WORKING WOMEN’S LIFE WRITING AND AUTHORIAL COMPETENCY

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degree of Doctor of Philosophy

by

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Scholars who study the influence of material circumstances on creative production are provided one avenue of examination by Marx and Engels (1845), who suggest a connection between work and identity: “Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life” (47). Following this assertion, in my study, I unpack the intimate connection between material circumstances and creative life narratives. I examine the writing and biographies of working women writers who constructed narratives which arose from the same conditions that framed their identities as workers. Menial and dangerous occupations, abundant familial/work duties, and poverty limited the available writing models and appropriate topics for working women’s narratives. Through this dissertation, I aim to challenge the limited scope scholars have established for effective life writing. I do so by arguing that nineteenth century scholars and readers alike focused on the bourgeois self while ignoring the lives and writing of working women, viewing them as incapable of producing valuable life writing, and, therefore, denying their creative choices. Readers have continued to discount these writers’ narratives, effectively silencing them. However, not all working

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1 Following Swindells, I use the term “working women” throughout this study instead of “working-class women” to establish how work influences class and gender but with the understanding that neither gender nor class make up the whole of an individual’s subjectivity, and neither is more important to his or her subjectivity.
women were silenced in this manner, but specifically those from the working classes with limited to no formal education. Some women, such as Martineau and Woolf, were able to gain acceptance. Currently, readers and scholars continue to undervalue working women’s texts: few scholars examine their texts as literary nonfiction, despite the attention paid to other life writers, such as John Stuart Mill, Harriet Martineau, Gertrude Stein, and Virginia Woolf. Consequently, the number of surviving texts by Victorian working women is far fewer than that by their male and middle class counterparts, which is a detriment to life writing studies as a whole.

As with other genres, readers/scholars accept certain life narratives as worthy of attention based on specific criteria for the genre and not others; therefore, there must be an absence of some characteristic that inhibits the valuation of these women’s work. Working women’s life experiences must be part of the concern. As Regina Gagnier notes in her study on working people’s subjectivity, "Subjects who did not assume creativity, autonomy, and freedom; who expressed themselves in individuated voices with subjective desires; who were regardless of family relations; and who narrated no development or progress or plot never appeared in literature courses" (28). Consequently, my study acknowledges the impact of ideology and concrete circumstances not only on an individual writer’s life (and therefore her narrative), but also on the consumption of her work by readers. The continued lack of scholarship on working women writers and their material lives is another central concern of this study. Marx and Engels suggest, “As individuals express their life, so they are. What they are, therefore, coincides with their production, both with what they produce and with how they produce. The nature of individuals thus depends on material conditions determining their activity” (37). The close connection between concrete circumstances of production and materiality is essential to

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2 Both Martineau and Woolf had the advantage of being middle class even though they were working writers. They also had a more formal education that allowed them to conform to established writing criteria.
understand the women’s texts in this study. Thus, this study tackles questions involving subjectivity, methodology, and mediation in women’s writing. Materialist feminists and other Marxist scholars assert that “literary value is not a transcendent property, but something conditioned by social beliefs and needs” (Guerin et al. 194). For this reason, these women’s works tend to be dismissed simply because of their status as working women. By recognizing their material lives, we can foster a greater understanding and appreciation of how/what the women wrote given the demands of family/work in their lives and society’s influence.

My analysis will focus specifically on the motivating factors behind the women writers’ production as well as their rhetorical strategies for expression. Examining their impulse to write and the strategies employed by each writer demonstrates the rhetorically sophisticated life narratives of working women. As I will show, their motivations include asserting autonomy in personal relationships, attaining fame, and promoting political affiliations. Each of the writers discussed balanced what they chose to share about their lives against readers’ expectations for life narratives. Hannah Cullwick, Ellen Johnston, Annie Kenney, Emma Smith and other women writers defied societal norms for working women in some way. As such, they needed to adapt their narratives to accommodate readers’ expectations and values to achieve their individual goals as authors. Through my analysis, I illustrate the variety of methods utilized in producing their narratives. In this discussion, their use of established literary genres is especially illuminating. With no life narrative models suitable for their life circumstances, working women writers employed literary genres as varied as romance and Bildungsroman. While extant scholarship in literary criticism discusses the influence of context on the production and consumption of texts, this study focuses on a group of writers who felt the devastating impact of these contextual issues to a larger degree due to the discrepancy between their material
circumstances and the available literary options. By acknowledging the various physical/societal obstacles for a working woman writer, we can bring these texts to critical light and, through analysis, emphasize their important contributions to life narratives.

Key Concepts

Life Writing

The genre of life writing is not new; however, the term only recently became common in scholarship. Life writing criteria are flexible, but there are several core characteristics that define the genre. I prefer the definition by Sidonie Smith and Julie Watson (2001): life writing is any writing focused on an individual writer’s experiences and memory. Unlike autobiography, which has a narrower definition (see below), life writing is an inclusive term that encompasses any writing based on one’s life, including biography, autobiography, memoir, travel, and diary writing. As such, autobiography constitutes one segment of the genre of life writing. We can gain a broader understanding of variations in self-narration through the study of both life writing and life narrative.\(^3\) Life narrative, as Smith and Watson note, includes “acts of self-presentation of all kinds and in diverse media that take the producer’s life as their subject, whether written, performative, visual, filmic, or digital” (4). Life writing differs from autobiography because, according to Smith and Watson, autobiography refers to the narrower Western tradition of retrospective life narrative while life writing is “inclusive of the heterogeneity of self-referential practices” (4). As such, autobiography closes off voices that do not conform to the Western tradition. Figures of middle class men/women as well as religious narratives dominate this

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\(^3\) As life writing and life narrative are essentially the same, I use the terms synonymously.
tradition. Commonly understood aspects of autobiography include individual focus, self-reflection, chronological framework, and encompassing an entire life. While autobiographical studies have flourished in the last thirty years, most scholars, as Smith and Watson suggest, have focused on traditional, Western, and patriarchal forms of narrative as well as the work of established writers. Thus, most of the available academic work neglects writers unable or unwilling to conform to the traditional narrative style.

*Devaluation*

Significantly, middle-class nineteenth and early twentieth-century readers deemed poor, uneducated women unable to write valuable pieces of literature. Even Virginia Woolf questioned whether she should introduce a collection of works from the Women’s Cooperative Guild, not because she was uninterested—she did contribute an introductory letter to the collection—but because she questioned whether the collection deserved a traditional introduction, the kind reserved for “literature.” In Woolf’s opinion, the women writing for the Guild could not possibly write literature, because they were unable to distance themselves from their subjects. Woolf did not examine her own preconception that all writers could or should adhere to bourgeois standards, and many readers have followed her example. Accusations of subjective interference are common for women writers as Gagnier asserts in her discussion of Pierre Bourdieu’s argument on aesthetics: “Thus he traces the establishment’s [ruling elite/bourgeois] aesthetic preference for form and style to its distance from economic necessity, and the blue collar taste for content (“realism”) and moral or creative agreeableness to engagement with material

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4The Guild was started in 1883 to encourage and support women with social and economic issues. It was established by Alice Acland and her “Women’s Corner” article, which then became a component of the Co-Operative movement specifically aimed at women and their needs, including information on maternity, suffrage, and general education.
conditions”(15). This aesthetic connects a writer’s literary reception directly to their economic situation. Others have applied the obstacle of content value to all women writers, not just working women writers. Gaye Tuchman outlines this central assumption of most critics in *Edging Women Out: Victorian Novelists, Publishers and Social Change* (2012) while discussing the reception of women writers:

Women’s hearts—their feelings—were finer and more delicate than those of men. Conversely, their minds lacked rigor. By insisting on such intrinsic differences between women’s and men’s minds, the developing ideology made it seem impossible for women to write as men did. One may improve a woman’s mind—that is, educate her to learn all she is capable of learning—but one cannot transform it into a man’s mind. (178)

Historically, numerous scholars discussing women’s writing have accused writers of sentimentality and subjectivity (as opposed to objective reality), thus equating their work with a lack of substance or rather a lack of masculine thinking. This stance contends that women who were trying to improve their material circumstances could/should have distanced themselves from their content. However, many working women wrote, specifically, to enact change in their circumstances. An example is the Co-Operative Guild’s collections, *Maternity: Letters from working women* (1916) that focuses on the difficulties and lack of knowledge about pregnancy and childbirth to enlighten the public and purpose more educational opportunities for women during and after childbirth. Readers’ focus on distance/objectivity reveals the bourgeois understanding of self\(^5\) and literature at the heart of the devaluation of working women’s writing.

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\(^5\) “The liberal state’s concern with procedural rather than substantive rights derives from such definitions of the body as merely the instrument and accessory of the self defined solely by its consciousness. The liberal state defends the desires and rights of the mind (free speech, right to vote, right to dissent, etc.) rather than those of the body (freedom from starvation sickness, cold, homelessness) and thus maintains the original devaluation of the body implicit in normative dualism. The consequences of liberalism’s ignoring substantive differences in material
As stated, most definitions of autobiography, which has a much longer history of scholarship than life writing, implicitly devalue any life writing other than that using traditional forms such as autobiography. A closer look at the definition of autobiography is important to my study since life writing scholarship grew out of autobiographical studies. Scholars saw the limitations of autobiography for the diverse means people employ to write about their lives and suggested ways in which the genre of autobiographical studies could be opened to reflect this variety. The following definition as well as in the wealth of scholarship devoted to traditional autobiography by well-established writers and famous historical figures highlights the limitation of the narrower term of autobiography for all life writing:

A narrative account written by an individual that purports to depict his or her life and character. Unlike diaries and journals, which are kept for the author’s private use, autobiographies are written expressly for an audience. Autobiographies are distinguished from memoirs (also produced for public consumption), whose authors render an account of the people and events they have known and experienced without providing the detailed reflection and introspection characteristic of most autobiographies. (Murfin 28)

Such definitions undermine the value of nontraditional life writing, such as the works analyzed in this study. In the quote above, Murfin restricts diaries and journals to private use.

Consequently, he fails to account for all the uses a writer might have for his/her diaries that

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situation to the way people see themselves in liberal society are evident. As Jaggar says, liberal rationality is normative as well as descriptive. Individuals who fail to maximize their self-interest are regarded as deficient in fulfilling their uniquely human potential” (Gagnier 23-24).

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6 A brief search for the most notable nineteenth century autobiography research highlights the amount of scholarship devoted to the following texts as opposed to the working women’s writing: searches for Thomas Carlyle’s Sartor Resartus, Charles Darwin’s Autobiography, Francis Galton’s Memories of My Life, Edmund Gosse’s Father and Son, Harriet Martineau’s Autobiography, John Henry Newman’s Apologia pro vita sua, John Ruskin’s Praeterita, Herbert Spencer’s Autobiography all return hundreds of journal articles, reviews, and scholarly books. On the other hand, searches for the women in this study return less than one hundred entries for the most part (Kenney being a notable exception due to the historical work done on the suffrage movement as a whole).
require an audience. In Chapter 2, I discuss one such diary that does not conform to the writer-centric definition of diaries. The writer, Hannah Cullwick, did not initiate her writing for personal use. Instead, the diary combined the intentions of herself and her lover Arthur Munby. Should this text be ignored due to its unconventional context, or should we value it as an example of the varied approaches to life narrative? This conventional approach neglects the subjective and bodily concerns that lie outside the traditional scope of autobiography such as labor, maternity, food insecurity and physical violence. I argue that by valuing life narratives as the writer chooses to present them, we can gain greatly in understanding subjectivity and the impact of historical context on subjectivity/life narratives.

*Truth in Life Writing*

Another key and complex topic in life writing studies is the issue of truth. Generally, readers value honest portrayals of the writer’s biography in life narratives. That is, readers and scholars alike expect life writing to be based on factual history. However, distinguishing “fact” from “fiction” is problematic. Some fictionalization is a given since language, memory, and feelings are inherently unreliable when portraying past experiences. Notwithstanding a writer’s commitment to accuracy, his/her perception of a subjective reality will always differ from objective historical fact. Thus, distinguishing truth from fiction in life writing presents readers with many obstacles. Smith and Watson, referring to Bakhtin’s theory of the dialogic, provide an avenue for analyzing subjectivity and motivation with respect to truth. Smith and Watson suggest that we need to move away from the fact and fiction distinction in reading the genre:

If we approach such self-referential writing as an intersubjective process that occurs within a dialogic exchange between writer and reader/viewer rather than as a story to be proven or falsified, the emphasis of reading shifts from assessing and verifying
knowledge to observing processes of communicative exchange and understanding. It redefines the terms of what we call “truth”: autobiographical writing cannot be read solely as either factual truth or simple fact. As an intersubjective mode, it resides outside a logical or juridical model of truth and falsehood, as models of paradoxical status of self-reference have suggested. (17)

Through the dialogic exchange between writer and reader, readers acquire insight into the author’s specific context and purpose while writers gain an opportunity to express their message and subjectivity. In doing so, both parties utilize the text to realize a broad range of truths. The dialogic exchange, thus, uses the complexities of communication as an advantage to understanding life narratives instead of an obstacle. The concept of dialogic interaction heavily relies on context and utterances. According to Bakhtin (1986),

Thus, all real and integral understanding is actively responsive, and constitutes nothing more than the initial preparatory stage of a response (in whatever form it may be actualized). And the speaker himself is oriented precisely toward such an actively responsive understanding. He does not expect passive understanding that, so to speak, only duplicates his or her own idea in someone else’s mind. . . . Rather, the speaker talks with an expectation of a response, agreement, sympathy, objection, execution, and so forth (with various speech genres presupposing various integral orientations and speech plans on the part of speakers or writers). (69)

The conviction that reader and author engage in dialogue is essential to my study of the writers’ motivations for their texts, as the writers used these expectations to persuade readers of their desired subjectivity. By looking at life narratives as such an exchange, the reader can consider “subtle shifts in narrative intent” (Smith and Watson 90). In so doing, the reader can appreciate
the truths the author intended, borne of context/purpose rather than objective reality. We will see examples of this intended truth in the writers’ selection of genres to emulate as well as their literary allusions among other techniques to be discussed. Four of the writers in this study chose literary genres to model due to their awareness of the response the genres would elicit in the readers. Whether hoping to attain the readers’ sympathy through Bildungsroman or acceptance through heroic deeds in romance, the writers clearly expect the readers to engage in the intersubjective exchange here described in order to understand the full meaning of their choices.

Subjectivity

A further key concept for this study is subjectivity. This term has various definitions; however, I follow Gagnier’s multipronged definition presented in *Subjectivities*. While the following excerpt is long, it is essential to highlight the variety of meanings for the term:

For the purposes of this study *subjectivity* has to be taken in its broadest range of senses, for it is precisely the categories of subjectivity that are under interrogation. First, the subject is a subject to itself, an “I,” however difficult or even impossible it may be for others to understand this “I” from its own viewpoint, within its own experience. Simultaneously, the subject is a subject to, and of, others; in fact, it is often an “Other” to others, which also affects its sense of its own subjectivity. This construction of self in opposition to others, it will be seen, is as characteristic of groups, communities, classes, and nations, as it is of individuals, as in the self-conception of Chartists, or “the working classes,” or schoolboys, or ladies, or, today, “Women,” or “the Third World.” Third, the subject is also a subject of knowledge, most familiarly perhaps of the discourse of social institutions that circumscribe its terms of being. Fourth, the subject is a body that is separate (except in the case of pregnant women) from other human bodies; and therefore
the subject, is closely dependent upon its physical environment. Finally, subjectivity in its common Cartesian sense— and despite the efforts of intellectuals to deconstruct the dichotomy—is opposed to objectivity; the particular or partial view (the view in and for itself) is opposed to some other (if only hypothetical) universal view (the view from nowhere and for no one, the view that contains all possible perspectives). Furthermore, in writing or self-representation (like autobiography), the I is the self-present subject “subjected” to the symbolic order of language in which one is writing—the subject is subject to language, or intersubjectively (i.e. culture). (8-9)

For my particular study, the third, fourth, and fifth definitions—a subject with knowledge of institutions, a subject with a body separate from others, and a subject with a specific point of view—will be most pertinent. The women writers at the center of this dissertation present their ideas and goals within the confines of Victorian ideology that regulated women’s behavior in public discourse, labor, politics, and the home, and influenced how they presented themselves. Additionally, while none of the women discussed go through pregnancy during their narratives, the bodily aspect of their lives is inherently tied to how they present themselves. This is especially true for Hannah Cullwick, Annie Kenney, and Emma Smith. All three writers discuss how their bodies are used in relation to outside influences: Cullwick’s work was very physical, Kenney’s protests were often violent, and Smith’s guardians physically abused her. For that reason, we also will need to consider the last section of the definition, which highlights the separation between subjectivity and objectivity that is typically the focus of discussions of literary value, as emphasized by Woolf. Such discussions frequently disparage the physical or bodily components of writing as opposed to the disconnected/objective writing of middle class men/women. As such, Gagnier argues that “part of the problem in presenting subjectivity lay in
the obvious material conditions: workers, as Engels pointed out in 1844, were not ‘heads’ but ‘hands,’ not *Homo cogitans* but *Homo laborans*; the conditions of their labor often mitigated against self-perception as an integrated, autonomous agent” (142). Considering the writers in this study were workers for the majority of their lives, this lack of perceived agency is an integral part of their presentation. Because of their life circumstances and society’s views on working women, many of the women emphasize their autonomy. This is true whether they are trying to achieve literary fame, as are Johnston and Smith, or establishing their relationship desires, like Cullwick.

Both Felicity Nussbaum and Julia Swindells suggest a way to examine subjectivity through dominant ideology. Nussbaum posits the concept of subjectivity through a materialist feminist perspective that incorporates historical context and ideology in a similar fashion to Gagnier in “The Politics of Subjectivity”: “In other words, we feel compelled as writers of ourselves and readers of autobiographies to construct a ‘self,’ but that interest in a closed, fixed, rational, and volitional self is fostered with a historically bound ideology” (162). As Nussbaum suggests, writing a “self” into narratives is more than simply a matter of creating subjectivity. It is rather a relational activity that connects ideology and history. The women in this study create their subjectivity with the circumstances of Victorian ideology and their own history. Further, Swindells examines the issue of subjectivity in relation to power and the ability to be a subject: “In short, members of the major part of the human race are positioned to lack authority, to start from a position of incoherent subjecthood, in which subjectivity cannot be subsumed in or stand in for the surrounding ideological world” (5). In this case, Swindells discusses women who have historically been denied full subjectivity. The women herein studied are considered less worthy because of gender, but also because of their class status prejudiced readers towards their ability
to be complete subjects. Through the work of Gagnier, Nussbaum, and Swindells, we can see subjectivity as a complex concept that encompasses the interplay between an individual and the historical/social context she or he inhabits. For the present study, this interplay is essential to understanding how and why the women created their narratives.

Genre and Class Restrictions

While traditional literary genres are not my primary focus, genre analysis is relevant to this study because of the multifaceted circumstances in which working writers produced their texts. As the women produced their narratives, they had access to many popular literary forms, yet few life writing models. Narrative references to traditional literary genres, whether through school, family, or other people, establish their connection to these models. Given their access to various literary genres and the lack of models for life narratives (given that narratives were typically by well-known men/women or were religiously based), they had to turn to these accessible fictional models. The working women’s circumstances meant that they used fictional models from middle-class as well as working men; as a result, these works manifest unique combinations of form and content since the forms/style they use is not typical of the content the women writers share.

While I do not claim that particular genres are strictly dependent on status and purpose, following Fredric Jameson, I suggest the writers’ circumstances render some options more feasible than others. Accordingly, working women writers adapted approved bourgeois standards of writing to suit their situations, forcing their life narratives into forms the writers could not easily use. As I show, how the writers chose and used appropriate styles from available popular forms determined the level of success or failure in their narratives. Since many chose to use traditional tropes in ways discordant with their lives, they created narratives that were at times
stilted. Much of the difficulty arises from the historical moment during which they composed their narrative. Jameson (1975) discussed accessible forms and genre’s relation to historical impact in “Magical Narratives: Romance as Genre”:

The “causal” action exerted by the concrete or historical series on the combinatoire⁷ is rather one of exclusion than of production: the historical moment blocks off a certain number of formal possibilities which had been available in earlier situations, all the while opening up certain determinate new ones which may or may not then come into being. To put it another way, the combinatoire aims at revealing, not the causes behind a given form, but rather the conditions of possibility of its existence. (158)

Thus, as I examine the working women writers’ choices, I acknowledge that societal conventions and ideology limited those authors’ options and revealed others. Contextuality of the writing circumstances, in this respect, offers an avenue to suggest conscious choices in genre usage. Combining Jameson’s work and Bakhtin can allow for the use of a dialogic examination of genre and the historical context as discussed by Jameson: “Generic affiliations and deviations from them provide clues that lead us back to the concrete historical situation of the individual text itself, and allow us to read its structure as ideology, as a socially symbolic act, as a proto-political response to a historical dilemma” (Jameson, 157). Lacking specific models left these writers faltering with inappropriate forms that their life narrative could not easily conform to, contributing to the perception that their writing did not meet acceptable norms/standards. Thus, the absence of easily utilized models created additional obstacles for working women to have their voices heard and valued in public discourse.

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⁷Combinatoire refers to the finite set of variables that can be examined.
Ultimately, I am viewing genre used through the writers’ works as an instrument of ideology and control. For example, Carolyn Miller argues in “Genre as Social Action” (1984) that “a rhetorically sound definition of genre must be centered not on the substance or form of discourse but on the action it is used to accomplish” (15). When I discuss form, it is to suggest how these writers use it for their specific purposes. Miller adds five other components to studying genre:

1. Genre refers to a conventional category of discourse based on large-scale typification of rhetorical action; as action, it acquires meaning from situation and from the social context in which that situation arose.

2. As meaningful action, genre is interpretable by means of rules; genre rules occur at a relatively high level on a hierarchy of rules for symbolic interaction.

3. Genre is distinct from form: form is the more general term used at all levels of the hierarchy. Genre is a form at one particular level that is a fusion of lower-level forms and characteristic substance.

4. Genre serves as the substance of forms at higher levels; as recurrent patterns of language use, genres help constitute the substance of our cultural life.

5. A genre is a rhetorical means for mediating private intentions and social exigence; it motivates by connecting the private with the public, the singular with the recurrent. (163)

These five components compel us to look at genre as a means of communication using forms that readers would recognize and understand. If we examine the first point, we see that genre only becomes a category through the interaction of writers and readers who establish its use. While “rules” from Miller’s second point are difficult to ascertain for all of the genres utilized, Frye’s topology for the romance genre and heroic modes will help show how Kenney produces the “meaningful” action depicted in Miller’s definition. Miller’s last point is especially important for this study as it highlights the connection between the public and private which is at the heart of my discussion of motivation and rhetorical choices. The women writers discussed in this study
participated in situational actions and, as a result, used their writing to elicit a desired response from the reader(s) in that situation whether the response be autonomy, literary recognition, or political understanding. We will see how this operates in Johnston, Smith, and Kenney especially.

**Text Selection and Methodology**

In this study, I examine several texts that all fall under the umbrella term of life writing: one full-length memoir, two autobiographies, and one diary. Each chapter discusses one life writing text as a case study. I chose these texts as representative of the variety of forms comprising life writing. Thus, I can provide a case study of the diversity of life writing; however, this structure means that I am unable to make any general claims about Victorian working women’s life writing as a genre. Given my focus on material conditions, I chose works from the Late Victorian and early Edwardian periods, a time when industrialization at the conclusion of WWI significantly affected British society. The authors range from those born in the early 1800s to ones born in the 1890s. Even with this relatively broad time span, acquiring texts was difficult. These difficulties highlight the current status of working women’s life writing. The full-length texts include Emma Smith’s *A Cornish Waif’s Story* (1954), Annie Kenney’s *Memories of a Militant* (1924), and *Autobiography, Poems, and Songs* (1867) by Ellen Johnston. *The Diary of Hannah Cullwick* (1984) comprises seventeen years of her writing. All of the authors were women who lived in Britain for all or most of their lives and labored for a living, and whose lineage was working-class. This dataset includes authors with similar life experience and status, letting me consider their material circumstances as well as gender as a group.

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8 The distinctions here are made by the authors of the texts as they referenced these categories either in the title or content of their specific text.
My criteria for selection were influenced by existing scholarship on working people’s life writing. One scholar, David Vincent (1981), applied three selection criteria in his study of nineteenth-century autobiography: (a) the texts had to be “genuine autobiographies” (as opposed to letters, memoirs, or fragments); (b) the writers had to be from working parents and to have maintained this status throughout their lives; and (c) all of the texts had to cover, in some fashion, the period between 1790 and 1850. While my study allows for a wider definition of autobiographical writing, the basic selection process was similar. Aside from Vincent’s work, my other methodological influences are feminist recovery scholars working with British and American life writing.9 These scholars have done remarkable work in rediscovering a large variety of texts that had been forgotten. I wish to accomplish similar work with the writers in this study by highlighting the following texts, which have not received much scholarly attention, since all of the texts offer insight into life writing studies.

The final influence on my text selection is the work of social historian John Burnett (1994), who compiled Victorian working-class life narratives by both men and women into two volumes (one focused on labor and the other on childhood) and a bibliography. Burnett collected his work through public appeals in the press and on the BBC. This call led him to receive numerous unpublished pieces, many previously read only by the author’s family and friends. In Burnett’s acknowledgement, he outlines his criteria for inclusion as follows: authors had to be “ordinary” men and women who lived between 1820 and 1920. He further narrows these criteria into themes:

It has been possible to quote only a few lengthy extracts, and it should be said that these find a place not necessarily because they are the “best,” most interesting, or well written, but because they illustrate key themes which it was important to include. Many more contributions are represented only by brief quotations and, regrettably, more still are denied even this small acknowledgment.

Burnett’s study illustrates how the working classes created their own set of themes and rhetorical norms:

Although autobiographies vary greatly in form, length and style, they often address a set of common themes, which, we may infer, had special importance or significance for the authors. Many begin by describing as much of their own ancestry as they know—usually not more than a couple of generations—yet they are already conscious of writing a history, locating themselves in time and space and also, although the term may not be used, in social class. (14)

Even though Burnett does not make gender distinctions for the autobiographies as both men and women in his collection shared similar family situations—little formal education and early entrance into the labor force—there are still significant variations based on gender. Burnett discusses the working-class writers’ various characteristics, yet ignores the issue of gender: “differences are partly accounted for by time, by class and economic status, but also by a variety of individual familial circumstances which defy classification” (3). As I made my selections, I considered the gender differences, which, Burnett suggested, “defy classification.” As I demonstrate below, Victorian women’s life writing focuses on gender-specific concerns; in this, it likely differs from texts by men. It would be interesting to consider the many texts Burnett received regarding gender issues. Sadly, these texts have returned to obscurity. As Burnett is the
only person to have collected many of these texts, it is essential to acknowledge his contribution since it has colored the study of Victorian working women’s life writing up to this point through the texts he has made available. The compilations also establish the basis for an area of scholarship I wish to pursue in the future as I discuss in the conclusion.

Once I collected the texts, following Julia Swindells’ discussion of working women’s autobiographies,¹⁰ I began my analysis with a close reading of each, recognizing that “the reading of historical texts, of social history, is restricted without a sense that the texts themselves are imaginative constructions with their own biases and partialities” (118). I am using close reading (sustained analysis of specific passages), focusing on elements that highlight issues of subjectivity and authorial control, to illuminate the methods they used pursuing their specific goals for their life narratives. Close reading, along with the ideas of dialogic, allows us to not only to examine what is written but how the women wrote and what they chose to leave out. Through the combination of these methods, I provide a thorough reading of the texts and the writers’ motivations.

My definition of close reading does not involve the reading process popularized by New Criticism; New Criticism’s focus on features of form does not do justice to these occasionally unaesthetic works, nor does it consider material or gender issues. Since the authors lacked formal education, their writing strategies do not stand up to such traditional readings. Accordingly, my use of close reading addresses subjectivities based on the awareness of the material constraints affecting writers. As indicated, I read these texts to challenge notions of what constitutes valuable forms of life writing as encapsulated, for example, in traditional autobiographical scholarship about Thomas Carlyle, John Ruskin, John Henry Newman, John Stuart Mill, Harriet

¹⁰ Even as Swindells suggests this understanding for autobiographies, the idea of creative composition applies to life writing as well.
Martineau, and Margaret Oliphant. The challenge includes examining the elements of the here included women’s writing that borrow from literary genres because more effective models for their works were unavailable. I argue that the women writers’ application of literary genres emphasizes their motivations.

Theoretical Assumptions and Literature Review

Studying the criticism on women’s life writing reveals the shortcomings of existing theories that focus on either working people or women. Neither approach captures the unique circumstances surrounding the construction of their texts and associated subjectivities. Traditional Marxism stresses the exploitation of working life while ignoring gender issues. Women were exploited not only at work but also at home, where mostly women fulfilled household duties. Moreover, Marxism focuses exclusively on capitalism’s oppression of the proletariat. As such, all other distinctions (aside from class) are presented as distractions from the essential goal of class equality. This view, moreover, dismisses the serious obstacles women of every class experience in patriarchal societies. Still, Marxist theory offers this study a means to concentrate on genre and material conditions in the production of subjectivity. As Marx and Engels suggested,

The production of ideas, concepts and consciousness is first of all directly interwoven with the material intercourse of man, the language of real life. Conceiving, thinking, the spiritual intercourse of men, appear here as the direct efflux of men’s material behaviour.

. . . we do not proceed from what men say, imagine, conceive, nor from men as described, thought of, imagined, conceived, in order to arrive at the corporeal man; rather we proceed from the really active man. . . . Consciousness does not determine life: life determines consciousness. (qtd. in Eagleton 4)
Although working life and class-consciousness are Marxists’ foci, the extension of class-focused concerns to gender is a relatively straightforward one. Women’s material conditions in nineteenth-century Britain affected how they saw themselves and their fellow workers and how they constructed their subjectivities. Although Marxism ignores the full reality of women’s lives, its understanding of capitalism’s impact on writers is essential for my purposes.

The largest shortfall of Marxist theory for the present study, which involves feminism, is Marxist failure to focus on women’s labor, including paid and reproductive labor. In terms of surplus labor, Marx created a model that accounts for sustaining daily life and producing future workers. However, he does not discuss the labor of child rearing and other home management. Because this sphere was almost exclusively women’s domain at the time, the Marxist model of surplus labor makes no room for women’s contributions: “for him [Marx] the value of labor power depends only on labor power incorporated into commodities; no attention is given to the value of labor power consumed directly or incorporated into use values. Women’s labor as such vanishes in this theoretical move” (Hartsock 147). Marxist theory leaves no place for discussing women’s labor specifically. Nevertheless, women experienced a variety of demands and obstacles that men simply did not. As such, ignoring these differences leaves any study of working women’s writing incomplete.

Marxist scholars have written useful pieces on the working lives of Victorian people that provide a basis for my examination of historical context. Gagnier’s significant contribution to working people’s autobiographical studies concerns identity creation in various groups. Gagnier suggests that working people (both men and women) created subjectivities/personas from middle class norms. She also argued that readers devalued working-class writings because they
anticipated bourgeois construction and topics, which working class writers could not produce.

What they did produce were quite different narratives:

For working-class autobiographers, subjectivity—being a significant agent worthy of the regard of others, a human subject, as well as an individuated “ego” for oneself—was not a given. In condition of long work hours, crowded housing, and inadequate light, it was difficult enough for them to contemplate themselves, but they also had to justify themselves as writers worthy of the attention of others. (141)

Although Gagnier’s argument about the worthiness of working class writers is convincing, the significance of proving their personal worth for women, given Victorian society’s general dismissal of women in public discourse—no matter the class—is lost in the discussion.11 Gagnier further classifies working-class autobiographies into four groups: conversion and gallows, commemorative, political and polemic, and confessions (151). According to Gagnier, these divisions disregard gender distinctions, which is a characteristic of working-class life writing. However, even overlooking gender distinctions does not erase gender identification. Ignoring this avenue of discussion does a disservice to such writers, who had to endure more than just working-class stigma, facing gender discrimination as well.

Additionally, Ying S. Lee’s study focuses on the presentation of masculinity in autobiography and fiction. Some of his assertions, however, apply to working women life writers as well, including the arguments about the exploitation and class identification of both working men and women. Especially useful for my work is the association of working men with the body and not the mind:

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11Many women writers initiated their work by accounting for their journey into the public sphere, thereby seeking forgiveness and/or understanding from readers.
Working class men do indeed represent themselves through their bodies. Part of this is because their bodies are central to their own definitions of labor, and it is through this labor that they are defined, and define themselves, as part of an economic system. It is also because the body is the most canonical medium through which they can participate in a public dialogue about working-class identity. (19)

Victorian working women were similarly connected with the physical body. Their labor was typically physical and not mental, hence, the prevalence of bodily concerns for the working class in Victorian ideology. As I will show, while many of the writers dealt with this issue, Ellen Johnston, a poet, fought hardest against this ideology of class for acceptance. Being a poet made it that much more difficult for her to achieve success, given the gatekeeping measures performed by middle class men in order to maintain this area of literature as their domain.12

On the other hand, feminist scholarship highlights gender oppression associated with Victorian households and within the dominant ideology but does not consider the differences in living conditions between middle/upper and working women. For these latter writers, it was difficult—if not impossible—to become a proper Victorian woman, one who could experience pride in house management and the achievements of husbands and fathers, while focusing on child rearing and domestic accomplishments. Similar to the Marxist argument previously discussed, the traditional feminist argument is also problematic for the writers in this study. Feminist critics such as Stanton, Peterson, and Friedman have argued that a specifically female form of writing exists. These discussions, however, do not consider class distinctions. Even a cursory examination of Victorian women’s life writing shows that readers valued different kinds

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12 Given the abundance of women writing romance novels in Victorian England, it was difficult for other women to be taken seriously as literary figures. Gaye Tuchman discusses the importance of poetry in her work *Edging Women Out: Victorian Novelists, Publishers and Social Change*. (2012)
of women’s writing unequally.\textsuperscript{13} For example, middle-class women writers frequently embodied the “angel in the house” ideology; that is, they presented themselves as humble and not adept at public pursuits to ensure the readers’ acceptance. However, these writers discuss a domesticity that was impossible for working women to actualize. Working women’s concerns typically related to poverty and labor. Additionally, when middle-class women wrote their life narratives, they touted their families’ accomplishments, which allowed an acceptable presentation of themselves without societal censure.\textsuperscript{14} Some middle-class women composed their life narratives for young children so that the latter could be proud of family accomplishments. For female children, they offered additional instruction in the ways of proper housewives and mothers. In contrast, working people’s life writing rarely had the purpose of emphasizing familial achievement, though the desire to be accepted haunts the writings of all Victorian women.

Some feminist writers have focused on women and men’s writing as essentially discrete. Donna C. Stanton (1987) coined the term “autogynography,” a genre specific to women’s writing. Stanton asserts that women’s writing is devalued as uncreative because women are thought incapable of writing beyond their experience, from imagination: “to affirm that women could not transcend, but only record, the concerns of private self; thus, it had effectively served to devalue their writing” (132). Life writing, with its focus on the self, is an ideal outlet for women; however, even this particular form is devalued for working women due to their status as

\textsuperscript{13} A simple database search produces hundreds of results for Harriet Martineau, while Emma Smith’s work receives maybe a dozen.

\textsuperscript{14} Lady Anne Fanshawe’s autobiography, \textit{Memoirs}, is an apt example of the restrictions placed on women and their writing. Her story begins with a genealogy, then a discussion of her husband’s career, only to end with his death (Peterson 17-18). Through this format, Lady Anne can present herself as the good wife and mother, as required of a woman writer. Her autobiography was specifically written for the betterment of her son. There are many other autobiographies of middle- and upper-class women who put their own accomplishments after those of their husbands or fathers in order not to be accused of failing to conform to their roles as proper Victorian women.
working class/uneducated. Stanton ultimately suggests there is something uniquely feminine in women’s writing that transcends class and other distinctions:

Because of woman’s different status in the symbolic order, autogynography dramatized the fundamental alerity and nonpresence of the subject, even as it asserts itself discursively and strives toward an always impossible self-possession. This gendered narrative involved a different plotting and configuration of the split subject. (140)

She thus suggests that women are not complete subjects on their own but are inherently bound to their relationships with others. This is a highly problematic notion given the turbulent nature of many working women’s lives, which prevented them from casting themselves in such roles.

Nancy Chodorow (1981) also addresses the importance of relationships in female development, stating that “in any given society, feminine personality comes to define itself in relation and connection to other people more so than masculine personality does” (145). With Chodorow’s relational view of how women’s development manifests itself through familial connections, their writing must be unlike men’s work. Poverty made it difficult for Victorian working women to develop relationships with close female relatives as many moved away from home early and were outside of the home for work. As a result, working women’s development is more influenced by work and poverty than by their familial relationships.

Also comparing male and female writing, Susan Standford Friedman (1998) asserts that male concepts are incompatible with women’s autobiography. She also maintains that women have a more collective identity and relational life experience than men, circumstances that alter how female life writing is created and subsequently valued. She aligns herself with Gagnier’s discussion of working-class subjectivity when she notes, “The emphasis on individualism as the necessary precondition for autobiography is thus a reflection of privilege, one that excludes from
the canons of autobiography those writers who have been denied by history the illusion of individualism” (75). Her argument again focuses on the importance of collective identities for women; however, the Victorian working class writers exhibit more class-consciousness than gender solidarity. Working-class life writing, then, would not signal clear gender differences that separate women’s life writings from men’s. Nonetheless, there are elements that separate male and female texts, namely, the exploitation of female writers and the variation between life writing and autobiography. My work focuses on this combination of class and gender that severely limited women’s options.

The last scholar whose work is relevant to my argument, Linda Peterson (2001), examines middle-class and professional women’s autobiography as a whole as well as the various models that exist within the genre. Peterson concludes that women’s writing should not be limited to the models presently allowed, as women also utilized other models for their narratives. Similar to Gagnier, Peterson categorizes life narrative writings open to women as spiritual, domestic, and literary. However, both scholars do not focus on working-class women’s variations. Traditional models do not always account for working people’s writings. It is essential, therefore, to study issues of work and class in all working people’s writing, both male and female even as this study only focuses on women. Because Peterson’s categories do not include working people’s narratives, they are not an optimal choice for analysis. Instead, as I argue, when working-class writers adapt their narratives to available forms, they create a new category unique to them.
Material feminist literary scholars’ approach to literature is central to the present work, as they argue for the importance of lived experience. These scholars reject the ahistorical examination of texts and incorporate contextual elements into their analyses. Material feminism is a difficult term to define, especially when juxtaposed with Marxist and socialist feminism. The separation is essential, however, and I base my distinctions on the work of Rosemary Hennessy (1997). She argues that material feminism highlights a break with Marxist feminism, which includes both sexual as well as traditional divisions of labor. As an alternative to both traditional Marxism and feminism, material feminism focuses on the effects of capitalism and patriarchy in women’s lives.

While my views closely resemble Hennessy’s, other materialist feminists provide a multidimensional view of this theory. Elizabeth Grosz examines materialism as a way to “return to the question of matter, its forms, nature, and capacity, in order to address the direct objects of feminist investigation—the differences between men and women for men and women, all subjects, are material objects” (50). This approach provides a way to “take materialism and its forms and varieties, including its infusion with the incorporeal and the immaterial” (Grosz 50). While production is essential, admitting the immaterial is also significant. The women I discuss deal with various immaterial/immaterial circumstances such as gender and poverty that affect their narrative presentation. Kuhn and Wolpe harken back to Engels’s and suggest a similar combination of material and immaterial (1997):

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15 Scholars of interest include Michelle Barrett, Christine Delphy, Mary Poovy, Lillian Robinson, Juliet Mitchell, and Rosemary Hennessy.
16 According to the materialist conception, the determining factor in history is, in the final instance, the production and reproduction of immediate life. This, again, is of a twofold character: on the one side, the production of the means of existence, of food, clothing and shelter, and the tools necessary for that production; on the other side, the production of human beings themselves, the propagation of the species. (Engels 1972, 7)
The materialist problematic is based on a conceptualization of human society as defined specifically by its productivity: primarily of the means of subsistence and of value by the transformation of nature through work. United with this is a conceptualization of history as the site of the transformation of the social relations of production and reproduction. As far as an analysis of the position of women is concerned, materialism would locate that position in terms of the relations of production and reproduction at various moments in history. In doing this, one of its central concerns would be the determinate character of the sexual division of labor and the implications of this for power relations between men and women at different conjunctures. At the same time, however, the connection between this set of relations and the social relations specific to modes of production—that is, relations between classes—must also be thought (86).

As such, discussing social relations must include a consideration of both the interactions between men and women as well as between different classes. It is this combination that appears central to the women writers I analyze because both status markers affected their choices and reception. Without considering class and gender power dynamics of Victorian society, it is impossible to create a complete argument for the writers’ motivation and rhetorical choices.

Another theorist, Gillian Howie, considers Marxist ideas, even as materialists stray from them. Howie suggests,

According to Marx, the world is shaped by human activity, but he draws a distinction between this and the claim that the world is given shape through human ideas and concepts. Consciousness, ideas, and concepts emerge from the social experience of productive and active engagement with the world. Production itself takes various forms and changes over time and therefore our social experience changes. (5)
Howie argues that we are tied to the forms we produce. As such, writers who perform distinct activities (here, a factory worker and a maid) write differently from those in other activities. Finally, Howie considers how ideas of gender and class work to provide context about production by “demonstrat[ing] the usefulness of Marxist categories and thereby reviv[ing] a dialectical method that helps to engage with questions of class, exploitation, alienation, ideology, mediation, and reification” (7). By acknowledging these circumstances—especially ideology, mediation, and reification—as they pertain to this study, we can more carefully examine how women writers worked in a system that tried to silence them in the space of public discourse and prevent them from achieving their goals as writers.

In sum, both Marxist and feminist theories elucidate only a part of the women’s lives. To understand these texts comprehensively, we must examine them as the product of their authors’ gender and class. We should recognize the multifaceted roles working women played in Victorian society and the manner in which this complexity translated into their narratives. Victorian England is well known for its strict social standards, which separated classes as well as genders. Working women generally suffered the most under this ideology. They were more exploited in the labor force and looked down upon as not being “complete” Victorian women. Thus, focusing on work and gender allows for a fuller view of how working women identified themselves as individuals within their broader class identification. As such, I draw upon Materialist feminist literary theory. It is through this lens that we see how well the women adapted their life narratives into forms that would allow them to attain their individual objectives through analysis of the dialogic exchange with readers.
Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I have introduced life writing by working women as the object of study. Each subsequent chapter includes an exploration of a different text, examining the writers’ motivation. These discussions share several features. First, and most importantly, I focus on the authors’ rhetorical choices to analyze their writing goals, as opposed to a traditional analysis based on the perspectives of aesthetics and objectivity. Second, I consider the close connections between their material circumstances and their life narratives.

In chapter 2, I begin my discussion with the earliest of the texts, Hannah Cullwick’s diary. While this text differs in content and genre from the other published pieces, the author faced similar circumstances as the published writers. Cullwick wrote her diary at the behest of her middle-class lover (and later husband) for his pleasure. As such, and presumably unlike other diaries, this one has an additional and particular audience. In this chapter, I argue that Cullwick used the diary not simply to entice Munby but also to construct her own identity and assert her autonomy in their relationship. To that end, I analyze two narrative fragments inserted in the diary where Cullwick expresses the importance of her work, wages, and status as a woman in order to resist Munby’s unwelcome demands.

Chapter 3 contains an examination of the shortest and most traditional literary life writing of the selection, Ellen Johnston’s Autobiography of a Factory Girl. Even as Johnston calls the text an autobiography, its form is more similar to a memoir, as it encompasses only a small part of Johnston’s life; indeed, it is only about twelve pages, an attachment to her much larger selection of poems. It is through this piece that Johnston constructs a working-class literary subjectivity to increase her credibility as a poet. In this chapter, I focus on the difficulties Johnston faced in gaining respect for her poetry as a working woman. I argue that Johnston
incorporated various literary elements to enhance her credibility as a writer. As such, Johnston is able to highlight her literary knowledge and connection to her community though her narrative strategies.

In chapter 4, I consider the political motivation for life writing in Annie Kenney’s *Memories of a Militant*. Instead of promoting herself and her participation in the suffrage movement, Kenney promoted the movement itself. Kenney focused almost exclusively on the movement and its leaders, as they were central to her subjectivity. I argue that Kenney attempted to paint the suffrage movement as valuable and the suffragettes as political warriors willing to endure great sacrifices for their belief in the rights of women. What makes this text notable is the writer’s desire to shift the focus from herself to a political movement. To that end, Kenney employed elements of traditional romance to characterize the movement as noble and to depict Christabel Pankhurst as a hero for the cause.

The last analytical chapter, chapter 5, contains an examination of the most recent text, Emma Smith’s *A Cornish Waif’s Story*, which was first published in 1954 and republished in 2010. Smith, a pseudonym for Mabel Lewis, wrote a life narrative about her life as a young illegitimate child. As such, this work would traditionally be called a memoir. I argue that Smith constructed her life story as a Bildungsroman to gain publication. Smith shared the suffering and trauma from her youth in such a way as to provoke comparisons to Dickens. Since I argue that Dickens’ work was a model for Smith’s, achieving this comparison is quite an accomplishment for someone with virtually no formal education and who at the time of composition was in an unhappy marriage and possibly suicidal.

I conclude with a summary of my findings for all of the writers. I also discuss the issues that arise from studying these texts, including but not limited to availability and historical
verifiability. Finally, I consider future research based on this same category of texts that could enhance our knowledge of women’s life writing.
I begin this study by focusing on domestic laborer Hannah Cullwick (1984), who composed a diary over a period of seventeen years, from about 1854 to 1873. She wrote the diaries at the behest of her middle-class lover Arthur Munby until their eventual marriage as noted by Stanley in her Introduction to the compilation: “Hannah began writing her diary at Munby’s wish and in order to keep him in touch with her daily drudgery and other activities” (8). My central question is: Why would she spend her scant leisure time chronicling her daily chores and other mundane activities? To answer this question, I examine the link between Cullwick’s writing and Victorian ideology, focusing on work and class status, thereby illustrating the complexity of the text as a product of Cullwick’s needs as an author as well as her use of letter format in a diary.

The nature of Munby and Cullwick’s relationship made daily letters inconvenient due to secrecy needed by the disparity in their status. Consequently, Cullwick wrote daily entries in her diary for Munby. Such composition required a great deal of time commitment. Yet, she continued the daily task for seventeen years until after their marriage, when she saw no use in them. As Liz Stanley (1984) notes in her introduction to Cullwick’s diary, “Her diaries ended, and she made it clear that there would be no more because the conditions that gave them point and purpose no longer existed” (24). Cullwick’s purpose in writing,
according to Stanley, was to encourage the playacting both Cullwick and Munby enjoyed. Building on Stanley’s argument, I suggest that, as Cullwick gained increasing control of the text, she shifted the focus from his needs to hers. As such, she could no longer concentrate solely on Munby’s pleasure in reading about her labor and instead emphasized her needs as an autonomous laborer. This chapter, then, considers her relationship with Munby, the dynamics of their long-term union, and Victorian ideology to argue that the diaries provided one of the few opportunities for unhindered communication between Cullwick and Munby that was the primary motivation for the diaries.

With respect to Cullwick, critics have, for the most part, considered Munby’s pleasure to be her sole objective. From this perspective, Cullwick’s writing simply serves Munby’s fetish for working women “in their dirt.” As such, even scholars who acknowledge Cullwick’s control over the text do not make note of her long-standing commitment to her life writing. However, to deny Cullwick’s role in constructing the diaries, as Swindells does, means to ignore its role as a creative as well as a practical outlet for her. Swindells (2008), analyzing both Liz Stanley’s introduction and Cullwick’s diaries, asks the following key questions:

Whose story do the diaries of Hannah Cullwick tell? Whose subject is being inscribed? And if we listen carefully to the voices, and look at the relative places of the subjects and objects in this business, we begin to hear and see, surely, the liberation, not of Hannah Cullwick but of Arthur J. Munby, finding a voice in text, already a relatively free[d] man in life. (31)

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17 See Russo, Malkovich, and Merrick.

18 Throughout this chapter, I refer to Hannah Cullwick and Arthur Munby by their surnames instead of the more common convention of using Hannah and Munby as this speaks to an infantilization of Hannah Cullwick and removes her identity as an individual, which many domestics experienced.
Swindells (2008) argues that Cullwick’s text enhances our understanding of Munby more than Cullwick. To counter this assumption of Cullwick’s lack of control, I examine two sections of the diaries; both are narrative sections that focus on her life outside of daily chores, which distinguishes these parts from the rest of the diary. Cullwick produced the section “Hannah’s Places” (1872) before her marriage to Munby and “A Servant’s Life” (1873) shortly after the marriage, developing therein the incidents from “Hannah’s Places.” Cullwick composed the earlier fragment in one sitting while visiting her family. She wrote the second longer fragment while she still lived with Munby at Fig Tree Court, Inner Temple in central London—before she moved to the countryside alone. The contextual information concerning their relationship influenced Cullwick’s writing choices involving style and content. Moreover, variations in the treatment of the same material in the two narrative fragments illustrate the growing, shifting relationship between Cullwick and Munby as well as her uneasiness about its evolution. My textual analysis compares Cullwick’s use of the third person, her relevant asides, and her understanding of social roles according to the prevailing ideology in England during her lifetime. Before my close reading of the text, however, I introduce the context and discuss relevant scholarship.

Biographical Information

We cannot study Cullwick’s diaries without looking at her life and relationship with Munby. Cullwick and Munby were secret lovers for seventeen years before they married in 1873. Because of their different social statuses, secrecy was the hallmark of their relationship. Cullwick belonged to the working class, as did her parents. Munby, conversely, was a gentleman and a member of the intelligentsia. He was not well known; however, he had some standing as a poet and instructor at the Working Men’s college. He was also a prolific diarist. His diaries,
which he kept before and after his relationship with Cullwick, reveal his interest in working
women. Munby frequently interviewed and photographed working women for his personal
collection. As his images and words indicate, he preferred women who worked outside and were
rather masculine. As such, this side of Munby’s personality contributed to Cullwick’s recurring
discussions of her daily chores and their dirtiness. Because Cullwick respected (or at least
tolerated) his fetish and craved his devotion, many passages stressed the filthiness of her labor.
These sections do not diminish Cullwick’s agency; instead, they indicate a keen awareness of her
audience and possibly her interest in a dominant/submissive relationship.

Munby’s will, published after his death, provides insight into the longevity of the
relationship between him and Cullwick. At the time of its publication, not many people knew of
the relationship and/or marriage between Cullwick and Munby:

Whereas Hannah Cullwick, servant . . . has been for 45 years and upwards beloved by me
with a pure and honorable love, and not otherwise, and she, the said Hannah, has during
all that time been as faithful and loving and devoted to me as ever woman was to man . . .
I married the said Hannah (she being then in my service) . . . and the 14th January, 1873 ..
. . and whereas not withstanding her said marriage, the said Hannah has always refused,
and still refuses, to have the position which as my wife she might and could have had,
and has always insisted and still insists on being my servant as well as my wife . . . and
whereas, owing chiefly to this noble and unselfish resolve of hers, I have never been able
to make known my said marriage to my family, or to the world at large. (qtd. in Merrick
28)

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19 Trinity College’s Munby collection contains abundant photography, writings, and interviews that
highlight his compulsion.
Munby’s reference to the “pure” nature of his love for Cullwick reflects the difficulties she expressed in her diary, which suggests that their relationship was inappropriate because of the difference in their social status. The secrecy they maintained only enhanced this sense of stigma. Still, Cullwick had to contend with those who challenged her morals upon discovering her relationship with Munby.

_Victorian Perspectives on Work_

The ideology of self-support grounds Cullwick’s writing, where she often focused on wages. While Munby encouraged her humble manner, the low status of the worker was embedded in English society during her life. As such, Cullwick’s subjectivity as a humble worker cannot be attributed solely to Munby’s interest in working women. England’s position as “the manufacturer of the world” highlights the practical and ideological basis for Cullwick’s emphasis on work in the Victorian period. Britain made great leaps in its industrialization; by mid-century, the country was responsible for “two thirds of the world’s coal, perhaps half of its iron, five-sevenths of its supply of steel, half the world’s commercial cotton, 40% of its hardware, one-third of the world’s steam power, and about one-third of the world’s total manufactures” (Hobsbawm, qtd. in Applebaum 409). To maintain such enormous production required every able-bodied worker not only to contribute but also to value such labor. Women and young children, such as Cullwick, who started work at eight years old, experienced this pressure to work. The British working class valued such work because they feared poverty and the sense of social failure poverty entailed beyond poor living conditions. Although the British

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20 A passage from Munby’s diary on August 8, 1860, suggests his pride in molding Cullwick’s personality, “let me look on this hardworking simplicity, this humble unselfish devotion, which finds its highest expression in the doings of a sweep or a lapdog, and feel, unreservedly, what I always meant to prove - that the veriest drudge, such as she is, becomes heroic when she truly loves.”
government attempted to improve the plight of those unable to work, the prospect of the poorhouse was nonetheless an unpleasant reality. Additionally, the working class feared splitting up families, hard labor, and loss of identity. The government contributed to this stress by the demands it placed on workers to maintain and increase production levels. The result, as Sandra Spencer notes in her work on Victorian poorhouses, was shaming:

A subtle shift in public perception of the deserving poor also contributed to their obscurity. An ugly idea took root that perhaps all the poor were undeserving. Perhaps the indigent elderly should have been more provident. Perhaps the unmarried mother should have made better moral choices. Many people scorned the poor rather than pitying them. Hence, applying for relief was a tacit admission of defeat and moral degradation. And, indeed, one premise of the New Poor Law supported the idea that the workhouse was the last resort. The workhouse needed to be as unattractive as possible to give the poor an incentive to work and save. (Spencer para 7)

Self-support was essential to maintain for respectability. Cullwick inhabited this notion throughout her diary as she focused on the employment, salary, and mobility she had as a working woman. Societal norms emphasized self-support; no one wanted the public scorn of failure. As such, Cullwick’s focus on her ability is another means of expressing her autonomy.

Cullwick’s motivation to emphasize her autonomy also reflects the paternalistic attitude of employers towards their workers. For Cullwick, this kind of marginalization lowered her ability to assert herself in her relationships since she mentioned frequently the strong role Munby had in her decision-making.\footnote{A small selection of passages illustrates this issue: “Massa came to see me in Suffolk & lost his way on the road back to his hotel at Halesworth, & he told me if I stopp’d then he wouldn’t come again” (43), “Still it was way too much & I felt overpower’d & Massa thought it’d be good for me to go to Margate for a change” (45), “But}
ideology that focused on the value of work: “She [Mrs. Easton] stood to me & named me as much like herself as my mother would let her. Her own name was Anna Maria Dorothea & she wanted mine to be the same. But my mother said it was too much out of the way for mine, & all it sh’d be was Hannah. . . . So that’s how my name came to be Hannah—as plain a name for a servant as could be” (Stanley 1984, 50). Her mother’s forethought was appropriate since this stripping of individuality was common. Employers often assigned generic names to their domestics, for example, Betty and Mary. Most employers and employees accepted this arrangement, one that removed the individual’s sense of self, as did the uniformity of clothing.

Textual Background

We must now consider the imposition of textual/editorial criticism on Cullwick’s diary by Stanley (1984), the editor of the available text. Stanley’s efforts add another layer of complexity to studying the diaries. We only have the texts as they appear through her editorial decisions, which were extensive. Until Stanley, access to the diaries was restricted to Munby’s collected works at Trinity College.\footnote{Derek Hudson (1972) compiled a version of Munby’s diaries entitled \textit{Munby, Man of Two Worlds: The Life and Diaries of Arthur J. Munby, 1828-1910}.} Therefore, few scholars mention Cullwick’s writing, and those who do, do so in connection with Munby. This factor has colored much of the scholarship on Cullwick, leading to an overall focus on Munby. Stanley is currently the only scholar who has examined all seventeen years of diaries for her edition of Cullwick’s work. Recognizing that the editor consolidated seventeen years of diaries into approximately 300 pages is an essential component of studying Cullwick’s work. Accomplishing this meant frequent editorial decisions about content as well as spelling and grammar. Stanley’s perceptions of a biographer’s
responsibility also affected her presentation of Cullwick’s diaries: she strived for “a kaleidoscope of the subject’s life” which engages everything the individual writes, as opposed to taking a traditional approach which, according to her, accepts certain matters as part of the individual’s story and rejects others:

Conventional biography sees the rich complexity of a person’s life as an embarrassment, a failure to find the real person who must be there if only you look deeply enough and do it “properly”; and, in writing biography, biographers have developed efficient ways of reducing complexity to manageable proportions. The end product is a genre that all too often pronounces “she was like this (and not like that).” Any feminist biography, indeed any good biography worthy of the name, should instead firmly grasp the cup of plenty that a person’s life and their contemporaries’ views of it represents: “she was like that and like that” should be its motto. (21)

Stanley’s editorial decisions, by her own account, create complications for finding the core of Cullwick’s identity. We might never truly know who she was or what Munby’s relationship was to the text. Whether this would be possible with a complete version of the diaries is unclear; however, the magnitude of available texts makes this an extensive endeavor. Based on the diaries’ complexity in authorship, and in contrast to Stanley’s assumption of complete authorial control, Cullwick herself could only control certain aspects of her presentation, as I will demonstrate. Stanley paid limited attention to Cullwick structured much of her narration around waged labor; yet, at the same time, Victorian ideology funneled her life choices into a limited number of available options. For that reason, I examine how Stanley, Munby, and Victorian ideology affect our understanding of Cullwick.
Additionally, Stanley’s goal of a connection between women of Cullwick’s time and contemporary women might have narrowed her selection of Cullwick’s diary entries to conform to her vision. Stanley outlines in her introduction to Cullwick’s diary the benefits of studying the text. She suggests it is Cullwick’s commonality with other working women and the abundance of documentation available (as opposed to other working women of the period) that requires scholarly interest:

For me, it is precisely her “ordinariness” that makes Hannah so “extraordinary.” She is an ordinary lower-class woman of the Victorian period; but her life is fully documented. The result is not only that she is “the most thoroughly documented housemaid of the Victorian age,” but also the most thoroughly documented, thoroughly ordinary working-class woman of a period about which we still know all too little. (Stanley 1984, 2)

She essentializes the experiences of all women for political purposes by suggesting Cullwick’s text could speak for women of her class. As such, Stanley possibly ignores elements of Cullwick’s life/text that do not align with her broader goal. Incidents focusing on Munby’s physical labor and dirt fetish as well as the numerous photographs available that suggest both Cullwick and Munby’s heavy interest in role-playing counter the claim of Cullwick’s ordinariness. It is difficult to deny Stanley’s claim about Cullwick’s well-documented life; however, the ordinariness of that life is suspect. Cullwick’s relationship with Munby and his obsession with documenting working women’s lives make it more difficult to perceive Cullwick’s life and her text as quite ordinary, at least, since these elements colored what she wrote about. Yet, Stanley’s assertion is essential to support her claim for a connection between Cullwick and contemporary women from the time of the collection. As a sociologist focusing on feminist theory and cultural sociology, Stanley bridged the gap between Cullwick’s life
experience and contemporary women in terms of patriarchal oppression. Feminism in the 1980s, when Stanley compiled the text, was especially concerned with the inequality of power structures based on gender. Because feminists were dedicated to social as opposed to legal changes, Stanley connected contemporary women and Cullwick. As such, the normalizing of Cullwick’s experience was critical.

Given her focus on political connections, Stanley’s selections can interfere with our holistic understanding of Cullwick’s text. In an article following the publication of Cullwick’s diaries, Stanley (1984) discusses the term “women” in connection with essentializing women’s experiences. Stanley submits that Cullwick was not the dominated, exploited servant and wife of a wealthy man with a fetish for poverty, but instead a strong, autonomous woman who lived free from the societal pressures that plagued middle-class Victorian women. Stanley notes,

Surely when feminist sociologists and fellow scholars use the phrase [women], we know that it stands for the social construction of a particular set of people facing—albeit with large internal differences—a common material reality because one based in a common oppression/exploitation; and the key here is the rootedness of this category of people in a common oppression, (152)

As Stanley focuses here on the “common” element of oppression, it is no wonder she extends the treatment and relationship between Munby and Cullwick to women in general. Elsewhere in the introduction to Cullwick’s diary, Stanley connects Cullwick’s life and those of contemporary women:

It has been written because I am a feminist and I believe that its contents are important for feminism. These tell us that people are complicated, bloody-minded, resist simple categorization and always repay listening to, hearing and taking seriously. And they also
tell us that even “oppressed women” have power, pride and can enforce their own kind of liberation on those they are involved with. (25)

Aside from the commonness that Stanley highlights, she brings up the important idea of complexity in subjectivity. It is important not to accept the simple dualism of complete control or no control in Cullwick’s subjectivity. There is more than an either/or option when considering Cullwick’s control and autonomy over her text. Even as Cullwick might have been oppressed in several ways, we should not dismiss the control she had over other elements in her life.

As such, Cullwick’s text should be examined without imposing such opposing interpretations on it. One scholar who adds useful information to Stanley’s mediation is Sarah Russo (2008) who examined parts of Cullwick’s original manuscript. An essential component of Russo’s work, as well as my own, is acknowledging that the status difference between scholars and Cullwick often leads the former to make negative assumptions about Cullwick’s abilities as a writer and autonomous individual. As such, Russo claims academics see the text “from above”; that is, they consider Cullwick’s writing in terms of her lower social status. As a result, scholars assume that the uneducated Cullwick writes poorly, perceiving her as a complex and contradictory identity. By denying Cullwick’s creativity, critics reified the victim/victor dichotomy that limits Cullwick to a single/simple persona. To counteract this reductionist view, Russo situates Cullwick’s writing within the context of all available biographical information— as do I—not simply in the context of her relationship with Munby:

In contrast to the critical tendency to situate Cullwick’s writing and life events relative to Munby, my autobiographical reading reveals a rich social fabric and a series of life events in which Cullwick figures herself as an active participant and in which she
articulates her own identity both before and after meeting Munby, who is mentioned infrequently (37).

As we can see, this type of reading does not ignore Munby’s role, which is impossible, but denies that he is the sole interest in analyzing Cullwick’s writing. She writes about wages, family, and her thoughts on current events that reveal aspects of her identity beyond being an object of Munby’s fetish.

While most scholars have accepted Stanley’s edition uncritically, Sarah Russo also examines how Stanley’s choices influenced our understanding of Cullwick’s work by analyzing “Hannah’s Places.” Russo suggests that Stanley’s adjustments of spelling and other grammatical issues influence more than the readability of the diaries. Russo concluded that in addition to erasing her double perspective, Stanley’s omissions promote a deceptive image of a victimized Cullwick, an image consistently fostered throughout Stanley’s edition. Furthermore, Stanley presents her altered version of “Hannah’s Places” as a framing device for the diaries. . . . Stanley’s subtle promotion of Cullwick as victim, then, infiltrates the reader’s reception of the rest of her writings. This has perhaps contributed to critics’ tendency to assign Cullwick a victim or victor status, or both. (60)

Russo suggests that Stanley distorted Cullwick’s diary by “erasing the double perspective,” that is, by removing any trace that Cullwick was not a victim. In so doing, scholars such as Stanley supported a broader argument about working-class women that they were simply oppressed by Victorian society. It is not easy to analyze the mistake-ridden text of an uneducated woman as anything other than a one-dimensional description of her troubles. Still, my analysis extends Russo’s work to examine the complexity of Cullwick’s text. Elsewhere, Russo highlights and critiques how Stanley’s subjectivity influenced her analyses of Cullwick. Based on the
manuscript of “Hannah’s Places,” Russo suggests that Cullwick was more than simply concerned with her fetishistic relationship with Munby. However, Russo overlooks the second longer autobiographical fragment. Because both manuscripts cover the same period, they must be part of the analysis as they show how Cullwick’s focus and vocabulary changed over time as her relationship with Munby and the text evolved.

_Scholarly Background_

Because Cullwick’s diaries are difficult to find, there is little scholarship on her work. Much of the scholarship revolves exclusively on the Munby/Cullwick relationship. Specifically, on how we read her middle-class lover/husband Arthur Munby, and his control over Cullwick’s diaries as he initiated her daily writing and seems to have influenced her focus on chores. My analysis of Cullwick supports a combination of control and controlled notions of Cullwick and offers a rationale for Cullwick’s production, thus showing Cullwick as a creative author within the confines of her material circumstances. Demonstrating her own choices/control is essential to my scholarly contribution as her motivation is rarely examined beyond its connection to Munby’s pleasure.

The presentation of Cullwick as the controlling author typically does not extend beyond her decision to remain a servant after marriage, which would mean ignoring the variety of evidence suggesting that Cullwick was not simply a servant above all else. Scholars who have asserted that Cullwick had some agency over the text typically highlight her desire to remain a servant even though she had opportunities for social advancement. Malkovich focuses on how Cullwick presented herself as the sole author and used her role as a servant to support this presentation. Malkovich demonstrates Cullwick’s authority over her identity though he leaves other aspects of her motivation unexamined:
It is significant to note that Hannah does not wish for more than their [Cullwick and Munby] occasional visits, nor does she yearn to become the idealized picture of middle-class womanhood. Arthur wants these things more than she does, but Hannah stresses her desire not to marry or have children within her entries. Hannah is steadfast in her desire to remain in service and retain her independence, as she does not wish to become the epitome of Patmore’s angel (94).

Cullwick insisted that she maintain her status as servant; however, this is not simply a reactionary response to the restrictions on middle-class women. Instead, it suggests a naturalized understanding of her particular role in society. As such, analysis must also focus on the restrictions/influences she allowed to be placed on her. For example, she married Munby even though she was content with their prior situation. This is, again, another example of Cullwick’s complicated relationship with control and Munby that needs to be considered within the context of her relationship and societal norms.

Once again, Swindells is one scholar who completely denies Cullwick any autonomy, despite clear evidence to the contrary, in the creation of the diaries. She (2008) is the strongest opponent of Cullwick as an independent agent. Of her own compilation, she suggests, “It is Author Munby who is being given a helping hand in this work of restoring the diaries. The most meticulous historians cannot avoid offering him further liberation through and in text” (36). In other words, Swindells argues that Cullwick’s text is essentially a means of discussing Munby’s eccentricities above any revelations about Cullwick’s character/life or her writing agency. Much of Swindells’ analysis focuses on how Cullwick shaped her memories for Munby’s approval. By suggesting that Cullwick was molding her composition for Munby, Swindells indicates that Cullwick controlled the text to an extent. I argue that Cullwick was aware of her audience’s
proclivity for dirt and chose to add these elements as a way to entice Munby. This effort suggests that she was in control of the text. Obviously, we can never know what Cullwick might have written for herself and what Munby’s controlling hand influenced. However, it seems unlikely Cullwick would occupy her limited free time to record mundane chores daily. This point appears well supported by the narrative/letters I analyze in this chapter. The information Cullwick presents is not new to Munby (some of the events occurring while he was with her and would therefore have the basic information) and must serve a purpose other than recording her daily activities. By examining the narratives, we can see the choices Cullwick makes in order to present an autonomous subjectivity she wants to maintain.

Historical context is also an essential component of Cullwick scholarship given the discussion of Cullwick’s desire for freedom from middle class norms and the obsession with class difference seen in her relationship. Without this information, we cannot understand the full scope of pressure that led Cullwick to create the texts as a discussion between her and Munby. As Merrick (1996) points out:

Cullwick does seem to exemplify the position of most servants in her experience of the rigid control exercised over the servant’s work, leisure time, and activities. This restrictive and isolating lack of independence was often the incentive for Cullwick and other servants to give notice, with an average of two years (even in good positions) much more the norm than life-long dedication to one family. (32)

Moreover, Cullwick’s writing suggests that she thought status was inherent and established from birth and therefore not something that could be changed. As I will demonstrate, Cullwick does not merely avoid dressing as a lady; she denies she can become a lady. In her autobiographical
entries, she spoke of the way one can tell a true lady by countenance alone.\textsuperscript{23} Cullwick, herself, could not be mistaken for a stereotypical Victorian “lady” as she never looked the part with her large hands and physically masculine appearance. Merrick does not consider these working-class elements of Cullwick’s subjectivity. Just as we cannot take Munby out of the diaries, we cannot dismiss the influence of nineteenth-century hegemonic views on natural class distinctions and status on Cullwick’s production. If scholars do not consider this context as well, Cullwick would possess no reason to construct her diaries as she did to reach Munby.

While Merrick is concerned with class and gender values, Cullwick’s text speaks more to society’s hierarchical values, which she internalized. Cullwick felt the naturalness of her position as seen through her adherence to social norms and dress. Scholars addressing the role of Victorian hegemony in Cullwick’s writing have neglected to study conflicting elements evident in Cullwick’s presentation of her subjectivity, such as her relationship to control and being controlled. Merrick addresses the issue of social control, warning historians about generalizations based on people’s relationships. She argues,

The conflicts of interest and perception in this “cross-class” relationship can only be partly understood in purely personal terms, as Cullwick’s writings show that the specificity of the male middle-class “world-view” was a construction that did not permeate all of society equally. This suggests that social hierarchies based on class and gender divisions did not always appear “natural,” but that differences in the view of the social order existed between, and also within classes. Although notions of ordained

\textsuperscript{23} This is a common physiognomy assessment in Victorian England. See John Tosh’s \textit{A Man's Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England}: “First impressions of an individual were strongly conditioned by physical indicators—countenance, voice, and hand-clasp could (and should) all be ‘manly’” (111).
hierarchies and boundaries may have been widespread, their influence and manifestation in realities of working class (and female) life was varied. (38)

As Merrick suggests, even as the ideological control present in the Victorian era was noticeable in many facets of everyone’s life, we should not assume identical presentation of that control in how status markers/ideology were reproduced in individual lives. Cullwick and Munby clearly had a complex relationship with each other and class status, so to examine their lives and narrative requires a nuanced approach that incorporates both the personal/relationship and political/ideological aspects of their subjectivities.

Analysis

In the following analysis, I use close reading to place two sections of Cullwick’s life writing in the form of letter fragments in the context of her particular circumstances (her relationship and nineteenth century ideology) to highlight Cullwick’s control and appreciation of her audience. Similar to other writers to be discussed, Cullwick utilizes a genre different from the primary genre (diary) throughout these two sections—they appear in letter form with a narrative structure. Through this discussion, I highlight issues of authorial control, creativity through genre selection/audience appreciation, and her resulting subjectivity. As such, we can see that Cullwick presents herself as an independent laborer who desires autonomy in her relationship with Munby. To demonstrate how Cullwick used the text for autonomy in her relationship with Munby, I address the following key elements. First, I discuss the control and growing confidence as a writer, which Cullwick exhibited in the text. Her confidence shows in her failure to distance herself from the text as well as in her insertions of information that was close to her heart as it indicates the growing control she feels she can take in the text. Next, I look at the lack of closeness Cullwick felt in her marriage and the resulting text that underscores
her desire for more intimacy with Munby. Finally, I examine the Victorian ideological forces that intrude on Cullwick’s presentation of herself and her relationship. Through a close reading of the narrative sections “Hannah’s Places” and “A Servant’s Place” in the context of Cullwick’s class, gender, and relationship with Munby, I highlight the elements of the text she controlled and those she did not. This examination emphasizes Cullwick’s ability to use the diaries to assert her identity. It is ultimately illuminating to examine the separate sections that focus on similar circumstances as we can perceive therein the changing dynamics of Munby/Cullwick’s relationship and the ensuing changes to the narrative. In challenging existing scholarship on Cullwick, I argue that Cullwick is a self-directed author and that the direction she takes here demonstrates her authorial competency.

The two narrative fragments I analyze in this section are distinct from the rest of the text in terms of their length and narrative structure. The rest of the diary entries are quite short (typically only a paragraph or two) and read like a list of chores and daily accomplishments. Cullwick wrote “Hannah’s Places” in a single sitting on the afternoon of July 2, 1872. The diary entry for July 2 details her activities: “I wash’d the dishes, clean’d me & begun writing to Massa, with a hurried history of my different places. Posted the letter by ½ past 9 & to bed by 11” (Stanley 1984, 228). This entry suggests that Cullwick wrote the piece as a letter to Munby. At this point, Cullwick was visiting relatives, which allowed her additional leisure time away from the prying eyes of fellow servants. The setting explains why this text is longer than most, as well as the prominent place of correspondence in her relationship. Apart from Russo’s article, scholarly work on Cullwick assumes the incongruity of a working woman being a thoughtful, creative author. Regrettably, the mundane topics on which Cullwick focuses encourage readers to assume she was merely recording rather than crafting her experiences. Indeed, most entries
involve chores she completed or other basic information about her employers and/or her current living situation. A representative passage reads as follows:

*Wednesday [18 July]* Lighted the fire & did the hearth up. Swept up & dusted the room. Clean’d 1 pair boots. Got the breakfast up. Made the beds & emptied the slops. Clean’d & wash’d the breakfast things up; clean’d the knives. Got dinner ready & laid the cloth. Clean’d away & after baking look’d at the eclipse for some time—I saw it very quick & I thought how very wonderful it seem’d, & again that men should know when it was going to happen. Clean’d the kitchen. Wash’d the towels I used at Massa’s to wipe myself & had tea. Went out on errands. Clean’d away. Took the children in the garden, for Ann had gone to see the riflemen with my brother. Put them to bed & emptied the slops. Cook’d & took supper up. Clean’d away. To bed at 11. (108)

Even as the focus is overtly domestic, her perspective on worldly events provides an outlet for discussing other matters. She describes her labor as well as personal/historical insights when she reflects on a variety of topics; for example, she managed to enjoy the eclipse. These diverse elements reveal a multidimensional character who is more than simply a maid interested in recounting her daily chores. However, the narrative also reveals Cullwick’s consideration of Munby as her sole audience by catering to his fetish with working women.

Establishing Cullwick’s control over the text is the first step in examining her motivation to write because if Munby were in control, then his motivation would be principal. For many texts this step would not be needed. However, given Munby’s central position as the initiator and audience for the diary, this is an important step. Scholars (e.g., Malkovich, Russo, Stanley) have posited Cullwick’s autonomy by emphasizing her disobedience toward Munby when she opposed his wishes. One notable example occurred after their marriage. Despite Munby’s
demands, Cullwick refused further writing post-marriage. Additionally, Cullwick refused to frequently dress as a lady after their marriage, despite the conflict this caused. Complications with this limited basis for the assertion of control arise from the prominence of Victorian hegemonic beliefs that suggested the consistency of status; thus, her decision to remain in service could be the result of her naturalization as opposed to her autonomy. However, her disobedience is still significant as it emphasizes her autonomy with Munby, if not society. Since Munby is considered by some, such as Swindells, to be the de facto author of the text, defying his wishes highlights her self-determination and ability to write with her own voice and about her own needs. The lack of agency given to Cullwick in her text could stem from various causes, both aggravated by her class and gender. First, the idea that Cullwick could be a willing participant in the dominant/submissive relationship they share is lost on those who do not look past Cullwick’s situation as a domestic. The master/slave dynamic prominent in Cullwick and Munby’s relationship can be problematic in establishing Cullwick’s control as she performs the submissive role in her relationship with Munby. However, there are numerous instances, discussed below, where Cullwick writes in a clear autonomous voice. Additionally, the vast number of photographs that have survived showing Cullwick in black face and a chain, as well as multiple references to the enjoyment she got from licking his boots and scrubbing various surfaces both clothed and naked, would suggest her willing and possibly eager participation.

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24 One example of Cullwick’s cleaning occurs on Friday, October 16th 1863, “Clean’d away & then to bed at ten o’clock. I’d a capital chance to go up the chimney, so I lock’d up & waited till ½ past ten till the grate was cool enough & then I took the carpets up & got the tub o’ water ready to wash me. Moved to the fender & swept ashes up. Stripp’d myself quite naked & put a pair of old boots on & tied an old duster over my hair & then I got up the chimney with a brush. There was a lot o’ soot & it was soft and warm. Before I swept I pull’d the duster over my eyes and mouth, & I sat on the beam that goes across the middle & cross’d my legs along it & I was quite safe & comfortable & out o’ sight. I swept lots o’ soot down & it come all over me & I sat there for ten minutes or more, & when I’d swept all round & as far as I could reach I come down, & I lay on the hearth in the soot a minute or two thinking, & I wish’d rather that Massa could see me. I black’d my face over & then got the looking glass & look’d at
Another reason the idea that Cullwick could creatively mold her narrative is dismissed is possibly due to her lack of formal education and unconventional writing style. Yet, neither of these issues should allow readers to disregard Cullwick’s agency and the possibility that she willingly performed her role in the slave/master dynamic for her own enjoyment and not just Munby’s.

Furthermore, Cullwick was self-determined in many aspects of her life: she sought to control the positions she took and set the criteria for accepting them. Her strong will is evident in the assertive voice she uses in her diaries, which a few scenes highlight most effectively. The first involves Cullwick’s interaction with a shopkeeper:

Valentine’s day was while I was there & I slipp’d out in my dirt to get one for Massa. It took me a few minutes to select one. I found one—a dog with a chain round his neck & thought it fit for me so I ask’d how much it was. The woman very kindly said, “It’s a shilling, but I see you work hard for your living, poor thing, so you may have it for 6D.” I said, “Well, I do, ma’am, but I don’t want it cheaper nor you can afford to sell it, & I dare say you wonder why I want one at all.” (57)

In this passage, Cullwick stresses her ability to take care of her financial needs and pride in her independence. The second example occurred while Cullwick was looking for a new position:

She [the lady of the house] sat down, & she said, “There’s one thing Mr—will not allow & that is staying out after church time on Sundays, & we cannot give you any stated time on weekdays.” I said, “I must give it up then, ma’am.” She said, “Why?” “Because, ma’am, I don’t like being compelled to go to church, & to feel I dare not stop out if I wanted to nor never one evening in the week.” I was turning away to go, but she told me

myself & I was certainly a fright & hideous all over, at least I should o’ seem’d so to anybody but Massa” (Stanley, 139).
to wait & think it over—I said, “No, ma’am, I must give it up, thank you,” & I made a curtsy & come away. (74)

Again, we see that Cullwick does not hesitate to assert her autonomy as a waged laborer despite what others might desire of her. We should not assume that she was unable to assert control over her text in the same manner. Another example of Cullwick’s complicated relationship with authority is seen in her refusal restrictions that would impede her choices concerning her religious observation and access to Munby (such as any that limited her ability to visit Munby), while complying with strict standards regarding the quality of her labor. While many domestics were pressured by employers to conform to the employers’ ideas of morality and status, Cullwick left an employer after only three months to maintain her dignity as she felt the placement was below her:

I could see myself cleaning the doorsteps of a vulgar London lodging house in a street full of nothing but the same thing, & the servants of the rest looking as common & vulgar & low as the houses & them, for they wore ribbons & tiny caps or none at all on hair done up as fashionably as possible. So I did feel rather vex’d to be put on a level with tem as it were (56).

Such independent behavior was risky, especially given her pride in financial independence. Given this risk, it would appear that Cullwick had a strong sense of independence and values that could not be suppressed by others.

The previous examples from Cullwick’s writing highlight the problem of taking an either/or argument on Cullwick’s autonomy, both concerning her life and to her life writing. Her general acceptance of some oppression is evident as she accepts physical abuse from employers; for example, in the following scene, an employer instructed Cullwick on proper cleaning
technique: “Instead of her showing me how with her hand she kick’d me with her foot & pointed. I dare say she thought I sh’d feel hurt & vex’d with her but I didn’t. I was glad she thought me humble enough without kicking again” (46). Two noteworthy aspects of this scene include Cullwick’s desire to maintain the humble attitude acceptable for someone of her status. As Munby and society would have encouraged this attitude, Cullwick’s response to the beating underscores the limited power Cullwick would have felt in many aspects of her life. Moreover, she did not hold anyone but herself responsible for the physical assault. Again, this response to physical punishment could result from the naturalization of her status or, on the contrary, from the importance she placed on doing her job well. Either would be connected to the overall influence of Munby and society in her writing/subjectivity.

Although I argue that Cullwick was the controlling force of the diary, her focus on Munby’s fetish with manual labor gives credence to his influence. First, Cullwick would not have kept such extensive diaries without Munby’s influence; second, the topics she explored show her efforts to entice Munby. At times Cullwick acknowledged her anticipation of sharing the descriptions of her chores with Munby, for example, the numerous times she mentions how dirty she is from cleaning. As she related this information, she considered the pleasure it would give Munby. Furthermore, he requested she remember and recount particular menial tasks for him as she notes in her entry from Sunday, May, 31, 1863, “I told Massa things what gad happened at Brighton & so he told me not to forget to put them things down what I’d bin telling him” (124). Cullwick’s crafting of the scene for Munby’s appreciation illustrates how she used daily activities to pique his interest. Her deliberate detailing of the scene recurs as she discusses washing Munby’s feet after a long separation: “That is, washing his feet by the fire, me sitting on the brass on the hearth & Massa in an armchair leaning back enjoying the warm water & seeing
me. I think he must have miss’d it these two years as much as I have, for it’s a pleasure to me, as well as a useful & humble little service that I never can tire of, especially as long as I know M. likes it & loves me too” (54). The emphasis she continually places on being “in her dirt” speaks directly to Munby’s fetish for working women.

The personal pronoun emphasizes her prominent role in the narrative fragment. Cullwick adjusts her focus in this pronoun switch, situating herself as the dominant character and not the fetishized personality that she was for Munby. As mentioned, Cullwick initiates the narrative section as a third person observer but cannot maintain the separation between herself as narrator and herself as subject. “Hannah’s Places” begins in third person and then switches to first person:

[Hannah’s places] from her leaving the Charity school in Shifnal, which was at eight year old & after she’d done her yellow sampler, her mother meaning her to do a white one for framing at a better school, but what her never could afford. Instead o’ that a friend on Mother’s (Mrs Phillips) took me to work at her house off & on (not hired) from 1841 to about 43. (35; my emphasis)

By switching from third person to first, Cullwick trades perspective from the voyeuristic pleasures of an outsider to the personal ownership of the writer. Her perspective, not Munby’s, directs her representation. Cullwick cannot maintain the distance between herself as the writer and herself as the subject within the text, as first established by the use of “her” instead of “me,” as highlighted above.

Cullwick’s increasing control over her writing, given the prominent place she allows herself as the focus, is again evident in the second narrative section. Unlike “Hannah’s Places,” Cullwick begins “A Servant’s Place” with a personal reference: “I left Mrs Caulfield’s at St Leonards On Sea, in December—on my own account being so far off Massa & feeling out o’ the
way of everybody” (53). Cullwick also ends this section by focusing on herself as she is getting her picture taken: “I had mine done in my dirt to please my Massa, & they had their’n done clean’d to please their Missis, only I couldn’t tell them so, & they of course thought it was only to please myself” (91). The confidence Cullwick shows in her writing is associated with Munby. His position as the sole audience is never distant; moreover, her focus rarely deviates from her labor—the object of his fetish. However, Cullwick separates what Munby wants as the audience and what she wants as author through her rhetorical choices in content and tone. There is a duality of voices present, yet Cullwick’s voice subjugates Munby’s in many places as she asserts her own desires, which allows her to present the identity that she desires.

For Cullwick, her foremost identity was that of a self-sufficient laborer. To highlight the significance of this association, she begins the narrative section with her exit from school and entrance into the workforce, albeit unpaid. As Russo points out, Cullwick focuses on wages as well: “Her choice to begin her history at age eight, when she had finished her schooling and began work training, establishes the wage earning theme” (37). Throughout the diaries and narrative fragments, Cullwick describes her various occupations, her income, and the labor involved. Her discussion of financial independence appears to be a response to Munby’s interest in manual labor and dirt. She presents her pride in her work and her financial independence in an entry from Friday, February 27: “Put the things away & went to the shop on the terrace & bought a black & white shawl for 15 & 9d, & a new flannel for two petticoats, cost nearly 9 shillings the two” (118). In addition to information about her purchases, she made a record for every new place where she worked. She did so, I suggest, to oppose Munby’s plan that she live as a “lady” as she valued her status as a laborer/maid. As such, she highlighted not only her employment and wages, but what her labor could do for her in terms of possessions and independence. By
continuously sharing the financial aspects of her life, Cullwick indicates how important this matter is to her identity. Additionally, given Munby’s interest in Cullwick’s maintaining a humble attitude, this aspect shows her commitment to their shared status understanding.

Cullwick asserts yet another aspect of her identity, that of a devoted daughter, by sharing biographical information with Munby, as seen in the following examples. In both “Hannah’s Places” and “A Servant’s Place,” she inserts personal stories into the narrative, illustrating events that helped to form her identity. The first aside in “A Servant’s Place” discusses the death of both her parents:

A month after my mother came to see me, & in December both my father & her was dead. So I never saw them again, for they died of a fever just a fortnight ‘twixt each other & my Missis wouldn’t let me go. . . . my mother wrote me a letter about Father being so bad, but nobody told me of Mother’s being so ill else nothing’d o’ kept me away. I sh’d o’ run across them fields & all the 3 mile in ½ an hour I know. . . . All the night I was praying that she may come to life again or trying to dream of her ghost or something that she might seem alive to me. It see’d as if my care for life or work was all gone. I’d bin thinking how I sh’d work & make her happy for she sh’d have all my money. (37)

Here, Cullwick highlights the significance of her separation from her parents at the time of their deaths; this event follows from her narrative more generally because she frequently discussed her family. The story likely held no appeal for Munby because he was aware of the information given the length of their relationship and was only concerned with her labor; yet she ensured its prominence as an explanation of its effect on her life and identity.

The second aside in “A Servant’s Place” contributes to a representation of Cullwick’s identity as well as speaks directly to her relationship with Munby. Cullwick was working at
Margate at this time, and Munby went to visit. This extended section features the pleasure
Cullwick experienced during Munby’s visit. The event occurred shortly after Munby arrived.
Initially, everyone was impressed by Munby’s gentlemanly stature. She relates how she and
Munby shared and enjoyed the duplicity of his arrival. When Cullwick had to serve him, as a
guest, she recounts how they sustained their intimacy while still adhering to their outward roles:

I made him a curtsy & said, ‘Yes, sir,’ pretty loud & then put the door to but of course
didn’t shut it. Then I think I went up & he kiss’d me quickly & then spoke louder about
his dinner, giving me a sovereign to get what I thought best, & came out again & told
Miss K. & Mary what I was going for. . . . You may be sure I wasn’t long a-going to the
butcher’s & fishmonger’s, but I was soon back again & got a nice little dinner for M.,
fish, cutlets, & an omlette. (68)

Cullwick yearned for the continued play-acting that Munby rebuffed once they married. This
aside reflects the significance of remembering a relationship that had fallen apart; she wrote this
after their marriage when she was quite unhappy. The story she recalls had happened before they
were married and living at Temple. After their marriage, Munby spent most of his time away
from home, leaving Cullwick rather lonely. Moreover, the persistent difficulties with role-
playing and the incentive for relating this duplicious tale reminded Munby of how their
relationship worked best. Cullwick longed for a return to these moments after their marriage.
There are a number of scenes in this aside where Cullwick recalls the element of secrecy in their
relationship and the enjoyment it gave them both. The more their relationship became public, the
less they could enjoy their distinct statuses. Her focus on this event highlights both the joy they
had had in their relationship and her sadness at the end of it and its clandestine nature.
“A Servant’s Life” also introduces a more personal connection to Munby than “Hannah’s Places.” The narrative continues the focus on the intimacy they were missing at the time of her composition. Similarly directed at Munby, it is more conversational. Here, she acknowledges her closeness with Munby as the reader. Notable is Cullwick’s use of “you.” “You” does not appear at all in “Hannah’s Places,” except through dialogue. However, it does appear in “A Servant’s Life” no less than eleven times, which is a significant increase in direct communication with Munby as reader. Frequently, Cullwick uses “you” generally, yet she also refers directly to Munby. This direct appeal contrasts with Cullwick’s usual way of referring to Munby as “Massa.” Cullwick’s most direct address to Munby is an accusation of fault in his behavior toward her:

Miss Julia got to like talking to me, & seeing me work in the kitchen—she said she enjoy’d it & thought cleaning so very interesting. I’ve thought so but never knew a lady as said so before her, nor could I ever think so ‘cause you have such strict orders to get all done afore anyone’s down of a morning & it’s quite natural for me to run away with a dustpan & brush or anything if you hear anyone coming. (78)

The “you” must be referring to Munby as the sole audience, as she made very sure that her diary was kept secret. This is one of the few times she addresses Munby directly in her writings. It is also the only reference that is not used as something akin to “dear reader” or in reference to people in general as she does when she discusses an impending excursion: “And so I was ready to start—I did my bag up, & I’d bundle besides, for somehow you always get more things to carry back than you bring to a place” (79). As seen here, Cullwick does not directly address a specific person but rather refers to a commonality amongst everyone. The direct reference to Munby in the first quote stands out markedly. The rebuke in this reference is significant as the
attractiveness of manual household labor should be a given for Munby considering his general focus on work and women. He enjoyed seeing Cullwick “in her dirt” as she would wash his feet and various other tasks.

Munby’s discomfort at seeing Cullwick performing demeaning tasks—demeaning, that is, for a middle-class wife—illustrates his difficulty with the play-acting after their marriage.

Marriage was never their goal; however, after their more than a decade-long relationship, they felt it was the only respectable outcome. By drastically changing their circumstances, they lost the ability to continue playing servant and Massa, a grave disappointment. Cullwick desired servitude, while Munby desired a lady after Cullwick became his wife. Living together and sharing their situation with close companions permanently disrupted the roles they had performed for seventeen years. However, living as husband and wife pleased neither of them. Additionally, during this time, Cullwick asserted herself with growing frequency, including her refusal to completely stop role-playing in their marriage. Cullwick enjoyed the life she led as a free servant—at least from her writing, this appears to be the case. She could not avoid all societal pressures on what constituted a respectable woman by simply acting as a servant; however, as an independent wage earner, she possessed the freedom to move around as she wished and make choices about her livelihood. Munby wanted Cullwick to transform into a respectable middle-class lady while she made clear her disdain for this idea:

That’s the best o’ being drest rough, & looking ‘nobody’—you can go any where & not be wonder’d at. Besides I have got into the way of forgetting like, whether I’m drest up as a lady or drest in my apron & cotton frock in the street. It matters not much to me, but certainly I feel more at ease in my own dress. (274)
These factors complicated their relationship and led to many of Cullwick’s more pointed discussions in her narrative, including her focus on their play-acting and directly addressing Munby.

The guidelines for social interactions between varying classes were firmly entrenched, and Cullwick accepted these restrictions in the same way she understood the organization of society as natural. She severely judged those who did not abide by the rules of conduct. Her attitude towards those rules was somewhat hypocritical given her relationship with Munby; however, as she noted when her relationship was revealed by her fellow servants, she felt her conduct was above reproach:

“You are keeping company with a gentleman—Gower has told me as truth.” I said, “Yes, sir, it is true—I have for a great many years, & he’s a gentleman in every sense of the word, even as you are, & if you think a bit & know how I’ve work’d for my living as a servant & had settled to go to the Isle o’ Wight with you—right away from him—you’ll know there is nor ever was anything wicked or wrong in him.” (83)

Cullwick disliked when others defied the outward signs of status that she and Munby upheld in public even as they continued to masquerade as master and servant despite their much closer relationship. Cullwick completely accepted the dress and the conduct codes of hegemonic control. I contend that in the passages discussed above, we see how societal norms influenced Cullwick, narrowing the paths for her creativity in writing. This complication disrupts the usual readings of Cullwick as either an outlet for Munby’s fetish or an autonomous author. There should be no reason to limit interpretations to an either/or reading. While it is clear that Cullwick controlled her text, there is little doubt that Victorian ideology shaped her from a young age, thus, naturalizing her status as a working woman as projected in the diaries. What we perceive is
the control of an author who is experiencing societal pressures on working class women that would not be present for middle class men/women writers. As such, Cullwick chose the best options she could within the ideological structure of the time.

Cullwick, therefore, used her diary and life circumstances as tools to communicate her distress with Munby. Nevertheless, it is difficult to argue that Cullwick focused on servitude only because of her own enjoyment of her occupation/status. We must also examine the effect of established status signifiers such as dress and behavior that Cullwick discusses to understand the influence on her of Victorian hegemonic ideology and obtain a clearer view of her motivations and subjectivity. The segments’ similarities suggest the pivotal role Victorian ideology played in her compositions. This ideological influence is combined with Cullwick’s own desires and Munby’s influence to create this complicated text. Cullwick’s preoccupation with status is evident in the two narrative sections in ways other than the inherent characteristics of being a “lady.” Two aspects of class determination appear frequently in Cullwick’s writing. The first and most prominent is her focus on what she and others wore. She noted her attire whenever she ventured out for new employment, visited Munby, or went shopping. The attire of other women also attracted her attention. In many cases, the issue of “being a lady” was inseparable from the clothes/presentation: either people’s appearance corresponded to their status or it did not. Miss K., mentioned earlier, is one of the women who did not dress the part of a lady despite her obvious bearing: “Although she was so plainly dress’d the minute I saw her & heard her speak I could tell she was a lady, so I curtsied” (45). This scene demonstrates that a true lady’s bearing could not be covered by plain clothing. Similarly, no amount of finery would transform a servant into a lady. In light of these preconceptions, Cullwick emphasized the significance of curtsying, mentioning this act of deference as well as her middle class employers’ corresponding reactions.
She also used people’s responses to judge their status. For instance, not acknowledging a curtsy elicited Cullwick’s condemnation. Cullwick naturalized these social elements, which cannot be removed from her desire to stay a servant. One cannot argue that without the constraints of Victorian ideology Cullwick would have so stringently maintained her identity as a servant.

Cullwick revealed a near obsession with the natural bearing of a lady as opposed to women simply dressing the part. She discussed the status of all her employers for two reasons. First, finding quality employers was essential for any future employment. As such, she repeatedly returned to this information. Given the importance of respectable references, the employer’s status, in some cases, was more important than her duties. At one point, Cullwick was even denied employment because of a past employer: “She [Mrs. Green] talk’d to me and seem’d to like me & settled to give me wages & a holiday once in three months, & came straight for my character. I suppose when she found it a lodging house and the Missis not a lady she didn’t like to take me, for I got a letter saying I sh’d not suit her” (58). Aside from practical concerns, the pointed nature of the passage suggests an additional interpretation. The diaries served as a medium for expressing Cullwick’s discontent with the trappings of middle class respectability.

Additionally, as she was never comfortable in a “lady’s” attire, Cullwick’s attention to the naturalness of other women amplified the contrast with her as a humble worker. Her portrayal of Mrs. K. illustrates this distinction: “She told me once that the first time she saw me at Mrs. Eastlands where I was lodging & at work, that she thought she never saw such a nice-looking servant. That pleas’d me very much of course, & I told her how that I could tell she was a lady directly she spoke to me. And so we complimented one another, she for being a lady, & me for being a servant” (62). Cullwick’s belief that the “true nature” of a lady was revealed
through speech emphasizes her acceptance of the prevailing hegemonic power structure. What she did, as a maid-of-all-work, involved her employment as well as her identity. Cullwick’s writing does not hint at her aspiring to more than her humble origins, at least as far as the diaries suggest:

No, I’ve long resolved in my own mind & felt that, for freedom & true lowliness, there’s nothing like being a maid of all work. . . . And I would leifer do all the scrubbing both out o’ doors & in, wearing my thick striped apron, peasant’s bonnet, short frock & thick boots—having black arms & hands, & face too if it happens with soot or dust, than I’d be prim & clean in the kitchen looking on at anyone else doing the work I’ve bin used to & liked for this 30 year. And as I once said to Massa, “I was born to serve, & not to order,” and I hope I shall always keep the same humble spirit—that of liking to serve others, & obeying instead of commanding. (85)

This passage, like many others, makes Cullwick’s vocation clear—hers is the hard and dirty work of a household maid. In the text, she demonstrates that Munby revered her performance of difficult labor. We cannot dismiss the role Munby played in persuading Cullwick to take on her appropriately humble attitude. Nonetheless, ideological influences of status clearly shaped her as a domestic long before his influence, and, in the end, caused her to go against his wishes of living as a lady.

Significantly, while Munby clearly influenced Cullwick’s writing, as did social conventions, she nevertheless asserted her control of the diaries through her asides and focus on waged labor to represent herself in her relationship with Munby. The relationship between Cullwick, the diaries, and Munby entails a complicated mix of authorship, control, and conflicts involving gender and class. Still, it is evident that through the diaries, Cullwick explored her
own, not just others’, desires in life. Although the impetus to write was not Cullwick’s, it would be wrong to deny that she constructed her own writing to some extent; such a denial is based on the same gender bias that led critics to presume women writers cannot write outside of their experience. Cullwick was not a puppet under Munby’s control, and the diaries give us a glimpse of a woman who understood who she wanted to be and would not change for anyone. In the next chapter, I examine the life writing of Ellen Johnston who used her narrative to legitimize literary ability in the hopes of further publication.
Chapter 3: Ellen Johnston

In the previous chapter, I examined a private form of life writing, a diary never intended for public consumption. This chapter shifts to a form of life writing designed for a wider audience and a text created by a writer aspiring to literary fame. Unlike Cullwick, Ellen Johnston wrote *Autobiography, Poems, and Songs* (1866) specifically to promote a series of poems and songs published along with the narrative. For that reason, in this chapter, I analyze the use of life writing for working women as a means of professional advancement. This chapter also addresses a different form of labor for women in the mid-1800s. While Cullwick was a domestic, Ellen Johnston was a factory worker. Both of these occupations were common for women during the 1800s. However, through factory work, Johnston associated with working people to a greater extent and enhanced her class consciousness on the subjects of wages and the conditions of factory work. In my analysis, I focus on how Johnston presents her working writer subjectivity by pushing the boundaries of acceptable life narratives. Her subjectivity, in this case, combines the two prominent identities: those of factory girl and poet. If one ignores either one of those two identities, it would be easy to suggest that

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25 Working-class women fueled the Industrial Revolution in cotton, wool, flax, and silk industries. They made up as much as 57% of all workers, mostly under age 20. Report from Dr. James Mitchell to the Central Board of Commissioners, respecting the Returns made from the Factories, and the Results obtained from them.” *British Parliamentary Papers*, 1834.

26 This definition is in addition to the foundational information on subjectivity outlined in the introductory chapter.
Johnston desired a bourgeois subjectivity due to her use of middle class aesthetics. However, such a reading reduces the complexity of Johnston’s work. Johnston merged her working class status and middle class aesthetics into one persona. By incorporating this aesthetic in her work, she hoped for middle class readers’ assistance in publishing further and gaining a wider audience. These aesthetics include her use of literary elements well known to readers such as direct reader address and literary allusions. As such, Johnston capitalized on her working class status while also pursuing literary fame through pursuing a larger readership. Thus, her writing reveals a combination of working class life and content presented through middle class literary elements. The outcome is transgressive to both working class content and middle class aesthetics. As such, Johnston created a work unique in many ways. The balance that Johnston maintained between her pride and commitment to working class issues and the interests of her middle class readers highlights her effectiveness as a writer. She showed no interest in revealing a fully accurate version of her life; instead, she chose specific elements of her biography to legitimize herself as a writer and create what she referred to as a “romance of real life.”

Even memoirs, which focus on a specific period of one’s life, provide more basic biographical facts than Johnston incorporated in her writing. Through Bakhtin’s dialogic, we can examine her choices based on her desire to establish a relationship with her readers and share her truth—that of a “romance of real life.” Examining the combination of literary elements in Johnston’s prose and poetry, I am building on the work of previous scholars who have studied aspects of both her prose and poetry but without juxtaposing her with other writers and focusing on her authorial

27 Since the work is actually entitled “Auto-biography,” the reader may expect a full and largely chronological retelling of Johnston’s life. Autobiographies typically encompass a greater scope of a life as well. These factors make Johnston’s work unique as it is focused on a small period of time and includes very little factual biographical information.

28 Emma Smith, Annie Kenney, and Hannah Mitchell all fall into this category.
choices, as does my study; my purpose is to highlight how she hoped to use her life writing for future publication and financial security.

Johnston’s work shows how she challenged the ideological forces within the dominant culture through strategic choices in content and word selection, consequently building an acceptable foundation for her poetic contributions. She devised several tactics to overcome the obstacles her material circumstances created. These strategies include the use of literary allusions and references to authority figures to support her literary claims. Johnston’s choices were inspired by society’s condemnation of writers with Johnston’s material circumstances and a lack of other options for achieving literary fame and respect. Both her gender and class prejudiced readers against her aptitude as a poet. Furthermore, Johnston’s lack of education affected the reception of her work.29 At the time of composition, working women, especially those deficient in formal education, were granted little artistic recognition.30 I argue that Johnston uses literary elements as a strategy to create her working-class writer subjectivity: she does not ignore or suppress issues that would clearly identify her class status and her concern about subjects related to poverty and women. However, she presents this information through middle class forms and style. The dual aspect of her subjectivity is central to understanding Johnston’s motivation for writing.

29 The testimonies provided by Gilfillan will be discussed later in this chapter to examine this issue.
30 As Florence Boos suggests at the beginning of her discussion of Scottish working women poets: “Only a few working-class Scottish male poets enjoyed any name-recognition outside of Scotland, and two of the best-known—James Thomson and John Davidson—gradually leached Scottish language and referents out of their work after they emigrated to London. Later critics of nineteenth-century working-class poetry also tended to focus their attention on artisan poets, a choice which virtually erased women, who were excluded from most skilled trades, and eked out a marginal non-domestic work-life as textile workers and farm laborers. Finally, most anthologists and critical expositors strongly suggested that few proletarian women of any region wrote poetry, and that the verses of those who did lacked “political” content, or added little to contemporary interpretations of working-class life” (53).
Johnston was born to working class parents in the mid-1800s. She started factory work at a young age and continued working as long as her health allowed. Within her local community, she achieved some recognition as a poet. This included publications in the local penny paper and a book of poems and songs, *Autobiography, Poems, and Songs of Ellen Johnston* “Factory Girl” (1866). Accompanying the collection of verses is her only life writing: a fragment (about twelve pages) about her childhood and growth as a writer and factory worker. Through this fragment, Johnston offers the reader insight into her preferred identity, emphasizing both a traditional literary knowledge and her situation as a “factory girl.” We know precious little else about Johnston’s life outside of the information she provides, which makes it difficult to check the veracity of her claims. However, Klaus’s (2008) short biographical article does contribute some concrete information to fill these gaps. Through extensive examination of censuses and poor relief data, Klaus provides information on Johnston’s life and death and stresses the adverse circumstances of Johnston’s last years:

The inspector’s summing up gives an inkling of her situation: “Applies for relief being ill and off work since September last. She supported herself during that time by pawning her clothes and jewelry and her means are now exhausted.” A doctor’s report produced but no longer extant certified that she was “partially unfit for work.” Despite the humiliation of applying, but perhaps also in order to impress the inspector, Ellen was proud enough to mention that she was “well known as the ‘The Factory Poetess.’” She received 2s. 6d. outdoor relief on the spot and could expect another weekly payment of 1s. 6d. over the next eight weeks. (430)
By reviewing these relief applications, Klaus establishes some specific dates for Johnston’s life; yet, no birth, death, or childbirth records are available for her. Therefore, we cannot be certain about her age. With these limited documents, Klaus concludes with some degree of certainty that she died penniless and relatively young. How she supported herself and her family after her only publication remains unknown. Finally, Klaus establishes the fate of Johnston’s daughter at the time of Johnston’s death—she was alive and married. Outside of these basic biographical facts and her writing, Johnston left virtually no other evidence of her life.

Working writers, both men and women, faced a number of practical and ideological problems that prevented many from attaining eminence in their craft (and many others from pursuing their craft at all). The living conditions of working class families presented the greatest practical obstacle. Much as Virginia Woolf posited the need “for a room of one’s own” for middle-class women as a step in achieving independence, working class people, too, required space and time to pursue their writing, as one working-class writer clarifies:

I wrote in the dear old chimney by the winter firelight, while my buxom brothers were shouting around me. And this was my only study, save the barn or cowhouse. O how I longed for some obscure corner, where, with a handful of fire in the grate, and the smallest lamp upon the unplanned board, I might write my hymns in quiet. But this was denied me. (qtd. in Klaus 12)

Even though composed by a male writer, this description of long hours and the sense of responsibility to others was paralleled in the lives of Johnston and other women writers, because writing took time from other activities. The volume of factory work and household labor working women performed made free time a luxury. Factory work in the mid-1800s was demanding and lasted most of the useable day. For children as young as thirteen, this demand
would mean a nine hour workday. For adults, the day lasted anywhere from twelve to fourteen hours, and the number of working days could vary depending on the season and production needed. As such, Johnston likely found writing difficult because of the various demands on her time.\(^3\)

Moreover, Johnston had to cope with low wages and illness. Even though many laborers preferred factory work for a variety of reasons, including better conditions and pay, women and children were paid subsistence wages at best (less than men for the same or similar work), and the conditions could be hazardous. As Shoemaker indicates in his study on gender in Victorian England:

As a factory commissioner reported in 1844, “a vast majority of the persons employed at night and for long hours during the day are females. Their labour is cheaper, and they are more easily induced to undergo severe bodily fatigue than men.” As another commissioner put it, girls and women were more “docile.” Yet even in these types of work men could end up earning more money, because they worked different grades of cloth, they secured better jobs (as supervisors or mechanics), or because women were forced to work shorter hours due to their domestic responsibilities. (167)

That women would work to severe fatigue is comprehensible since they had fewer employment options. Their docility can also be understood as a result of their lack of options. What all of these combined factors show is the extent of exploitation experienced by working women—both at home and at work. In these circumstances, writing was a luxury that few working women had

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\(^3\) In addition to working at the factory, Johnston had a small daughter in her care for whom she had to find alternative care for when she wrote: “As my circumstances in life changed, I placed my daughter under my mother’s care when duty called me forth to turn the poetic gift that nature had given me to a useful and profitable account, for which purpose I commenced with vigorous zeal to write my poetic pieces, and sent them to weekly newspapers for insertion, until I became extensively known and popular” (11).
the time or energy to pursue. Furthermore, since Johnston had to financially support her mother, stepfather, and daughter due to their ill health, she could be exploited by her employers as her family had few options outside of the workhouse. As Johnson claims towards the end of her autobiography:

My step-father was unable longer to work, and my mother was also rendered a suffering object; my child was then but an infant under three years of age, and I who had been the only support of the family, was informed by my medical advisor that, unless I took a change of air, I would not live three months. (11-12)

Johnston’s own health frequently made employment hazardous for her as well. Indeed, her family’s poor health and her lack of financial success as a poet made unemployment impossible.

To compound the practical issues of opportunity and time, the literary scene’s attitude towards working people—especially women—resulted in a tendency for negative appraisal of her work. The literary scene became more commercialized at this time through the prestige and financial security of male writers, and those involved in the profession had ample reason to act as gatekeepers into the field. As Rosen (2001) explains,

> Given the increasingly professional and commercialized nature of the book trade at mid-century, working-class poets who found their way into print did so largely through the interventions of middle-class sponsors, who edited their poems and introduced them—often through a series of mediating prefaces and testimonials—to the middle- and upper-class audience for new books. (208)

In this complex climate, Johnston sought publication of her work and financial support as well. To accomplish this while maintaining her identity as a working woman, Johnston chose to craft her life narrative in order to convince readers she deserved their appreciation as a poet. As I will
discuss, Johnston’s narrative has a more dramatic style than many life narratives. There are gaps in information, possible exaggerations, and literary elements that distinguish Johnston’s work as unique. This highly selective presentation allows Johnston to control how her life experiences, which might not otherwise be acceptable to her readers, are perceived. Through these elements, Johnston is able to show herself as a rather accomplished reader/writer despite the obstacles laid before her.

Lastly, working people were frequently excluded from intellectual professions as they had little access to publication opportunities. Preserving middle-class status also led to Victorian society’s organic view of society, where middle-class men were the heads, middle-class women were the hearts, and workers were the hands.\(^{32}\) As we can see from this description, a working woman writer/poet was an anomaly. Thought of alternately as hands or hearts, working women lacked the standing to legitimize themselves in an intellectual endeavor such as poetry, which explains Johnston’s need to establish her ethos as a poet. Furthermore, male domination in poetry created additional obstacles for Johnston. Working women’s poetic aspirations conflicted with middle-class ideology since the working classes were not seen as capable of the same intellectual work as the middle class. While it was not impossible for women to be successful in literary pursuits, they faced obstacles many writers could not overcome.\(^{33}\) At the time of production, Victorian ideology class and gender-based social stratification, as discussed in the previous

\(^{32}\) Leonore Davidoff discusses the organic view of society as “able to operate as a system because of its hierarchically ordered but independent parts. The adult middle-class (or aristocratic) man, representing the governing or ruling group, was seen as the Head of the social system as well as the Head of the household which was in turn a society in miniature. The Hands were the unthinking, unfeeling ‘doers,’ without characteristics of sex, age, or other identity. Because work was central to Victorian society, the implication was that middle-class men did brain work while the hands did menial work. Middle-class women represented the emotions, the Heart, or sometimes the Soul, seat of morality and tenderness. Women performed these functions as keepers of the Hearth and Home, and here we find a body/house connection which figured widely in the Victorian world view”(89).

\(^{33}\) One noticeable exception was Eliza Cook.
chapter, was deep-seated, prescribing a strict delineation of status, social roles, and even literary genres. Thus, poetry was deemed more appropriate for men – as the “more difficult” of the genres while women’s domain was primarily fiction. Had Johnston chosen to become a novelist, she might not have encountered as much resistance. Tuchman points to the gender boundaries placed on literature during the first part of the nineteenth century and the distinctions made between genres: “The status [of novels] arose from men’s association of the novel with women, for many novelists and most novel readers were thought to be women. England’s traditional readers and authors were elite men. In the late eighteenth century the genres that they favored, poetry and essays, had high status” (46). This preferential treatment of genres continued into the nineteenth century, only beginning to change around mid-century. To compound this issue, Russ suggests working-class writers received limited literary acceptance because they lacked models and because readers valued some life experiences over others. This double standard meant most readers valued the life circumstances of middle class writers more highly than those of working class people. Klaus adds that the double standard arose out of fear of working class challenges to the middle class:

The middle-class criticism of self-taught writers is largely an attempt to hold at bay the anxiety generally felt over the social and political challenge of such writing by diffusing that anxiety into a discussion of language and formal quality appropriate for working-class expression. To focus on “unpoetic” or “unrefined” diction was one of several strategies employed to put aspiring working-class writers in their place. The procedure is very much the class equivalent of the gender-based imputation of “coarseness” and “impropriety” with which middle-class women writers were slighted in the nineteenth century. (14)
This distinction would suggest that the middle-class feared most those working women who challenged the system beyond simply broaching the public sphere with their poetry. We will see these tactics employed in Gilfillan’s testimonial of Johnston’s text as he suggests improvements to her writing through formal elements and adherence to approved aesthetics established by middle class writers.

Mediation

Mediation in literature is the reconciliation of opposing groups through a third party. The opposing groups for our purposes are the working class of Johnston and her middle class readers. Gilfillan, who aimed to provide an appropriate avenue for middle class readers to appreciate Johnston’s working class poetry. The various literary forms that Johnston employs would also act as mediators. The first mediator, Alexander Campbell, was Johnston’s publisher and apparent friend. Campbell published the Penny Post (from 1860 to 1868) as well as most, if not all, of Johnston’s work. Not only did he promote her writing in print, but he also printed working people’s responses to it (some of which will be discussed later in the chapter) and encouraged people to subscribe to her compilation. Campbell sincerely advocated for Johnston, going so far as petitioning for readers’ contributions for Johnston when he learned of her destitution. In April of 1873, Campbell wrote in his paper, advising his audience:

We are sad to learn that our old contributor, Ellen Johnston, has been very ill and is in very distressing circumstances. Some of her old admirers might, perhaps, be inclined to give a little to assist her; and, if they forward anything to our office, it will give us great pleasure to hand it over to her. (qtd. in Klaus 431)
Whether the pleas were successful remains unclear; however, the fact that Campbell felt he could elicit charity from readers suggests Johnson’s work had a lasting impact on readers. Campbell’s concern is accompanied by his general encouragement of working people as Boos\textsuperscript{34} notes in her discussion of the publication history of Johnston’s work:

Campbell clearly considered his paper a means to help inform and educate as well as divert his audience, and his readers’ many poetic contributions provided a kind of oblique confirmation of the need for an enlarged franchise. Johnston’s poems, in particular, proved that a talented woman could arise from the grinding labour of the mills. (505)

By encouraging her as well as those who wrote in response, Campbell exhibited his conviction that women and working people’s creative works deserved attention.

Even as Johnston overcame various personal and professional obstacles while creating her dual subjectivity, she faced resistance even from those assisting her. The second mediator of Johnston’s writing, Reverend Gilfillan, is a prime example of the complex nature of Johnston’s reception. Here, I compare testimonies Rev. Gilfillan provided for Johnston and another working women poet, Janet Hamilton, to illustrate how middle class men utilized testimonies to promote the dominant Victorian ideology by criticizing writers who did not conform to social norms. Rev. George Gilfillan’s testimonial, which opens Johnston’s text, emphasizes the difficulty of being a self-taught writer. Gilfillan was a well-known patron of working-class poets and provided other introductory materials for poets such as Janet Hamilton (1868). The following is his complete testimonial as it appears at the beginning of Johnston’s work:

Ellen Johnston, the “Factory Girl,” has asked me to look over her verses. This I have done with very considerable interest and pleasure. She labors, of course, under great disadvantage, but subtracting all the signs of imperfect education, her rhymes are highly creditable to her heart and head too—are written always with fluency and often with sweetness, and I see, have attracted the notice and the warm praise of many of her own class. I hope she will be encouraged by this to cultivate her mind to read to correct the faults in her style—arising from her limited opportunities—and so doing, she cannot fail to secure still increased respect and patronage. (Foreword)

Gilfillan’s testimonial highlights a number of significant issues: the class-based focus of working class poets’ reception, how patronage alters when directed at a woman who thwarts societal norms, and society’s conflicted conceptions of value of working class writing.

Even as Gilfillan supports Johnston’s writing, he highlights alleged limitations to her writing skill. He acknowledges her credible rhymes, yet underscores various failings and disadvantages in her writing. Gilfillan advises Johnston to better imitate the style of middle-class writers in his testimony, in order to approach his idea of “correct” or “good” writing. This patronizing praise is unfortunately common in many texts on women writers of this era. Women’s writing is typically discussed as gendered and suggests women should be applauded for their effort more than the final product since they will always be inferior to men.35 In a proviso, however, he acknowledges the benefit of appreciating a different world from the

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35 Elaine Showalter discusses the reception of women writers in, *In A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists From Brontë to Lessing* (1977), suggesting, “Most of the negative criticism tried to justify the assumption that novels by women would be recognizably inferior to those by men. When the Victorians thought of the woman writer, they immediately thought of the female body and its presumed afflictions and liabilities. They did so, first, because the biological creativity of childbirth seemed to them directly to rival the aesthetic creativity of writing. The metaphors of childbirth familiarly invoked to describe the act of writing directed attention toward the possibility of real conflict between these analogous experiences” (76).
middle-class norm. His comments are indicative of the correlation between the dominant ideology and working-class writers’ reception. Interestingly, Gilfillan points specifically to Johnston’s class-based success, suggesting the working class is her true place and appropriate readership. Johnston, however, desires to claim a wider and more varied readership, which indicates their conflicting objectives.

Based on Gilfillan’s testimony, then, Johnston’s lack of education is a detriment to her work. However, a similar educational background does not condemn every poet. As such, there must be more to the response than the question of formal education. Gilfillan’s mention of Johnston’s lack of formal education actually masks his censure of Johnston’s life if we compare his reception of Hamilton’s work. To justify this claim, it is necessary to contrast this testimony to Gilfillan’s introduction to another equally uneducated poet. Gilfillan provides a more extensive introduction to Janet Hamilton’s text, as compared to Johnston’s, already suggesting a preference towards Hamilton. Hamilton was much less controversial than Johnston since she was married at thirteen to a fellow laborer and had ten children during her marriage. She wrote about working people’s lives in terms of their hardships but also condemned drunkards and those who did not work. 36 In his testimonial, Gilfillan lauds the powers of an uneducated poet, arguing there is genius that too much education sullies. Gilfillan’s testimonial launches into a glowing endorsement of nature:

Great and rapid as the march of the higher culture has been and is, it is gratifying to know that it has not yet been able to extinguish the race of self-taught authors, nor to eliminate

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36 A few notable poems by Hamilton include “A True Story: To Young Abstainers,” “Be Pitiful,” “Burning Drink,” and “The Victim Of Drink: The Early Lost” (1863).
those elements of simplicity and sturdy common-sense which, along with native genius, have formed the staple of their character and the inspiration of their works. (17)

Here, Gilfillan endorses Hamilton for the same unschooled nature he criticized in Johnston’s work. Her lack of adherence to certain social norms and values appears to condemn Johnston’s life more than her writing ability as such. Rosen suggests this very idea: “Gilfillan’s comments point up the ideological flexibility of the label ‘self-taught’: what is, in Hamilton’s case, a means of aligning her with an approved ideal of uncorrupted Nature becomes, in Johnston’s, a patronizing critique that keeps her in her place” (2). While the term self-taught would seem to apply in equal measure to both writers, this is clearly not the case. Johnston’s supposed failings do not come from an inability to conform to the approved standards of style, but rather her inability to conform to society’s ideal of a respectable working woman.

Therefore, the fluid condemnation of the “unschooled” indicates a subtler censure of morality that the reference to the writer’s lack of education simply masks. Whether Gilfillan purposely meant to silence Johnston is unclear, the attempted silencing of the rebellious poet is the outcome. Hamilton conformed to the ideology of working-class womanhood, while Johnston was controversial:

Johnston labored in a series of large textile mills, in Glasgow, Manchester, Belfast, and Dundee, and was one of the very few Scottish working class women poets who did not work as a seamstress, domestic handloom weaver, or farm assistant. She fought labor injustices fiercely—suing, for example, one employer who fired her without the legally mandated two weeks notice—and her reflections and poems expressed a strong sense of integrity and pride in her ability to adapt to difficult circumstances. Her premature death in the poor-house was not for want of fierce resistance to her fate. (Boos 60)
Johnston not only asserted her rights through the judicial system, suing an employer for wrongful termination, but she proudly acknowledged her illegitimate child in her text—a clear moral deviation from the Victorian code for women, and not only those belonging to the middle class. In her mention of a poem by Oliver Goldsmith advising death as a cover for the shame of an illicit affair, Johnston counters that:

I did not, however, feel inclined to die when I could no longer conceal what the world falsely calls a woman’s shame. No, on the other hand, I had never loved life more dearly and longed for the hour when I would have something to love me—and my wish was realized by becoming the mother of a lovely daughter on the 14th of September, 1852.

(11)

Interestingly, the second edition of Johnston’s work removed all reference to this incident after some readers had claimed her work had included situations better left unsaid. There are also numerous veiled references to abuse by her stepfather in her narrative that were published in both editions—though it is hard to distinguish whether it was physical, sexual, and/or verbal—that go no further than implications. While both the childhood abuse and illegitimate daughter would go against social norms, it is only the daughter that readers seemed to have a problem with. It appears readers’ concern focused on her illegitimate child and not her accusations of abuse by her stepfather. Johnston thus altered the second edition of her work to remove most references to her daughter. However, she refused to remove her child completely from her narrative. The readers’ concern about the “propriety” of Johnston’s narrative is troubling as it led Johnston to suppress some traumatic events and thus limited Johnston’s ability to fully explore her life through narrative. The material and societal context during Johnston’s composition highlight her motives in constructing her life narrative as an example of working-class literary
subjectivity. If Johnston were less rebellious, she would not have needed to stress her competence as a writer as well as conceal certain biographical information.

Alongside Gilfillan’s introduction, Johnston includes a dedication asserting the value of the working-class voice in poetry to foster understanding amongst classes by suggesting the value of everyone’s labor. The dedication, while short, emphasizes the type of people Johnston wishes to see among her readers: “To All Men and Women of every class, sect, and party who by their skill, labour, science, art, literature, and poetry, promote the moral and social elevation of humanity, by their obedient servant, Ellen Johnston, The Factory Girl” (iii). By acknowledging this goal, and not her actual goal of self-promotion, Johnston upholds her literary pedigree and appeals to both middle- and working-class readers by focusing on equality. She connects the middle and working classes, focusing on people’s humanitarian contributions as the central aim of everyone’s labor. Two noteworthy items about motivation and subjectivity appear in the introduction. First, Johnston clearly expresses her desire that the life narrative function as an introductory piece for the poems. As previously mentioned, this is vital for understanding the production of the life narrative. Second, she deflects attention from a possible breach of public decorum caused by her publication by claiming, as did many women, that she has put forward her work only at the insistence of someone else: “Gentle Reader,—On the suggestion of a friend, and the expressed wishes of some subscribers, I now submit the following brief sketch of my eventful life as an introduction to this long expected and patiently waited for volume of my Poems and Songs” (3). Aside from assuaging the readers on her public voice, Johnston sets the foundation for her poems as desired by readers and her life as out of the ordinary. The ‘romance of real life is established from the beginning of her work. The events she subsequently describes frame the poems and songs. This shows her awareness of a need for constructing a persona that
conforms to society standards in some ways. By doing so, she can balance the needs of her readers with those of her overall goal.

Scholarship

During her lifetime, Johnston was known as a poet rather than a life writer as the volume of her poetry and songs is much greater than her twelve-page life writing. As such, the critics have paid little attention to her life writing. While a number of scholars discuss Johnston’s poetry, Swindells and Rosen add significantly to the discussion by examining both her poetry and life writing. Scholars tend to focus on her specifically as a working woman of Scottish descent. The scant texts available make any work on Scottish working women’s writing quite difficult (as acknowledged by most scholars). However, critics generally agree on the influence of Johnston’s material circumstances on her strategies as a poet and writer. Yet, scholars have essentially neglected the writer’s motivation for attaching her life writing to her poems. As with the other women in this study, ascertaining their motivation can help unpack the specific and sophisticated choices they made in composition. Though we could assume Johnston mainly desired public recognition, this reasoning is too simplistic, as Johnston desired recognition as a working class writer and poet. By analyzing her motivation, we expose the variations in genre and subjectivity that illuminate her creativity and control over her narrative, thus, highlighting her specific adaptations as a writer.

While critics such as Klaus established pertinent biographical facts, others have also highlighted the creative control and purpose of working women’s contribution to poetry. Swindells, in her piece on working women’s life writing, posits the need to examine gendered and class-conscious history through personal writings. Life writing, according to Swindells, allows scholars to
question the requirement that any individual could stand for an entire social group, age, epoch, while questioning the notion of a hermetically sealed or idiosyncratic, eccentric subjectivity which attempts no connection between individual and social group. The individual neither constitutes nor is constituted by the social group. (122)

Swindells’ emphasis on the connection between social circumstances and individuals is quite useful in this study. She demonstrates the impact of ideology on individuals while still allowing for originality. As she suggests, “The rhetoric of realism (‘common trials of everyday life’) is in tension with that of romance (‘strange romantic ordeals attributed to . . . imaginary heroines’), to produce an autobiographical subject in the literary” (164). For Swindells, the literary includes the creative construction of life narratives. Beyond constructing her narrative through multiple literary tropes, as Swindells argues, Johnston situates herself as a competent author and an advocate for the working class. By establishing her literary accomplishments, Johnston confirms herself as a person of letters despite her gender and class.

Johnston’s dramatic writing style distinguishes her life narrative from other working-class narratives, instead making it similar to contemporary novels. Her concern with literary competence and reader appreciation produces this writing style. Rosen suggests Johnston’s desire for literary credibility as a working woman led to her choices in the production. Furthermore, Rosen indicates that Johnston is in an impossible position of trying to achieve prominence in a field closed to her: “In attempting to present herself as extraordinary, outside the normative limits of woman and of worker, one could argue that Johnston can only depict herself as a fiction” (213). Rosen examines the tension between Johnston’s class/gender and her aspirations that produce a life writing disconnected from her biography:
Certainly the language of Johnston’s autobiography can sound strained as Johnston turns to literary models in a possible attempt to claim connections and to pattern experiences that educated readers could recognize. Early in the autobiography, for example, she tells of an authorizing, aristocratic, and masculine literary lineage. (213)

The distinguished literary lineage she suggests is highlighted in the beginning of her narrative; “When the Duke [Duke of Hamilton] was informed that my father was a poet, he familiarly used to call him Lord Byron, and, as I have been told, his Grace also used to take special notice of me when an infant in my mother’s arms, as she almost daily walked around his domain.” (4) This lineage through her father can not be verified either way as no published works are available. However, contrary to Rosen’s suggestion of a strained work, Johnson maintains a cohesive subjectivity despite using a variety of literary models in her narrative. While Rosen highlights the difficulties that Johnson faced as a working woman writer, she appears to focus less on Johnston’s talent as a poet and more on the situation that led to Johnston’s unconventional style. Rosen also discusses the conflict between poetic respectability and strong ideological forces. To resist a narrower vision of poetic worth, Rosen suggests broadening what we consider valuable in working women poets: “This wider consideration [of poetry in penny posts] may also help us to define less monolithically the ideological force of such concepts as poetic authority, publicness, and female respectability that have been held so harmful to working women’s literary expression” (208). The ideological forces, which, Rosen posits, worked against women poets in general, were especially prominent for working women’s life writing. It is this ideological focus that I seek to examine in Johnston’s life narrative; specifically, I show how we can enhance our discussion of Johnston’s subjectivity and motivation by incorporating both her poetry and prose.
One of the more prolific scholars of working women poets is Florence Boos; yet, Boos barely touches on Johnston’s prose. This omission casts Johnston’s entire work as less complex than it is. Boos posits the importance of communal characteristics in working women’s poetry as opposed to their prose:

What the Scottish laboring-class women poets did do was write poetic appeals to communal solidarity, whose humor, satire, linguistic immediacy, and appeals to shared memories expressed the enduring ideals of workers in a social order that might now be called “third-world” or “postcolonial.” Russell, Johnston, Hamilton, and their sister poets struggled to articulate a balance of social empathy and outrage which they believed they and their fellow women of the laboring classes were best able to understand and express.

(3)

Johnston’s poetry clearly shows the complex relationship she had with her working class subjects. While she promotes many community activities and organizations specific to the working classes, she also writes about the difficulties of dealing with absentee, drunkard husbands and other problematic circumstances for working women. While overt community identification is not as apparent in Johnston’s prose, her verses repeatedly rely on working-class themes, again including a number of poems concerning drunken husbands and other domestic issues. Furthermore, Johnston’s conversational poems aim to create a sense of class camaraderie between her and readers, which heightens her attachment to her working-class roots. As I will discuss later, “communal solidarity” and “appeal to shared memories” dominate many of the conversational poems as well. Finally, Johnston’s introduction establishes a connection between all laborers. By examining the communal facets of the life narrative and poems, as I will do later in the chapter, we can understand Johnston’s nuanced purpose for writing.
Lastly, Goodridge examines the rhetorical strategies of nineteenth-century working-class poets and thereby places Johnston’s work within a larger literary framework, much like Boos. He describes Johnston’s struggles to establish herself as a poet and be accepted as such:

She was clearly tremendously ambitious, setting out her stall with a bold and brazen panegyric to a powerful industrialist, and boasting on her title page the patronage of both the queen and the prime minister—a level of patronly achievement unmatched since the days of Stephen Duck, 150 years earlier. On her title page she is billed as "The Factory Girl"—the capital letters and definite article suggesting that she is both claiming unique title to the soubriquet and using her occupation as a badge of poetic integrity. (543)

In his analysis of the title, Goodridge effectively argues that Johnston desired working-class acknowledgment; however, he ignores her working-class literary subjectivity by not taking her life writing into account since that is the piece she uses to cement her literary lineage. In his examination, the importance of class solidarity established in the poems is clear; this solidarity serves as a means of giving the community a voice. This emphasis on solidarity complicates the argument that Johnston was simply looking for literary subjectivity as Swindells suggests. Johnston’s literary production and consumption are intrinsically linked to her concrete circumstances as a woman and factory worker. By examining her life as a woman factory worker, the literary scene in the mid-nineteenth century, and British ideological norms, I will thus illustrate the integral connection between the elements of production and consumption of the text.

Analysis

In this chapter, I use close reading to examine Johnston’s prose and a selection of her poetry; in so doing, I highlight her use of various literary elements to present her working class
literary subjectivity. Her desire for legitimization as a poet and financial independence for herself and her family influenced her use of these literary elements. As she mentions in her text, “As my circumstances in life changed, I placed my daughter under my mother’s care when duty called me forth to turn the poetic gift that nature had given me to a useful and profitable account, for which purpose I commenced with vigorous zeal to write my poetical pieces, and sent them to the weekly newspaper for insertion, until I became extensively known and popular” (11). Among others, Johnston uses aspects of traditional romance and nineteenth-century realism, which are not typically combined, but help Johnston create the working class subjectivity she wants.

Johnston’s tactics were only necessary because she was a working woman of limited formal education with past societal discretions; however, that does not mean she did not choose the ones that best fit her artistic goals. Here, I examine her rhetorical choices in terms of audience appreciation, tone, and literary tropes/allusions. Through understanding of the circumstances of production, these elements will allow me to clarify Johnston’s motivation and artistic ability.

Johnston first establishes her identity as the inheritor of her father’s innate literary talent and her scholarly achievements with little formal schooling. She does not provide evidence of formal schooling, though she mentions her scholastic prowess after nine months of some schooling. It is doubtful Johnston attended anything more advanced than a charity or Sunday school. In her writing, Johnston describes her education and childhood reading:

Before I was 13 years of age I had read many of Sir Walter Scott’s novels, and fancied I was a heroine of the modern style. I was a self-taught scholar, gifted with a considerable amount of natural knowledge for one of my years, for I had only been nine months at

37 Due to Johnston’s desire for sympathy and acceptance from readers for her life that did not conform to traditional standards (child out of wedlock, politic writings, and molestation), the use of romance with its focus on innocent heroines would allow readers to accept her as troubled yet still innocent. The realism she used, as will be discussed, produced a clear connection with readers.
school when I could read the English language and Scottish dialect with almost any
classic scholar. (7)

While she is vague about the extent of her education, the description highlights her scholarly
abilities early on in her life. As Johnston started working at age eleven and therefore must have
left school by that point, her competence is notable. It is also likely that her family could not
have afforded to pay for her schooling since England did not have mandatory education until the
late 1800s, well after Johnston’s youth. During her childhood, parents either had to pay tuition
for schooling or send their children to less academically rigorous charity schools.38 Johnston’s
referential poems and narrative, however, do suggest she was well read. The emphasis she
creates in this passage heightens Johnston’s effort to establish her literary credentials and
provides proof of her voice as a competent author. Johnston implies that any child this well
versed in literature must have only furthered her education and abilities later on. In this gap
between biographical certainty and narrative, an intersubjective exchange develops that
highlights Johnston’s purpose for writing, as I will subsequently show.39

Throughout the narrative, Johnston clearly adapts her story to appeal to her
contemporary/middle class audience’s expectations of class and gender norms. In one prominent
example, Johnston describes her coping strategies, illustrating the various identities she assumes
to meet her readers’ expectations:

In the residence of my stepfather I was a weeping willow, in the factory I was pensive
and thoughtful, dreaming of the far off future when I would be hailed as a “great star.”

Then, when mixing with a merry company no one could be more cheerful, for I had

38 See Linda Mahood’s Policing Gender, Class And Family in Britain, 1800-1845. Routledge, 2005.
39 See Smith and Watson’s discussion of this in Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life
learned to conceal my own cares and sorrows, knowing well that “the mirth maker hath no sympathy with the grief weeper.” (7-8)

By modifying her persona to please others, she demonstrates her need for approval, which could stem from paternal abandonment. Whatever the reason for such behavior, Johnston habitually accommodates others by concealing negative aspects of her identity. Interestingly, the quotation she uses here refers to Psalms 137, which describes the Israelites’ oppression in Babylon. Forced merriment is the general theme of the excerpt as the Babylonians compelled the Israelites to sing through their grief. While the Israelites refused, Johnston permits others’ expectations to overshadow her pain. The performer in her comes forth even though the type of “stardom” to which Johnston aspired at this point in her life is unknown. She mentions acting at one point, which might refer to the drama in her writing/persona, but clearly decides on poetry as her calling. In either case, Johnston suppresses her own identity to suit her audience’s expectations. Johnson allows readers’ values to influence her choices, thereby ensuring that her life narrative will be acceptable to them. The balance she maintains between self-censure and rebellion means she can express some of the elements of her biography that deviate from middle-class norms such as her illegitimate child and insistence on fair wages while avoiding the extensive reader condemnation.

This same adaptation, which she describes in her life, appears in Johnston’s text. The most notable example is her discussion of her stepfather. Johnston mentions the “mystery of my life,” which does not involve her father, but her stepfather’s abuse:

But had I only foreseen the wretched misery I was heaping upon my own head—had I heard the dreadful constructions the world was putting on my movements—had I seen the shroud of shame and sorrow I was weaving around myself, I should then have disclosed
the struggle of my life, but I remained silent and kept my mother and friends in ignorance of the cause which first disturbed my peace and made me run away from her house for safety and protection. However, I consented to stay again with my mother for the time, and resolved to avoid my tormentor as much as possible. (7-8)

Johnston’s confession of the abuse she suffered as her mother lay dying further suggests her desire to mold her narrative into the “romance” she mentioned earlier, as well as maintains Johnston’s position as a persecuted romantic heroine. Even as she hints at her victimhood, she chooses to remain vague, possibly to avoid additional censure of her text. Clear descriptions of sexual/physical abuse were not common even in fiction at the time. As such, by disclosing her situation even indirectly, Johnston might have alienated some readers and shocked the propriety of others. Her adaptability allows her to suppress features of her identity/biography that do not fit reader ideals and her focus of the “romance of real life.” However, her decision to mention the abuse (and child) at all shows how Johnston pushes boundaries for working class women writers. Just as she discusses persecution and wage disputes, Johnston refuses to completely conform to middle class norms. Thus, she is able to highlight her working class subjectivity. Based on the choices Johnston thus makes about what to include/exclude, her adaptability and understanding of her audience are clear. One method Johnston uses to make her narrative choices more acceptable is to dramatize them as if her life were a romance.

Johnston sets the narrative tone by dramatizing personal experience, waged labor, and publishing. Early in her narrative, Johnston stages her father’s departure/abandonment:

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40 It was not until the New Woman novelists of the late Victorian period that women writers began to more explicitly discuss sexual matters. Notable writers in this category include: Olive Schreiner (1855-1920), Sarah Grand (1854-1943), and George Egerton (Mary Chavelita Dunne, 1859-1945).
But when all the relatives and friends had assembled at the Broomielaw to give the farewell kiss and shake of the hand before going on board, my mother determined not to proceed, pressed me fondly to her bosom, exclaiming—“I cannot, will not go, my child would die on the way;” and taking an affectionate farewell with my father, he proceeded on the voyage, and my mother fled from the scene and returned to her father’s house, where she remained for some years, and supported herself by dressmaking and millinery.

(4-5)

Her mother is the heroine here, yet this role will soon be Johnston’s. Interestingly, no other dialogue occurs elsewhere in the text. As Johnston was a baby when her father left, she could not have recalled such details (which she even notes herself). As such, the dialogue itself is likely either her creation or passed down from her mother. Her mother’s sacrifice shrouds the trauma of parental abandonment, creating the myth of Johnston’s childhood. The dialogue then intensifies a family mythos of suffering heroines and augments the personal style of the scene. Critics such as Klaus have questioned the validity of this scenario, suggesting the scene provides a more sentimental version of what might have been Johnston’s and her mother’s abandonment by the father. Johnston liberally embellishes events throughout her work, which makes this story’s accuracy difficult to ascertain. As with numerous elements of Johnston’s work, it is unclear what is biographically accurate and what demonstrates creative license aimed at enhancing her literary subjectivity. In the end, though, the accuracy of narration is unimportant to her goal of literary credibility and romantic tone. If we reference Bakhtin’s dialogic again, Johnson’s creative choices allow her to use the chain of expressions her readers would correctly interpret to present her persona of a working-class woman writer in this exchange. As Bakhtin suggests,
But the utterance is related not only to preceding, but also to subsequent links in the chain of speech communion. When a speaker is creating an utterance, of course, these links do not exist. But from the very beginning, the utterance is constructed while taking into account possible responsive reactions, for whose sake, in essence, it is actually created. As we know, the role of the others for whom the utterance is constructed is extremely great. We have already said that the role of these others, for whom my thought becomes actual thought for the first time (and thus also for my own self as well) is not that of passive listeners, but of active participants in speech communication. From the very beginning, the speaker expects a response from them, an active responsive understanding. The entire utterance is constructed, as it were, in anticipation of encountering this response. (94)

As such, we can assume that Johnston reflected on her readers’ expectations as she crafted her subjectivity. Her idea of the reader led to her using many creative elements that would be understood by the reader, as middle-class readers were typically aware of these literary elements. For this reason, the purpose of her controlling fact and fiction could simply be to add to her subjectivity as a working poet. The tone of the narrative suggests further drama and excitement, instead of emphasizing the grinding existence of labor, illness, and abandonment.

Furthermore, Johnston relates numerous realistic familial stories in this same dramatic tone, conflicting with her persona as a romantic hero. Yet, the tone she sets nourishes her mythos as a romantic heroine by concentrating on her absentee father’s and mother’s deaths. In this tale, her mother thought her father had died after he left for America; however, he was alive and well for some time after his departure. Her mother, then, received a letter from him much later in Johnston’s life:
My mother had been an invalid for several years, and, to add to her sorrow, a letter had come from her supposed dead husband, my father, in America, after an absence of twenty years, inquiring for his wife and child; on learning their fate he became maddened with remorse, and, according to report, drank a death-draught from a cup in his own hand; and my mother, after becoming aware of the mystery of my life, closed her weary pilgrimage on earth 25th May, 1861. Thus I was left without a friend, and disappointed of a future promised home and pleasure which I was not destined to enjoy. (13)

The sheer theatrical force of this passage establishes the mythos of a suffering heroine yet again. Johnston appears to be obliquely referring to her family’s ill health and subsequent poverty, though the reference is made in obscure terms. She presents her father’s suicide in a highly dramatic style through the reference to a “death-draught.” This phrase, romanticizing suicide by poison, is common in fiction, but not in life writing. Compounding the trauma, Johnston’s mother died shortly after hearing of the abuse her daughter sustained at the hands of her stepfather. Johnston thus connects herself to other romantic heroines through her unwarranted misfortune associated with those responsible for her care. Accordingly, she links her narrative to numerous fictional works involving victimized orphaned girls. Johnston further asserts her persona as a suffering heroine and bolsters her father’s heroic image by stating he committed suicide because of her and her mother’s distress. Reintroducing the abuse of her youth also maintains the focus on Johnston’s and not her mother’s suffering, which must also have been plentiful as her mother experienced many of the same hardships as Johnston. While we cannot

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41 See Shelley’s “Queen Mab” and Richard Wagner’s “Tristan and Isolde” among others.

42 Notable authors employing this idea include Charles Dickens, Charlotte Bronte, William Makepeace Thackeray, and Willkie Collins, to name just a few.
verify any of the information Johnston provides here, we can infer that it is another element of the myth that Johnston and her mother created.

Lastly, Johnston emphasizes her aptitude as a poet as well as her connection to the working class through numerous allusions. Many of those focus specifically on her and her readers’ Scottish heritage. Allusions are her most common tool for legitimation and community. Johnston references notable Scottish writers Robert Burns and John Mackay Wilson. Each writer not only allows Johnson to demonstrate how well-versed she is, but shows a bond to her homeland that would not be otherwise obvious since she uses little Scottish dialect in her poetry. “Dainty Davie” by Burns was a traditional Scottish song well known to her readers. Johnston’s dog was named Dainty Davie. Wilson’s “Tales of the Border” is a series of stories about the border area of Scotland that he compiled, and more stories continued to be added to the series after Wilson’s death. Johnston discusses the effect reading the tales had on her imaginative life: “I had also read ‘Wilson’s Tales of the Border;’ so that by reading so many love adventures my brain was fired with wild imaginations, and therefore resolved to bear with my own fate, and in the end gain a great victory” (7). Johnston’s connection to the authors and stories of her youth will be paralleled in the writing of Annie Kenney in the next chapter. Not only does Johnston allude to less famous works, she also makes note of her love of Sir Walter Scott. Obviously, readers of her time were familiar with Scott. He was also Scottish, which aligns well with Johnston’s readership.

Other allusions include a reference to Samuel Johnston’s Rasselas, the Wandering Jew and “When Lovely Woman Stoops to Folly” by Oliver Goldsmith. The reference to Rasselas appears in the narrative as a foil to her own search for happiness:
Like Rasselas, there was a dark history engraven on the tablet of my heart. Yes, dear reader, a dark shadow, as a pall, enshrouded my soul, shutting out life’s gay sunshine from my bosom—a shadow which has haunted me like a vampire, but at least for the present must remain the mystery of my life. (6)

*Rasselas*’ theme of undiscovered happiness, with its drifting from innocence into experience, parallels Johnston’s situation with her stepfather’s abuse. Sadness radiates from both pieces because of the impossibility of worldly happiness. Much like Rasselas, Johnston gives up the chance to escape. This apt allusion suggests to readers Johnston’s literary prowess. The amount and variety of allusions in Johnston’s twelve-page life narrative present a well-read woman. Thus, Johnston not only gives her life a literary turn but also legitimizes herself as a competent reader and author.

The allusions also demonstrate her “eventful life” that she mentions in the introduction to her narrative. Johnston creates a sense of freedom and adventure in the text as she constructs a life of exploration and struggle:

Like the Wandering Jew, I have mingled with the gay on the shores of France—I have feasted in the merry halls of England—I have danced on the shamrock soil of Erin’s green isle—and I have sung the songs of the brave and the free in the woods and glens of dear old Scotland. I have waited and watched the sun-set hour to meet my lover, and then with him wander by the banks of the sweet winding Clutha, when my muse has often been inspired when viewing the proud waving thistle bending to the breeze, or when the calm twilight hour was casting a halo of glory around the enchanting scene; yet in all these wanderings I never enjoyed true happiness. (5-6)
There is no proof Johnston ever left the United Kingdom in her text, so the extent of the travel she describes is unlikely, yet not impossible as the United Kingdom does encompass a relatively large area of travel for the time. She and her family were not financially secure at any time in her life, so such extensive journeys are, at the least, unlikely. Johnston, instead, could be referring to escapism through literature; however, neither conclusion is certain. For example, Clutha is either a river in New Zealand or the Gaelic word for the Clyde River that runs through Glasgow. New Zealand was a long and arduous trip from Scotland for a young girl. Both readings are possible; however, given Johnston’s style and her poverty, the connection to New Zealand is unlikely to be true. This passage highlights the artistic license Johnston employs in her life narrative as she intentionally blurs the line between biographical truth and her “romance of real life” for readers.

While allusions create the foundation for her subjectivity, well-known tropes help present a complete working-class literary heroine. Johnston’s suicidal tendency and the persona she typically portrayed are notable examples. Suicidal tendencies are not, however, unique to Johnston’s autobiographical writing. Other working women writers contemplated suicide for various reasons. Swindells discusses this element, concluding that “for many of the autobiographers, the unresolved problems of self-advancement, of narrative progress, slide towards a dramatic contemplation of death, frequently in tension with fraught terms of sexuality” (147). Johnston characterizes her failed suicide in terms of unrequited love as it would be represented in a romance:

When one morning early, in the month of June, I absconded from their house as the fox flies from the hunters’ hounds, to the Paisley Canal, into which I was about to submerge myself to end my sufferings and sorrow, when I thought I heard like the voice of him I had fixed my girlish love upon. I started and paused for a few moments, and the love of
young life again prevailed over that of self-destruction, and I fled from the scene as the half-past five morning factory bells were ringing. (8)

Of possible suicide methods, Johnston chose drowning which was a common method of female suicide in artistic productions. Alexander discusses this aspect of Victorian art: “the mixture of literary and visual representations of the drowned woman reached all strata of Victorian society and formed a cohesive iconographic system with which Victorian society, as a whole, could identify and to which it could respond” (67). Frequently, a suicide by drowning occurred after a sexual transgression on the young woman’s part. That Johnston’s attempt fails validates her subjectivity as a strong yet suffering woman. First, using this trope would elicit the appropriate response of pity from Victorian readers as it suggests innocence and regret concerning her sexual transgressions. Second, Johnston defies convention by seeking love for rescue. She uses the connection between sexuality and factory work, since factory work was connected to sexual promiscuity, by combining the traditional hope for salvation with the restorative power of labor. Further still, Johnston focuses on the importance of the factory, represented by the work bell. It is via romance and labor that she discovers salvation. Again, the narrative returns to work and her identity as the factory girl, supporting her objective to present herself as such in the life narrative and poems.

43 There are a number of possibilities for this trope that Alexander notes, some stemming from the obsession Victorians had with Shakespeare’s Ophelia. Danahay illustrates the pervasiveness of this as she notes even Engels, with his strong critique of capitalist norms, accepted the idea:

Like many of the bourgeois Victorians of whom he is so critical, Engels also links working in the factory with an excessive sexuality, and with prostitution. Engels criticizes the ‘bad’ and ‘filthy’ language in factories, linking it to the pernicious effects of big cities. He quotes a man saying that ‘most of the prostitutes of the town had their employment in the mills to thank for their present situation.’ This is a common narrative in Victorian fiction; in Elizabeth Gaskell’s Mary Barton for example Mary’s aunt goes from working into a factory to prostitution. (Danahay 37)
Far from presenting a random selection of literary elements in her life narrative, Johnston constructs a tale using specific features from various literary eras and genres. Johnston’s use of such forms of address as “Dear Reader,” “Gentle Reader,” and “my readers” establishes a sense of community between herself and her readers. In the twelve pages of her text, “Gentle Reader” appears three times, “my readers” twice, and “Dear Reader” six times. The trope adds intimacy that allows readers to perceive Johnson as the heroine of the story. Much of the text has a conversational tone that aligns with the relationship Johnston establishes with the reader through this direct address: “Dear reader, I have wandered far away from my childhood’s years. Yes, years that passed like a dream, unclouded and clear. Oh! that I could recall them; but, alas! they are gone for ever. Still they linger in memory, fresh and green as if they were yesterday” (xxii). Johnson’s use of this element also harkens back to epistolary novels of the eighteenth century.

She writes her life narrative as to a group of friends instead of a mass of unfamiliar readers. The introduction first establishes this connection as she emphasizes her readers’ curiosity about her life being the impetus of her narrative. Throughout the narrative, there is a combination of dramatic and conversational tones that fit the dual aspects of her working woman literary subjectivity. Directly addressing the reader also serves to augment the readers’ perception of her literary knowledge, aligning with her multiple allusions and employment of other literary elements. Since Johnston’s life challenges societal norms, this trope is an apt strategy since it provides a connection with the readers and their traditional values.

The address to “Dear Reader” also begins multiple paragraphs and, as such, elicits sympathy from her readers. Two notable illustrations are: “Dear reader, were I to give details of my trials, disappointments, joys, and sorrows, since I came to ‘bonnie Dundee,’ they would be, with a little embellishment, a romance of real life, sufficient to fill three ordinary volumes” (14);
and “Dear reader, should your curiosity have been awakened to ask what form fate had then so hardly dealt with the hapless ‘Factory Girl,’ this is my answer:—I was falsely accused by those who knew me as a fallen woman, while I was as innocent of the charge as the unborn babe” (10). In the first example, Johnston explicitly references the romantic nature of her life, connecting her life with the romantic heroism often associated with the popular three-volume Victorian “triple decker.” Johnston also suggests her intention of writing a “romance of real life,” which is the outcome of her various strategies. She again signals a connection to romance when she alludes to King Author legend: “Mine were not the common trials of everyday life, but like those strange romantic ordeals attributed to the imaginary heroines of ‘Inglewood Forest’” (5). Inglewood Forest refers to the tale of King Author and Sir Gawain, but could also suggest Elizabeth Hume’s *The Farmer of Inglewood Forest* (1796), which was a popular contemporary text involving moral character. In the second use of the “Dear reader” trope, Johnston points to herself as her persona, the factory girl. In doing so, Johnston distances herself from accusations of sexual deviancy and maintains her innocence through her implied relationship with the reader. Here, as in other sections of her narrative, Johnston appears to desire sympathy from the reader. Through identifying with the reader in this direct manner and sharing some of her unwarranted suffering (such as the abuse from her step-father), Johnston hopes to find an understanding audience. As I will show through Johnston’s poetry, the direct address to readers, whether general or specific, is a frequent strategy for connecting her and her audience.

Moreover, the fallen woman trope, as discussed with factory work, is often associated with women who work and/or lack family stability.45 Johnston’s use of the fallen woman figure,  

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45 Examples of this trope include Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s “Imperial England,” Christina Rossetti’s “Goblin Market,” and George Eliot’s *Adam Bede*. 
even as she denies the charge, grounds her triumph as a wage earner. By insinuating sexual
and/or physical abuse at the hands of her stepfather and her own resilience, Johnston
demonstrates perseverance:

Dear reader, as this is neither the time nor place to give farther details of my younger
eventful life, I will now bring you to my sixteenth year, when I was in the bloom of fair
young maiden-hood. Permit me, however, to state that during the three previous years of
my life, over a part of which I am drawing a veil, I had run away five times from my
tormentor, and during one of those elopements spent about six weeks in Airdrie,
wandering by Carron or Calder’s beautiful winding banks. (9)

From this intimate revelation, readers may assume that the life writing is honest and provides full
disclosure; yet, instead, Johnston mentions the inappropriateness of such full disclosure. As the
romantic heroine, Johnston creates mystery around her childhood torment. By highlighting “a
veil,” she harkens back to the gothic innocent female character who removes the veil or is in
danger because something is hidden from her sight.46 Johnston likely knew of these conventions,
as she had read extensively. Gothic and romantic texts were popular with women at the time;47
Johnston would be familiar with these elements and ways of employing them to shape her
persona as a literary heroine. In sum, Johnston establishes her literary standing through
suggested educational prowess, literary tone, and dramatic narratives as well as including
conventions that produce a tale of a working woman heroine.

46 See Ann Radcliffe’s work as an example.
47 “The Gothic novel, with its idealized heroine, purely evil villain, unlikely plot and stimulation of feelings
of horror and suspense, is itself a kind of romance, and became a particular focus for worries about the effects of
feminine reading practices in the final decades of the eighteenth century” (Irvine 42).
Though the focus on working-class community and identity emerges prominently in Johnston’s poetry, at times her identity as a factory girl takes precedence in her life narrative as well. The heading for the second half of the life narrative—the only heading in the piece—is suggestive: “How I Became The Factory Girl.” Johnston does not claim to be just “a factory girl,” but “the factory girl.” She proudly embraces this title, and, by doing so, she secures her place as a respected wage earner and attracts middle-class readers’ interest in the novelty of a working-class writer. The life narrative allows Johnston to tap into the middle class’ voyeuristic gaze on those less fortunate. She dots the text with aspects of her work history, including the length of her staying in a position and the progress of her health. The writer emphasizes the seriousness of waged labor as she mentions suing an employer for mistreating her:

   I got work in the Verdant Factory, where the cloth I wove was selected by my master as a sample for others to imitate, until, on the 5th of December, 1863, I was discharged by the foreman without any reason assigned or notice given, in accordance with the rules of the work. Smarting under this treatment, I summoned the foreman into Court for payment of a week’s wages for not receiving notice, and I gained the case. . . . I was persecuted beyond description—lies of the most vile and disgusting character were told upon me, till even my poor ignorant deluded sister sex went so far as to assault me on the street, spit in my face, and even several time dragged the skirts from my dress. Anonymous letters were also sent to the foremen and tenters not to employ me, so that for a period of four months after I wandered through Dundee a famished and persecuted factory exile. (14)

Aside from illustrating Johnston’s determination to receive her due wages, she adds further drama to the story. Fellow laborers and employers habitually persecuted Johnston for perceived indiscretions, be they fabrications stated here or rumors about her sexual deviancy. Combined
with the introduction and poems, these instances of “factory life” demonstrate the difficulties she had with her circumstances as well as her commitment to being the “factory bard.”

Analyzing the life narrative’s conclusion further illustrates how Johnston manipulated her biography, thus establishing her working-class literary persona. This conclusion combines Johnston’s self-promotion with an egalitarian and communal sense of poetic usage based on working-class ideology:

In conclusion, I am glad to say that the persecution I was doomed to suffer in vindication not only of my own rights, but of the rights of such as might be similarly discharged, passed away, and peace and pleasure restored to my bosom again, by obtaining work at the Chapelshade Factory, at the east end of Dundee, where I have been working for the last three years and a-half to a true friend. [sic] I had not been long in my present situation when I fortunately became a reader of the “penny Post,” and shortly afterwards contributed some pieces to the “poet’s Corner,” which seemed to cast a mystic spell over many readers whose numerous letters reached me from various districts, highly applauding my contributions, and offering me their sympathy, friendship, and love; while others, inspired by the muses, responded to me through the same popular medium some of whose productions will be found, along with my own in the present volume. (15) Johnston begins her conclusion by suggesting that working women’s social status creates obstacles for their fair treatment. The situations Johnston “suffered” all stem from her identity as a working woman. These include starting to work at age eleven, the difficulties she faced supporting herself and her family, and the obstacles she overcame to be the “bard,” as she later proclaims. Johnston consequently underscores the importance of waged labor. As with Cullwick, obtaining waged labor marked an enormous achievement for many working-class people. In
Johnston’s circumstance, this moment of self-sufficiency initiates a phase of peace in her life. Johnston then shifts from her working-class to literary subjectivity. She focuses not on how she was published, which might be expected as the precursor to her poetic works, but instead on the impressive reception she gained through her works. As previously mentioned, the conclusion reiterates the importance of community and her relationship with her readers in her verse.

The Poems

Even though the focus of this chapter has been on Johnston’s life writing, examining her poetry completes my analysis of her subjectivity. I suggest her rhetorical strategies are fleshed out through the combination of prose and verse, especially in regards to Johnston’s connection with the working class. In the compiled poems, there are 22 poems directed to Johnston and ten replies from Johnston. The poems are from both men and women and writers of unknown status in some instances. Some writers, such as Edith, share many status markers with Johnston. The conversation between Edith and Johnston is the most developed in the compilation. If we look at these exchanges with working class people that were published concurrently with her own poems, we see her working-class and literary subjectivity fully realized.

The first poems by others praise Johnston for her talent. Most are titled “Factory Girl.” The verses are by both men and women of no recorded rank or status. Given the Penny Post’s readership, working-class men and women were the likely authors. Johnston’s exchange with a woman named Edith includes questions about how one can sing (create artistic work) in a factory setting: “They ask me, girl, what made thee sing/ ‘Mid din of shuttle and of loom—/ ‘Mid steam and dust and ceaseless ring/ Of cotton wheels in factory room” (156). Edith replies that, like Johnston, nature’s influence and God’s decree created the Muse responsible for her songs. The poet compliments a fellow working woman breaching the boundaries of her proper sphere.
Johnston’s reply echoes lines from Edith’s work: “They ask thee, Edith, why I sing/ ‘Mid factory
din, its dust and gloom, / And why I soar on fancy’s wing/ ‘Mid dreamland bowers and
summer’s bloom” (157). The poem then deviates as she describes the pain of her first love:

Then first love came with golden smiles—
Sweet were the vows he did impart
And with his false bewitching wiles
He stole away my trusting heart;
Then left me with a look of scorn
When he the seeds of grief had sown
Wrecked in the bloom of life’s young morn,
Ere scarce her infant buds were blown. (158)

Edith replies in the last poem of the series, and while her first poem established their
similarities, the second shifts to personal matters. As Edith feels a kinship with Johnston, she
hopes her own lines will be appreciated by Johnston: “I love thy life so sad, so sweet;/ Car’st
thou to read stray leaves of mine?/ Insipid they most eyes to meet,/ Perchance may favor find in
thine” (159). Edith understands the unlikeliness of publication for herself because of her works’
“insipid” nature. Yet, the dialogue between herself and Johnston enables Edith to share her life
(and writing) in public. No other instance in Johnston’s work highlights the community aspect of
art so well. Not only does she appreciate Edith’s work, but she publishes it with her own. It is
highly unlikely that Edith would have established her own artistic credibility without Johnston’s
place as the “bard.” In their last exchange, Johnston praises Edith and alludes to the relationship between herself and her own stepfather and father. Johnston claims for Edith more natural ability than herself:

    Inspiring spirit, thy lofty lays
    A mystic witchery o’er me fling:
    ‘Tis thee, not I, who claims the praise—
    ‘Tis of thy worth the world should sing.
    The language that pervades thy songs
    Portrays a noble soul sublime,
    And marks that worth to thee belongs
    I ne’er shall own through endless time.
    Edith, beloved one, be it so;
    I love those sweet stray leaves of thine,
    And feel what poets only know
    When kneeling by fair poesy’s shrine. (163)

The mutual respect shown by the poets is striking and displays the class-consciousness that Johnston strives to foster. This exchange also allows Johnston to promote other working-class poets, which would have increased her own literary standing by suggesting her authority to vouch for others as Gillifan did for her.

As Johnston promotes the talent of fellow working class writers, she also establishes “communal solidarity” and “appeal to shared memories” as mentioned earlier in my discussion of Boos’ work. The author, notably, establishes solidarity with readers through her discourse with Edith, specifically, through the closing stanzas of Johnston’s replies to Edith. All of the
poems end with an emphasis on the commonality between the two women: “Edith, farewll; may joy be thine! / Perchance with thee I yet may meet, / When I shall press thy hand in mine, / My kindres sister’s love to greet” (159); “Edith, my heart’s warm love is thine, / In kindred soul and kindred thought: / Oh may we at our Saviour’s shrine / Obtain that love which faileth not!” (165); and “One moment yet, my sister dear, before I say adieu / —This earth seems heaven to linger thus with one so good and true. / All I can give thee as a gift to prove my love unknown; / Accept the carte of my betrothed, accompanied with my own” (184). The expressions of love and solidarity in these replies are very present. Not only does Johnston discuss sisterhood and kindred feelings towards Edith, she directly addresses her by name in each reply.

Finally, Johnston solidifies her working-class status through verses written about issues well known to her community. These poems were published concurrently with the life narrative and account for the majority of the book. “A Drunkard’s Wife” relates her aunt’s experience with her husband. Johnston wrote other poems in honor of working-class men, such as “The Working Man”:

But the man who mins fair fortune wi’ labour’s anxious pain,
He is the man who’s justly earned her favour and her fame;
And may he aye keep flourishing wherever he may gang,
And ne’er forget the days that gane when but a Working Man.

The harvest soon will be, my freens, cheer up, you sons of toil,
And the fu’some hand of plenty will store your domicile;
Ye are the sons of nature’s art, aye forming some new plan,
Oh what would bonny Scotland do without the Working Man? (80)
Johnston focuses on the pride of working men who produce by their hard labor; this focus is a key element representing the dignity of working-class people. She also composed commemorative poems for groups and activities in her community and/or by request, such as poems for the *People’s Journal*, *Boat Builders*, and *Boilermakers*. Her focus on community and shared experiences increases on those rare occasions when Johnston uses a Scottish dialect, as her works typically avoid dialect. She writes using traditional forms and vocabulary, but the infrequent use of dialect creates an added connection with her local readers. Johnston’s connections to the working-class community illustrate the two vital aspects of Johnston’s subjectivity: literary self and waged laborer.

Johnston challenges the hegemonic view of working women by forcing her way into the public sphere to gain literary renown. In this quest, she defies the common perception of women as excluded from the public forum. From her life narrative, readers see a passionate writer and a rebellious woman claiming her voice. Despite moments of self-censorship, Johnston proclaims her personal and political beliefs in her writing; she believes sharing her poems about both domestic and political topics is her right. Her confidence is clear throughout her composition even as she feels compelled to legitimize her place in the literary scene. Johnston’s two foci, literary credibility and working class-consciousness, emerge throughout her work. Johnston’s subjectivity is a working class literary subjectivity with all of the challenges that term entails. At times, Johnston’s life narrative reads as a work of fiction. However, I argue that this fictive nature is essential for upholding the contradictory elements of her persona. Rosen also points out this element of fictionalization, but suggests it removes Johnston from class and gender considerations: “By constituting herself as a heroine, Johnston lays claim to an imaginative life unfettered by class or gender constraints, even as she remains pointedly conscious of her position.
as a working-class woman and the limitations that position imposes” (213). However, I argue that Johnston could not separate her imaginative life from her material circumstances. Indeed, the thought of working-class literary credibility so contrasted with contemporary readers’ beliefs that posing as a literary heroine gave Johnston the only avenue for depicting working-class life in a manner acceptable to middle-class readers’ standards.

While Johnston’s text provides only a partial story of her youth and introduction to work, it does show a woman adept at crafting her life narrative to produce her subjectivity of a working woman writer. She did not want readers to see simply a working woman attempting to break into the literary scene. What she stressed, instead, were her abilities as a scholar, her adventurous spirit, and a rebellious attitude towards those who would try to silence her. Through her craft, she gained some fame as a poet (including a second edition to Songs and Poems). Unfortunately, ill health prevented Johnston from publishing much after this text. Johnston eventually died at a relatively young age with no further collections published. Yet, this cannot diminish her ability to craft her “romance of real life.” The next chapters will focus on writers more conventional in their style — Smith’s Bildungsroman and Kenney’s mythical romance— but still rebellious in their content. Kenney’s attempt to legitimize the militant suffrage movement was no less daunting than Johnston’s need to make room for her literary contributions in circumstances closed to her.
In Chapters 2 and 3, I discussed how two women writers used life writing as a means of accomplishing personal and professional goals. Because Hannah Cullwick wrote for personal reasons, she was not concerned with the general reading public and focused on a single reader. In contrast, Ellen Johnston courted general readers to advance her standing in literature by crafting her biographical history. In this chapter, I examine a political use of life writing, one designed to persuade the reader to accept the militant suffrage movement. More specifically, I consider Annie Kenney’s *Memories of a Militant* (1925), which detailed her time in the militant suffrage movement under the direction of the Pankhurst family and suffrage leaders. Kenney additionally focused on Christabel Pankhurst’s legacy within militancy even after the movement’s success. To enlighten the public on both subjects, Kenney attempted to deradicalize the movement’s image for middle class approval. To that end, she constructed her life narrative using a traditional romantic structure that portrays Christabel and the militant movement in a favorable light, thus demonstrating her aptitude in modifying her narrative for her specific goals.

Kenney’s rhetorical decisions must be framed in the context of the deradicalization of the movement because she sought to gain the acceptance of the public. Throughout the chapter, I will refer to Christabel Pankhurst by her given name to avoid confusion with the other Pankhurst women also involved in the militant movement.
reading public. The suffrage movement, including its move to militancy, and the public’s general adverse reaction to radical political women influenced Kenney’s decisions. To analyze her rhetorical choices, I discuss both the romantic structure and the domestic elements she employed to demonstrate how Kenney’s presentation positioned her narrative as a traditional romance. By using the genre approach, I add a missing literary element to existing scholarly discussions of Kenney. To date, historians and social scientists have conducted the majority of research on Kenney. Although they present valuable directions for discussion, as they have considerably increased our knowledge of working women’s role in the suffrage movement, Kenney’s authorial choices have not been examined from the literary standpoint. My focus on Kenney’s textual construction and motivation emphasize her creative control over her text and subjects.

To understand her motivation, I turn first to Kenney’s (1925) own words. Kenney deliberately composed her text to advocate for the suffrage movement:

Believing it necessary, as I have done so for a long time, that a clear description should be given, however brief, of certain but important parts of the Militant Movement for Women’s Suffrage, I have had to decide in what form I can present such a narrative to the public. I have come to the conclusion that the best way will be to write my life. (Forward)

Kenney aptly chose life writing as a platform for deradicalization; by discussing the movement through domestic discourse, including Kenney’s childhood and family, she substituted an appropriately feminine topic for a radical one. To do so, she modeled her narrative after a classic literary structure recognizable to readers, namely, a romance. Kenney highlighted this intention as she considered the suffragette approach to public speaking:

Our policy at every meeting was “Educate the public on why we are embarrassing the Government, and explain the need of the Vote at the same time.” The strange thing with
the public was that they did not like to see or read about Militancy, but they loved being
told about it. I suppose there is an amount of romance in repeating some startling event,
or illustrating some deed of daring, or depicting extreme suffering. This is what I always
found with audiences. Two questions would hold them spellbound for two hours—history
and militancy. Why women wanted the vote was tame, dull, uninteresting. How women
would get it was exciting, romantic, and amusing. (147-148)

In this example, Kenney is likely referring to newspaper articles covering the movement as
opposed to personal narratives such as the one she constructs, considering the public’s distaste
for reading about militancy. The press and the militant movement had a mutually beneficial but
hostile relationship. Reports typically sensationalized female participants as outside the feminine
norm. Yet, it was this same dramatization that drew crowds to the suffrage meetings. Kenney
used the dramatic techniques of intrigue, romance, and humor as strategies for molding readers’
perceptions of militancy. As such, in her narrative, she enacted the means that she deemed
successful based on her militant experience. We should not lose sight of this level of audience
appreciation because it allowed her to present herself and Christabel as archetypal heroes to
show the power and legitimacy of both militancy and Christabel as its leader.

Whenever Kenney shifts the focus to the movement, the women she admired, or the
cause, she subordinates her own role. This subordination is especially evident at the end of her
narrative, which has very little focus on her at all:

The Militant Agitation worked miracles. This fact will be accepted by future generations.

It quickened the mentality of women and inspired them to action. It awakened within

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49 The press seems to have latched on to the more radical elements of the movement including arrests, force feeding, and the cat and mouse game. Very little press coverage attended to less radical meetings and activities.
them a consciousness of their individual entity in life, and gave them a confidence which
women as a body had never possessed before. It was a stage women had to pass through
to prepare them for more useful fields of action. (306)

All of the positive qualities the movement brought out in women could be applied to Kenney
herself. Yet, she uses this passage to highlight a broader function of the movement, that is, lifting
women as a class up. The text ends simply with her exhaustion and vacation abroad. This is the
end of the personal information she provides. She devotes the last pages of her narrative to what
the movement accomplished, what was yet to be determined, and the legacy of Christabel
Pankhurst. Her final focus is in keeping with the rest of the narrative that has negligible material
outside of politics and/or the Suffrage movement. After the first twenty pages, where she
describes her childhood, she concentrates solely on the movement.

_Historical Background_

To examine Kenney’s text, I must first establish the suffragettes’ historical context.

Working-class involvement in the suffrage movement is only now being recognized as occurring
both before and after the rise of militancy. Working women participated in the movement;
however, their presence was less obvious than that of their middle-class counterparts. Because
working women often lacked the resources to travel for the movement, they could not participate
as frequently. Therefore, they often played a less public role. In addition, lack of free time was
an issue as working women had abundant unpaid and paid labor that limited their availability.
Kenney’s own work, too, was affected by these practical concerns; however, her connection to
the Pankhurst family considerably eased her financial worries. During the Suffrage movement
and in the 1920s (the time of composition), few people approved of women participating in

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50 This is essential as the movement has typically been presented as a solely middle-class concern.
radical politics. Even other politically active women and those belonging to other organizations disapproved of the militants’ radical methods. Achieving female suffrage did little to stifle society’s condemnation of such activities. Charlotte Despard, a member of WLF (Women’s Freedom League), voiced her disapproval in a journal entry: “WSPU [Women’s Social and Political Union] tactics are often to me incomprehensible, but I suppose they know their own affairs” (104). Suffragette Alison Neilans produced the most public censure of the militant movement, stating in Vote that the movement did not have “respect for plate-glass windows or the usual British idea of ‘respectability’ and ‘womanliness,’ but because it cared ‘too deeply for [the] Cause to endanger its chances of success, however slender that chance may be’” (105). The problematic political initiatives included bombings and arson. Tensions increased between the WSPU, the group most connected to the vandalism, and non-members. Kenney’s motivation for constructing her narrative in the romantic genre, therefore, stemmed from a desire to rectify public censure and dispel Christabel’s infamy. The severity of the public’s judgments will be discussed further; yet, it is clear from others writings that Christabel was thought of as brash, bossy, and generally a tyrant.

Underscoring the changes between pre- and post- militancy also explains Kenney’s resolve to deradicalize the movement. Before the WSPU employed aggressive and damaging

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51 Marcie Kligman (1996) provides a summary of some of the more violent tactics: “The actions the WSPU now undertook were specifically done to ensure publicity. Both public and private property were destroyed, intending a call on the insurance companies of Great Britain” so great that they would force the government to capitulate” to the suffragette's demands. Among other actions, the suffragettes set arson to houses, seared golf courses with acid, burnt down sports pavilions, broke street lamps, stomped on flower beds, painted "Votes for Women" on the seats at Hampstead Heath, plugged up keyholes with lead pellets, slashed the cushions of train seats, staged false fire alarms, threw rocks at the windows of the Parliament building and houses of elected officials, severed telephone wires, blew up fuse boxes, placed bombs near the Bank of England, "hacked thirteen pictures in the Manchester Art Gallery", including the "Roke by Venus", slashed by well-known suffragette Mary Richardson. These drastic measures culminated on June 4, 1913, when one of the more famous suffragettes, Emily Davison, threw herself under the King's racehorse at Tattenham Center, toppling both the horse and the horse's jockey. A riot ensued, and by the time Davison's body was recovered from the track and taken to a hospital, it was far too late; Davison became the movement's first, and only, true martyr.”
tactics, they engaged in constitutional reforms, including converting influential parliamentarians, publishing magazines/pamphlets, and hosting public meetings. Their efforts achieved almost nothing towards women’s suffrage—which is when they decided to change tactics. Mayhall discussed this transition to militancy in her examination of life writing from suffragists:

After 1903 the Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU), under the leadership of Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst, revitalized a genteel and moribund women’s suffrage movement. The WSPU introduced the use of militancy, first interrupting Liberal Party meetings and heckling political speakers, then moving to the use of street theater, such as large-scale demonstrations, and ultimately to the destruction of government and private property, including smashing windows, slashing paintings in public galleries, and setting fire to buildings and pillar-boxes. Once the Liberal government introduced forcible feeding as an antidote to the suffragette hunger strike, militants created a visual activism, dependent upon the exhibition of women's tortured bodies as spectacle. (341)

Kenney’s work shared the bodily/visual focus of the militant movement, for example, when she discussed signs/slogans and visual displays that accompanied their activities. The use of women’s bodies, in this opportunistic way, created the drama that kept the movement in the public mind. Nevertheless, Kenney characterized the centrality of the constitutional movement by lauding Mrs. Fawcett, a notable suffragette, and the work of the Suffrage Society:

Mrs. Fawcett’s life has been one of devotion and service on behalf of women. Without the patient, persistent, plodding labour of the old Suffrage Society, the Militants would not have an argument on which to base their claim that “other methods had failed.” For over forty years the Constitutional Suffragists pleaded, they entreated, they persuaded,
and then were told to wait until the time was ripe when there was a sign that women really wanted the Vote. (294)

Kenney’s description of Mrs. Fawcett is revealing as it focuses on devotion and service, the same traits that Kenney and Christabel presumably possessed. The similarities between the characteristics of the constitutional and militant movements suggested that militancy was part of the cultural norm; as such, society should more readily accept constitutional suffragists.

Devotion and service were often used to characterize women in late nineteenth – early twentieth centuries, specifically regarding family and community. By demonstrating that these matters were also the basis of militancy, Kenney attempts to establish an acceptable foundation for the more aggressive tactics the movement used. Kenney references the constitutional movement only in her conclusion, but clearly understood the important work carried out prior to militancy. Only the constitutional movement’s complete lack of success produced militancy, she claimed.52 Kenney portrayed militancy as the obvious outcome of the continued denial of voting rights which women such as Mrs. Fawcett faced. Thus, the militants were not deviants, as often described, but simply women who refused to continue patiently waiting for their right to vote.

The move from the suffragettes’ focus on constitutionality to militancy produced escalating arrests as the government endeavored to nullify the entire suffrage movement. At the same time, women discovered the benefits of prison; Kenney became a popular public speaker almost entirely based on her multiple incarcerations. Kenney’s first arrest coincided with the beginning of militancy for the WSPU. As she was one of the first women arrested, it is interesting to examine Kenney’s description:

52 The constitutional women’s suffrage movement can be traced back as far as 1832. As Kenney did not join the suffrage movement until the 1900s, the limited success is clear due to its longevity.
What was to be done about Votes for Women? Who was to do it? The Militant Policy was then decided upon. It was not really “militant,” except insofar as the methods of dealing with the question were changed, and a change in policy always has the appearance of rebellion. The great difference between the old method and new lay in the changing of a word. The old school said, “Are you in favour of women having the vote?” the new school said, “Will you give us the right to vote?” Aspiring politicians could answer the old school; none would answer the new school. The wisest among them saw the cleverness of the change, but pretended otherwise. They knew it was the only way to win the vote; they must have known! (34)

Kenney described a minor adjustment in tactics that became the foundation for militancy – a question that became impossible for politicians to answer. Women interrupted the meetings repeatedly all over the country, usually a couple of times per meeting because male attendants aggressively silenced them. Integrated signage (focused on variations of “Votes for Women”) revealed a visual emphasis that the militants introduced. Because the suffragettes’ questions elicited no response, their only avenue for advancement was to become progressively more disruptive and aggressive. Militant tactics evolved from these initial disruptions. As the women escalated their techniques, they incorporated vandalism, arson, bombing, and harassment of prominent members of parliament at work and home.53 These tactics strove to prevent those in power from ignoring the women’s plea for equality. Kenney developed as a writer in this atmosphere and used it to the best of her ability. Kenney presented the shift to militancy as a last resort provoked by women’s continued silencing and not an inherent disrespect for societal norms.

53 This includes Black Friday, when at least 100 women were imprisoned and there were accusations of sexual assault.
Without establishing this need for escalating methods, Kenney could not accomplish her secondary goal of glorifying the Pankhursts and their place in history. Throughout the narrative, Kenney idealized all of the Pankhurst women, as she believed they played a central role in the success of the suffrage movement. Christabel Pankhurst was not generally well received by her contemporaries, even receiving the moniker “Queen of the Mob.” The arguments against Christabel and the movement were generally presented as follows:

The Suffragette Movement has become the accepted account of Emmeline Pankhurst, especially after George Dangerfield adapted this script in The Strange Death of Liberal England, first published in 1935 and reprinted at least up until 1972. Dangerfield belittled the suffragette movement, labeling it as a “brutal comedy,” a “puppet show” where the strings were pulled by Emmeline and Christabel. Both women were seen as opportunists, seeking to rise above their impecunious middle-class background in Manchester, and as despots who “dictated every move, and swayed every heart, of a growing army of intoxicated women.” (Purvis 56)

Kenney disputes the insincerity suggested by Dangerfield throughout the text. Christabel’s commitment to the cause and the women involved is never in doubt. Kenney also dispels the notion that the women were intoxicated through her focus on their serious commitment. Due to these circumstances, Kenney constructed her narrative in order to change the prevailing perception. As Northrop Frye explains in his work on romantic structure in novels, the presentation of Christabel as a high mimetic hero is the final outcome of Kenney’s portrayal (see below).

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54 This was true even of Christabel’s own family, which led to a split in the movement between Christabel and Sylvia.
*Scholarship*

Scholars have largely ignored the literary elements of Kenney’s text; therefore, this study’s discussion of her adaptability is especially significant. My argument adds to our understanding of how women wrote political pieces and crafted their life writing for specific purposes. Most of the scholarship on Kenney still focuses on the historical rather than literary value of her writings. Yet, much can be learned from adopting a literary perspective that considers how Kenney constructed her narrative for a political goal: public acceptance of militancy. Notable exceptions to the historical perspective exist in the scholarship. Namely, Swindells and Gagnier examine the text through a materialist feminist lens. Yet, both scholars spend little time analyzing the specifics of Kenney’s life writing, thereby opening an avenue for further research into how and why Kenney produced this piece of political writing.

The gap in the literature reveals the unique quality of Kenney’s political text. Notably, Gagnier’s analysis of working-class narrative outlines various categories of compositions and purposes, one of which is political. Gagnier observes that political life writing texts usually originated from the North of England, which was the case for Kenney’s involvement in the burgeoning labor movement in the textile factories:

> The political narrative is the self-conscious working-class answer to the bourgeois novel. Especially in its form of Bildungsroman, the novel channels all experience into one great conflict, the integration of social process and personal development in time. Like the novel, the political autobiography is dedicated to one hero, one odyssey, and one battle. Time is the frame in which the hero is the working class, the odyssey is the quest for political power, and the battle is class warfare. (160)
Gagnier thus suggests a connection between lived experience and political participation that renders unimportant those elements of the writers’ biography which took place before the movement. To an extent, Kenney’s work does support this notion; she spends barely any time discussing her life before the movement. Yet, in Kenney’s text, there is no clear connection to the working class; instead, it is her specific relationship with women Suffragettes that is important. Kenney notes the problems the Suffragettes encountered with working class men/women and the middle class women who were against the cause. As such, there is less class conflict in Kenney’s text than in other political works. However, other writers, such as Hannah Mitchell, focused on experiences both in and outside of politics extensively. This dual focus enhances the writers’ political observations since they affirmed the stance that everything personal is also political by combining their entire life experiences. Working women turned their suffering and joy to the fight for better representation and change. Gagnier characterizes the political writing of both men and women similarly by the methods they chose and their general purposes. Many women writers, however, are different; their unique concerns and circumstances distinguish their writing from that of men. Working women writers were distinct in using personal strife to breach the public domain, a tactic unnecessary for working-class men who were generally more accepted as public personas. As such, working women writers highlighted both the difficulties of being poor alone and those of being a woman. Lastly, while Kenney’s text has Bildungsroman elements, as Gagnier attests, Kenney’s version of the genre uses a romantic structure that focuses on heroic achievements and societal conflicts as opposed to individual growth and improvement. Examining the text’s romantic structure and its purpose are my contribution to this scholarship.
While Gagnier argues strongly that all working-class autobiographies have value, she mostly focuses on male political works, thereby neglecting gender differences in political life writing. Gagnier observes no structural distinctions in male and female working class political texts: “Among the political autobiographers there is little structural difference between the narratives of Annie Kenney on militancy, Margaret Bonfield on her rise in the labor movement, or Elizabeth Bryson on her struggle to be a physician, and their counterparts written by male activists” (165). As such, we should be able to examine all of the political writers as one group. Yet, there is more to these texts than structure. Variances in content and style still deserve critical attention; they highlight how women crafted their pieces under different circumstances. Gagnier also notes that Kenney’s work is a rejection of fiction: “Annie Kenney’s *Memories of a Militant* shows Kenney rejecting fiction for European and American political writers like Voltaire, Emerson, and Whitman” (146). However, there is plenty of evidence that Kenney not only read literature but also understood the importance of incorporating literary elements into her own life narrative. By overlooking the variety of women’s political pieces such as this one, we assume the same principles that govern male political life writing hold for women. This assumption, I argue, is similarly untenable as when we presume bourgeois standards of life writing hold for working-class writers. Each assumption denies the variety available in the respective genres. Kenney’s text shows that despite elements she shared with other political writers, the author’s political goals alter the writing significantly, especially as they relate to the choice of literary genres.

Swindells provides a more extensive study of women’s narratives, but still considers the political aspects of the author’s writing only to a limited extent. She suggests working women sought literary fame through their life narratives by incorporating middle-class writing standards. However, Swindells discounts the distinctive goals of political writers. Her discussion of
Kenney’s text focuses solely on how class and gender formed her identity: “Annie Kenney constructs her own identity in terms of the traditional working class, but her particular advocacy of the women’s movement also identifies women as a particular class. Appropriately, her initial autobiographical interest is with her mother’s rather than her father’s influence on her experience” (126). While it is true that Kenney identifies strongly with women, this is not the only element of her identity. Instead, I would argue that Kenney’s identity is presented as a Militant suffragette and companion to Christabel.

Swindells suggests that Kenney identifies women as a class by focusing on women throughout, including her mother. However, I would argue that more than showing women as a class, Kenney is setting the stage for domesticating the militant movement; specifically, she allows the reader to see that she came from a traditionally feminine mother. While Kenney does mention her mother, she provides little information about her childhood as a whole. This gap suggests that this part of her biography—before her participation in the movement—is unimportant, as Gagnier theorizes, rather than that she identifies with the feminine or the maternal. Instead, Kenney’s relationship with God seems as important to her development/subjectivity as her mother. Swindells concludes her remarks on Kenney by suggesting that an intense confluence exists between Kenney’s life and the suffrage movement: “Annie Kenney identifies the history of the fight for female suffrage as largely inseparable from her personal history” (159). As I will show, Kenney focuses not on the general suffrage

55 God appeared as a trusted friend and confidant to Kenney as a child. This was especially true at night. Kenney described how her friendship with God took priority over most other relationships and experiences in her life: “All through my life, the day’s work over, I have lived in dreams. The dream of my childhood was always about God. I never missed one night without flying to Him as soon as silenced reigned. There He sat for years, in the same cloudy arm-chair, waiting for me. . . . I confided to Him all my little troubles, and the difficulties under which I labored at school” (Kenney 4). She portrayed this intimate connection as lasting through most of her childhood, which added a great deal to the overall contentment that she felt about her youth.
movement, but on militancy and Christabel Pankhurst as opposed to the agenda Swindells suggests. This emphasis excludes the transition from constitutionality to militancy, as well as the other suffrage organizations. Therefore, Kenney’s comradery with the Pankhurst’s militant movement is intrinsically tied to her life.

Swindells also suggests that the “rhetoric of independence” is important in militant writings. She argues that this rhetoric of independence “inscribes the necessary rejection of ‘home-life’, of family’ also a rejection of that kind of self-definition. She bases her conclusion on a passage in Kenney’s work where the suffragettes are described in the city: “No home-life, no one to say what we should do or what we should not do, no family ties, we were free and alone in a great city” (110). However, Kenney is describing why the suffragettes were highly monitored during this time as she mentions right before the previous quote:

Nuns in a convent were not watched over and supervised more strictly than were the organizers and members of the Militant Movement during the first few years. It was an unwritten rule that there must be no concerts, no theaters, no smoking; work, and sleep to prepare us for more work, was the unwritten order of the day. These rules were good, and the more I look back on those early days the more clearly I see the necessity for such discipline. The changed life into which most of us entered was a revolution in itself” (110).

More than a “rhetoric of independence” and rejection of family, Kenney seems to be describing a substitution of one family for another. The movement itself subsequently maintained the rules that had been employed by their families. The connection that Kenney repeatedly makes in her text to the comradery and devotion of the movements’ members amplifies this connection.

56 The two movements are characterized by the diverse methods they employed. Constitutionality focused on parliamentary persuasion while militancy emphasized disruption and vandalism.
between birth and militant families. Additionally, this passage highlights the focus on femininity and conformity to approved standards that deradicalize the movement. This is a significant change in focus that goes beyond simply allowing the personal and political to merge as Swindells suggests. Kenney’s choice exhibits a great deal of audience appreciation and shaping to ensure her portrayal of militant suffrage movement does not stray too far from traditional gender norms.

Finally, Mayhall analyzes women writers from an historical perspective; she discusses how a few suffragettes in the 1920s and 30s created a narrative approach that focused on sacrifice and comradery. She suggests there were narrative strategies employed by a number of suffrage activists who wrote about their participation in the Edwardian movement in the years following the First World War. Its primary purpose is to chart the emergence of what came to be known as the “Suffragette Spirit,” a heady combination of self-sacrificing devotion to the Cause and to one’s sisters in the movement. (320)

Mayhall emphasizes the importance of the “Suffragette Spirit” in Kenney and the distinction between the constitutional and militant suffrage movements: “It [the narratives] relied upon an oppositional vocabulary within which subsequent commentators have been confined in discussing the movement” (320). Kenney did not participate in the constitutional movement; consequently, Mayhall’s assertion that this movement was important to Kenney is difficult to support. Mayhall highlights the difference in diction between the two movements that we cannot see in Kenney’s text. What is interesting about Mayhall’s work for this present discussion is her inclusion of Frye’s topology. I build on Mayhall’s argument to examine how Kenney utilized the Romantic genre.
From an early age, Kenney was knowledgeable about romantic literature. At the beginning of her narrative, she describes her mother’s encouragement of her intellectual curiosity:

Thanks to my mother, who allowed us great freedom of expression on all subjects, whether it was dancing or the Athanasian Creed, Spiritualism, Haeckel, Walt Whitman, Blatchford, or Paine, I grew up with a smattering of knowledge on many questions. No subject was tabooed. The only thing that was tabooed was gossiping in any form. My mother was a wonderful woman. (1-2)

Educational materials available to her included both popular and religious texts:

On Sunday evenings Mother read us stories. They all seemed to be about London life among the poor. One was *A Peep Behind the Scenes*.\(^\text{57}\) How we loved that story! The worst of it was that all the following week I was the girl in the story, and instead of doing sums or dictation my thoughts were far away, as little Meg, with the children in the garret in London, or the child of rich people. The stories made it more difficult than ever to follow the school routine. (6-7)

Not only did Kenney read voraciously, but she also embodied the experiences of the text’s heroine through daydreams and childhood play. As such, Kenney incorporated literature into her life in a significant way.

Kenney absorbed romantic literature outside the home as well. Consequently, she explored her experiences of factory life through the drama involved: “There was one redeeming

\(^{57}\) Rosalie is the daughter of a traveling theater master and is envied by many young girls as she appears to live a life full of glamour, glitz, and glory. But beneath the happy smiling face is a hurting heart, a deep sorrow for her dying mother, and a wretched life. Follow Rosalie as she learns of the Good Shepherd who loves and cares for her, and begins to trust Him for daily strength. (summary by Abigail Rasmussen)
feature. We used to go shares in a weekly girls’ paper. It was full of wild romance, centered around titles, wealth, Mayfair, dukes, and factory girls. The one whose turn it was to pay had the first read” (16). Given Kenney’s immersion in such texts, it is no surprise that she modeled her narrative on this literary structure since even though she was well read, Kenney lacked models for life writing as few existed at the time of composition. While there were working men’s examples and those of middle class women, there was little she could have directly translated to her experience/goals. As such, she used what was familiar and available, which was popular fiction.

In this discussion, Frye’s topology of traditional romantic archetype is essential. Frye outlined the elements of romantic structure and posited various characteristics for distinct romantic heroes. In her discussion of Frye, Mayhall claims,

According to Northrop Frye’s typology, the narrative structure of the romance draws upon the reader’s familiarity with three stages of what is essentially a quest: from a perilous journey and preliminary minor adventures, through a crucial struggle between the hero and the enemy, during which one of them must die, and finally, to the exaltation of the hero. Essentially a dialectical conflict, the romance pits the hero against an enemy in a struggle in which the reader’s values become intertwined with those of the protagonist. The romance presents a story that is neither subtle nor complex in its characterization of the struggle between protagonist and antagonist; as a reader, one is forced to identify either for or against the protagonist. (326)

Mayhall emphasizes several factors as key for examining Kenney’s text. First, the scholar acknowledges the familiarity readers had with the genre. Much like Kenney, readers understood
the structure and recognized the romantic elements that Kenney utilized.58 Second, by presenting
the movement in this light, through the protagonists’ point of view, Kenney constructed the
optimal situation for readers to feel compassion and empathy towards the movement and
Christabel Pankhurst. Kenney, therefore, compelled the reader to see Christabel Pankhurst’s
power and purpose. Using Frye’s topology highlights the rhetorical choices Kenney makes to
compose a text that readers could readily recognize and appreciate. Given this approach, we see
how much creativity Kenney employed in her representation of herself, the movement, and
Christabel.

Additionally, Frye discusses various levels of romantic heroes that we can also perceive
in Kenney’s text. In the genre in general, characters are archetypal, larger than life, often heroic,
and struggling with an unstable or changing society.59 Frye lists mythic, romantic, high-mimetic,
low-mimetic, and ironic hero types. Interestingly, Kenney developed two different types of hero
in one text. One of these is the high-mimetic hero:

If superior in degree to other men but not to his natural environment, the hero is a leader.
He has authority, passions, and powers of expression far greater than ours, but what he
does is subject both to social criticism and to the order of nature. This is the hero of the
high mimetic mode, of most epic and tragedy, and is primarily the kind of hero that
Aristotle had in mind. (33-34)

Although Kenney only alludes to Christabel’s public speaking, Kenney suggests it was
Christabel’s talent that initially drew her to the movement. Throughout the text, Kenney
positions Christabel Pankhurst as the quintessential infallible leader/general. Pankhurst’s failings

58 See my discussion of genre in the introduction.

59 This struggle with society will be seen again in Emma Smith’s text and is a common feature of many of
the women writers.
were couched in the struggles inherent in leadership during wartime. Along with her prominence, Christabel received ample criticism during her time with the movement, as many considering her a tyrant. The depth of criticism emerges as Kenney describes how Christabel fled to France to avoid prison. However, if we look at Frye’s discussion of heroes we can see how Kenney fits Christabel into this heroic role:

If superior neither to other men nor to his environment, the hero is one of us: we respond to a sense of his common humanity, and demand from the poet the same canons of probability that we find in our own experience. This gives us the hero of the low mimetic mode, of most comedy and of realistic fiction. “High” and “low” have no connotations of comparative value, but are purely diagrammatic, as they are when they refer to Biblical critics or Anglicans. On this level the difficulty in retaining the word “hero,” which has a more limited meaning among the preceding modes, occasionally strikes an author.

Thackeray thus feels obliged to call *Vanity Fair* a novel without a hero. (34) From this passage, we see Kenney’s own specific heroic role. She was neither superior to others nor to other environmental elements. In fact, she emphasizes her failings throughout as she speaks of her negligence in school and mediocre speeches. Little changes in her presentation of herself as she moves forward in the movement.

Kenney poses as a hero who was simply one of many, but strives for a higher purpose in Christabel. In Frye’s typology, Kenney is a low mimetic hero. Fittingly, this is the type of hero most often portrayed in realistic fiction. In contrast, Christabel Pankhurst is the high mimetic hero for Kenney’s text, one who is superior to other people but not to the environment (which
would include gods). Her power, which is discussed subsequently, can be seen at the beginning of militancy for the suffragettes:

And so the fight began. Christabel Pankhurst had declared war. Her army consisted of her mother, her two sisters, Miss Billington, myself, and about twenty working-women who had broken away from the Labour Party to devote themselves to the Cause. Her opponents’ army consisted of two highly organized political parties, Liberal and Conservative, or the Labour Party, whose sympathy was “here to-day and gone to-morrow,” of the whole Press, and of practically all women’s societies. (38)

The discrepancy in the groups presented here highlight the strength and commitment the Suffragettes had in order to stand up to the government. This passage dramatizes the struggle of the militants by presenting their opponents as a much larger and stronger group. High mimetic heroes traditionally appear in epics and tragedies. By characterizing Christabel as an epic hero, Kenney suggests the magnitude of Christabel’s struggle. Focusing on Christabel’s conflicts (as the protagonist) is essential to overcome the focus on an individual and, instead, present a group protagonist. Kenney is slightly removed from the central focus through this group approach. She, therefore, is a minor protagonist in her own life narrative.

60 “In high mimetic tragedy, pity and fear become, respectively, favorable and adverse moral judgement, which are relevant to tragedy but not central to it. We pity Desdemona and fear Iago, but the central tragic figure is Othello, and our feelings about him are mixed. The particular thing called tragedy that happens to the tragic hero does not depend on his moral status. If it is causally related to something he has done, as it generally is, the tragedy is in the inevitability of the consequences of the act, not in its moral significance as an act. Hence the paradox that in tragedy pity and fear are raised and cast out. Aristotle's hamartia or "flaw," therefore, is not necessarily wrongdoing, much less moral weakness: it may be simply a matter of being a strong character in an exposed position, like Cordelia. The exposed position is usually the place of leadership, in which a character is exceptional and isolated at the same time, giving us that curious blend of the inevitable and the incongruous which is peculiar to tragedy. The principle of the hamartia of leadership can be more clearly seen in naive high mimetic tragedy, as we get it in The Minor for Magistrates and similar collections of tales based on the theme of the wheel of fortune” (Frye 38).
Based on the preceding discussion, I now examine Kenney’s text through close reading while considering the circumstances of production (militancy and political women); in so doing, I highlight her creative control and her molding of the narrative using the structure that would appeal to readers who might otherwise be less accepting of militant women. Kenney presents her subjectivity as an everyday hero who accepts familial/gender norms; moreover, she does so even while participating in the militant suffrage movement and characterizing Christabel as a knowledgeable and selfless leader. We see Kenney’s adaptability as a writer through the presentation of her and Christabel’s subjectivity as traditional, yet determined, women who only wish to see other women treated equally.

As Kenney juxtaposes her political contributions with Christabel’s, she mirrors the heroic journey as prescribed by Frye. The first step in a romantic tale, no matter the heroic type, is the journey precipitated by minor adventures without real consequences or danger. For Kenney, these adventures surrounded her fellow child laborers. Kenney presents these activities as enjoyable experiences, ones lacking the struggles many child laborers encountered. A few passages highlight the early adventure and comradery that solidified her attachment to the suffrage movement:

In one adventure we were nearly all drowned. It was in the winter time. A deep pond near the factory was very lightly frozen over, and we insisted on every one’s sliding on it. The ice gave way and we only just saved ourselves. After a year of leadership we were weighed in the balance and found wanting, so we had to take our places among the rank and file again, and follow another, who to us seemed tame and dull in the extreme. (16-17)
We see here Kenney’s desire for adventure and her commitment to her companions. Kenney’s escapades with her friends are similar to the absurd cat and mouse activities the suffragettes encountered later in her life. Both exhibit a lighthearted appeal that belies the real dangers/consequences of the experiences. The issues of child labor are well documented both in scholarship and life narratives.61 The same is true of the physical violence Suffragettes faced any time they protested. Yet, Kenney presents both of these events as inconsequential. They mean nothing compared to the real work and conflicts that arise after the movement embraces militancy. Interestingly, we know nothing of Christabel’s life before the movement. As such, the first meetings and visits Kenney experiences with the suffragettes stand in for Christabel’s minor adventures. Since we ignore the circumstances of Christabel’s life before the movement, she becomes one with it since the reader never knows of her without the movement. Kenney’s connection between the movement and Christabel is therefore complete: one does not exist without the other.

In Kenney’s descriptions, as she began factory labor, we see the importance of solidarity as well as a level of pragmatism she embraced later in life. The solidarity Kenney emphasizes in the child laborers is also made apparent in her life with Christabel and the suffragettes. Not only did her fellow suffragettes replace the family she lost after her mother’s death, they also supplanted the friends she had as a child. Aside from her early relationship with God, which Christabel later eclipsed in many ways, the suffrage movement replaced every important relationship of her youth. This section begins her journey to become everyday hero. She notes the necessity of starting work young: “When I was ten years of age a change came into my life.

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61 This variation in textual focus highlights not only the different paths women took to the movement but also the complex nature of political writing. One woman may write from a profound sense of injustice, while a powerful and charismatic leader captivates another.
My mother announced to me that I was to work in a factory. I was to join the army of half-timers; to work in the factory half the day and attend school the other half” (14). She completed school and began full-time employment only three years later: “I then joined the great masses whose lives were spent spinning and weaving cotton. I was a full-timer. I rose at five o’clock in the morning. I had to be in the factory just before six, and I left at 5:30 at night” (18). Even at this point, when she began working full-time, Kenney presents adventures which might have been dangerous as simply humorous hijinks:

Another escapade was a challenge to climb a steep wall. Everybody followed the leaders, of course, but fortunately for them the followers gave up the contest and watched the two of us nervously climbing to the top, expecting every moment to see us dashed to the ground. We succeeded amidst applause from the girls and severe condemnation from the overlooker, who threatened that he would sack the lot us “if we did not show more sense!” (17)

Kenney describes very little actual labor at her job. Although she disliked working, she understood the necessity for her family. Kenney’s understanding is in stark contrast to the descriptions of Hannah Mitchell62, who focused on the injustice in her family situation and work life. Nevertheless, Kenney was not ignorant of the disadvantages of being a working person; she notes the difficulty working people face to advance:

It always seemed to be unfair that those people who spent almost twelve hours away from home should on their return find more labour awaiting them, and yet this was the case in most Lancashire homes. Where you get a family who are keen on knowledge and who

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62 Mitchell was another working class Suffragette who discussed her experiences with the movement, poverty, and family in her memoir The Hard Way Up: The Autobiography of Hannah Mitchell, Suffragette and Rebel (1968).
have ambition to make headway in life, people whose whole thoughts are centered on a
totally different life to the one they are leading, it seems more unfair than ever that they
should toil in the factory, toil in the home, and that all the vitality that is left must be
given to mental study to attain their heart’s desire. (19)

She suggested that working people lacked the motivation that also kept her from political activity
early on in her life. At that point, Kenney was singing in a socialist choir, though she lacked any
personal stake in the cause. This first step, though Kenney was not committed to a cause, led to
her initiation into her heroic deeds later.

Kenney’s formal political journey was incited by the death of her mother, described
almost as an aside. At that point, as a textile worker, Kenney was alone and beginning to
recognize the work of socialism and female suffrage:

Christmas, 1904, and the beginning of the New Year, 1905, were weeks of sadness and
grave anxiety on account of my mother’s health. She was too ill for Christmas festivities,
and the New Year had scarcely dawned when she died. My mother’s faith was more the
faith of a child. The only thing she desired was a heaven where she could be at peace;
release from a world full of struggle to make both ends meet, a world full of anxiety and
hard labor. To my mother I owe all that I have ever been, or ever done that has called
upon courage or loyalty for its support. (26)

The death of her mother in many ways signaled the end of her childhood. It disbanded the close
family that Kenney knew. For reasons unknown, the family was never as close after this loss.
Other than the mention of her sister Jessie’s participation in the movement, Kenney does not
refer to her family again. Kenney’s central focus on one woman, her mother, seems to be
replaced by her portrayal of Christabel who, in Kenney’s belief, held the militant suffrage
movement together and provided focus. What Kenney found instead of her biological kin was
the family available in the movement.

Kenney’s next step in her transition from simple factory worker to everyday hero
occurred through the suffrage movement. The political awakening was sudden for Kenney, and
the progression from initial political awakening to full immersion and commitment was
remarkably short. Before Kenney’s first suffrage meeting, her only political involvement was in
the Clarion choir, which she joined for entertainment and not its socialist agenda. In fact, she
acknowledges she was inattentive, irresponsible, and floundering before the birth of her political
awareness. In fact, Kenney earlier suggested she was rather helpless as a child and young adult.
Her younger sister cared for her and kept her in line. All this changes when she attends her first
suffrage meeting: “I had never heard about Votes for Women. Politics did not interest me in the
least. I had never read any newspaper but the Clarion. I went to the meeting spontaneously, as I
have done with most things in my life. I was not particularly excited, the name Pankhurst
conveyed nothing to me” (27). This is the last time in the text that Pankhursts are not central to
the entire narrative. By ending this passage with the focus on the Pankhursts, instead of the
movement as a whole, we are again led to see the impact these women had on Kenney.
Particularly important, as she later emphasizes, is Christabel’s influence.

In her description of the meeting, Kenney relates the effect the speakers had on her and
others as almost spiritual. She discusses the two speakers, one of whom was a Pankhurst
daughter. The speech is so impassioned that Kenney lingers afterward to meet the captivating
speaker: “It was amusing. It was like a table where two courses were being served, one hot, the
other cold. I found myself, plate in hand, where the hot course was being served” (28).
Thereafter, the name Pankhurst dominates Kenney’s life. Kenney presents the meeting not only
as a religious experience but also as a necessary one by comparing the speaker to a provider of sustenance. Kenney’s description of this meeting offers a sense of a religious conversion in addition to her political awakening. She transfers the significance of her relationship with God to Christabel. Kenney becomes dogmatic in her understanding of the cause and Christabel’s role, accepting the teachings as gospel. If we look at the stages of hero again, Kenney demonstrates the different levels of devotion Christabel and Kenney manifest. While Kenney is devoted to a person, Christabel focuses on the broader idea of women’s suffrage and equality.

Through this awakening/initiation, Kenney found her voice as a suffragette, an essential step in her quest as an everyday hero. Early in her work for the movement Kenney challenged the societal convention that women did not speak in public. Although she was apprehensive about public speaking, Christabel’s command was enough to overcome her fears:

I pleaded for exemption, but it was not granted, and I found myself at about seven o’clock at night, mounted on a temporary platform, addressing the crowd. What I said I do not remember. I suppose I touched on Labour, the unemployed, children, and finally summed up the whole thing by saying something about Votes for Women. This was my first public speech. (30)

After this event, Kenney increased her presence in the movement significantly. She never accepted a leadership role as Christabel did, but was a vital member of the militant movement. Kenney’s arrests only increased her appeal to audiences. Christabel and the movement needed Kenney’s infamy and working-class status. Without that reputation and her prison record, her

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63 Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence argued that Kenney was a devoted follower of Christabel Pankhurst: “Annie’s . . . devotion took the form of unquestioning faith and absolute obedience. . . Just as no ordinary Christian can find that perfect freedom in complete surrender, so no ordinary individual could have given what Annie gave—the surrender of her whole personality to Christabel.” My Part in a Changing World, 1938.
prominence as a speaker would have likely diminished; the novelty of the imprisoned woman captivated the audience. Throughout her narrative and quest, we see Kenney’s continual growth and maturity as a political voice for women. Kenney’s final thoughts in the text, already discussed, emphasize how far she had come in finding her voice and political power.

Once established in the movement, Kenney experienced both internal and external conflict. These conflicts represent the continuation of her heroic journey as well as the typical crime and punishment element of the quest. Internally, she struggled with lack of confidence and financial insecurity. Externally, she fought against violent backlashes from those opposed to women’s suffrage as well as against imprisonment. Kenney discusses both in detail, an essential element for her emergence as the everyday hero by the end of the text. Kenney’s greatest struggle eased her lack of confidence.

After her first speech, Christabel continually thrust Kenney into the public light. Even as Kenney performed all of her assigned tasks, she lacked confidence in her speaking ability and intelligence: “It could not have been my eloquence that was the draw, for my speeches too often were incoherent. But I had worked in a factory! I had sat on a Trade Union Committee! I had also been to prison!” (56). Here, as in much of the text, Kenney downplays her achievements, creating her persona as the everyday worker and juxtaposing herself and Christabel, the true hero of the narrative. The qualities Kenney focuses on only made her appear more common. At the time, ordinary women frequently worked in factories, especially in the North where Kenney was from. She was unique in the latter simply because of her gender. What Kenney showed her audience, as both she and Christabel recognized, was a working woman breaching the public sphere with strength and courage. Their idea was that if Kenney joined the movement and fought for suffrage, then all working women could do so. Kenney’s very unremarkableness was her
Her lack of confidence eventually prompted her to confront her fears and to describe herself as a military general in the manner she usually saved for Christabel. This would be the final step of her initiation and full acceptance of her role as the everyday hero.

Kenney’s altercations with the suffragettes’ opposition were more aggressive than was her self-doubt. These altercations highlight not only Kenney’s personal struggle but also those of the entire movement. Countless incidents she described underscored the physical nature of their resistance. For a few years, the government arrested suffragettes for all disturbances and oppositions. Suffragettes happily went to prison because it resulted in more press coverage and encouraged larger turnouts at the meetings. As a result, the government began to impose progressively longer sentences to subdue the militant activities, prompting some suffragettes to undertake hunger strikes:

Miss Wallace Dunlop went to prison, and defied the long sentences that were being given by adopting the hunger-strike. “Release or Death” was her motto. When asked by the prison authorities what she would have for dinner, her reply was, “My own determination!” From that day, July 5th, 1909, the hunger-strike was the greatest weapon we possessed against the Government. (145)

Hunger strikes effectively antagonized the government, which feared the women would die in their custody. Consequently, the government briefly attempted forced feeding, but abandoned the effort after the public and medical outcry over the violence and danger of the procedure. While Kenney did not participate in all of the hunger strikes, she was arrested at least four times, and did get hospitalized due to mistreatment in prison. At the height of the conflict, women were arrested and/or thrown out of meetings simply for attending.
The militant women resorted to increasingly desperate and creative methods for gaining attention. At one point Kenney was smuggled into a meeting in the hamper of an actress as she would have been arrested before she had the chance to speak otherwise. As she relates the tale, she emphasizes her commitment to the movement and the growing conflict with the government:

At last we stopped. Then the growls began again about the weight, about actresses having no consideration for the poor men who had to carry their baggage, and so on. I was turned, toppled, banged, dropped, before one of them got me (in my hamper, of course) on his back. I arrived safely on the platform and made my speech. No one in the audience had any idea how I got there, but the same fate as before awaited me on leaving the Pavilion. I was rearrested, marched off to Holloway, and did another four days’ hunger-strike; then the same old license was read out solemnly, and I was free once more for another eight days. (238)

Two notable instances that Kenney described—though she was not directly involved in them—involved suffragettes hiding in an organ overnight waiting for a public meeting and the unfortunate death of a member. The first adventure is quite humorous and shows Kenney’s pride in how her fellow suffragettes handled the conflict with the government. The latter involved a prominent suffragette’s death during a horse race when she ran onto the field and was struck by a horse.

Complementing Kenney’s persona as an everyday hero as both women proceed on their quest, Christabel Pankhurst, in contrast, is elevated from the status of everyday hero to the epic romantic heroes of the past. As mentioned earlier, Christabel is the high mimetic hero of this narrative. As this type of hero is frequent in epics, it highlights Kenney’s understanding of the magnitude of the Suffragettes/Christabel’s struggle for the Vote. The superior hero quality
Christabel embodied first appeared at their initial meeting. The instant Kenney met the
Pankhursts, she was transformed. Kenney describes the moment in religious undertones:

The following week I lived on air; I simply could not eat; I wanted to be quiet and alone.
I did not feel elated or excited. A sense of deep stillness took possession of me. It was as
though half of me was present; where the other half was I never asked. For the first time
in my life I experienced real loneliness. I instinctively felt that a great change had come. I
was losing my old girl-friends of the factory. (28)

From a single meeting containing little interaction, Christabel obtained an exceedingly loyal
follower, one willing to risk her safety and health for a movement in which she had not been
very interested before. This example illustrates Christabel’s above-average status: she was god-
like, thus encouraging Kenney’s discipleship.

Kenney’s description of militancy—and Christabel as its leader—resembles great
military epics more than ordinary life narratives. She understood the movement as a
Country, the home of other revolutions, both bloodless and otherwise” (44). As the movement
grew in size and status, the significance of Christabel’s persona as leader increased, as did the
dangerous conflict with the suffragettes’ opponents. Kenney states that Christabel alone sought
militancy and became one of the first arrested. She consistently insists that Christabel’s decisions
were both decisive and selfless. This presentation supports the image of the high mimetic hero
who is generally superior to others. From this moment on, Kenney continually describes
Christabel in terms typical of powerful men in moments of national war and danger:

Two dozen women backed Christabel Pankhurst in the challenge thrown out by her to the
people, the Government, the armed forces of the Crown, and the powerful force of the
Press. How we should win, when we should win, I never asked. I lived then as I have lived nearly all my life, not in the past or in the future, but in the “eternal now.” To live in the “now” makes life far simpler. (38)

We see Christabel as a general whose army might be small but who demonstrates determination and loyalty. We also see the large-scale conflict needed for the heroic journey. Kenney continues the presentation of Christabel as extraordinary, for example: “Christabel Pankhurst’s speech was truth to me” (42); elsewhere, Kenney states, “Ordinary people quite innocently draw from the turbulent and vital person with whom they come in contact, the vital force of life itself” (43). The magnitude of Christabel’s charisma permeated the movement as a whole. The heroic journey started with the move to militancy, continued on to the increasing conflicts, and ended in the right to Vote. None of this would have been possible, in Kenney’s view, without the force of Christabel’s personality and vitality.

Kenney’s final comments about the movement’s resolution confirm the distinct heroic qualities she establishes in the text. Although the protagonists finally triumph in 1918 achieving female suffrage, the conclusion of Kenney’s work in the movement did not come until Christabel’s unsuccessful bid for Parliament. However, after this event, Kenney recalls her reward for devoting fourteen years of her life to the cause, “I left the Movement, financially, as I joined it, penniless. Though I had no money I had reaped a rich harvest of joy, laughter, romance, companionship, and experience that no money can ever buy” (288). Kenney only minimally celebrated the victory she worked so hard to achieve. Instead, she infuses the ending with a sense of peace and fulfillment at having known Christabel Pankhurst and assisted her, a great leader, which is reinforced through Kenney’s praise of Christabel even as Christabel became more autocratic and lost followers. Kenney portrays these flaws as inevitable for a great
leader. By directing the readers’ vision toward her devotion to Christabel, Kenney forces the reader to identify with Christabel in much the same way as Kenney does:

To be autocratic, self-assertive, dictatorial, is necessary on the battlefield, whether the fight be waged in Parliament Square on in Flanders, but once Peace is signed each soldier must be free to act as he thinks best and to judge for himself. During battle the Chief in Command has to fight and plan with enthusiasm, inspiration, emotion, and force, but the fight over, should they continue to act as though they were still in command? The fate of the great Napoleon invariably awaits such people; their St. Helena may be found in the very city which has bowed in worship before them. Such is life, with its rugged path which all leaders must climb. Fortunate are those leaders like Christabel Pankhurst, who have found, after well-earned rest, another mission which brings with it Peace of mind and rest for the body. (292-293)

Kenney ends her narrative by becoming one of the protagonists who overcame patriarchy and received their reward: rest and respite. While both heroines received rewards, Christabel alone was praised for her success, suggesting that Christabel was superior as a leader to the very end.

In addition to using familiar romantic tropes in the text, Kenney incorporates elements of domesticity to maintain the accepted female ideological norms of the time. As Gagnier notes, “Domesticity, at home and abroad, was a dominant state apparatus; as a contemporary observer put it, Queen Victoria affected domestic bliss to the same degree that Elizabeth I affected virginity” (52). Kenney’s deradicalization of the militant movement is finalized with this component. Whereas the romantic structure allowed readers to relate to the quest of Kenney and the movement, the domestic elements reminded the reader that while the movement violated the
norms of public/political discourse, the participants maintained many of the qualities and behaviors required of women.

Kenney’s domesticity appears most prominently in the collusion of her biological family with the Pankhursts. Throughout the narrative, Kenney connects her life with the Pankhursts and other suffragettes with the common elements of family life. Kenney’s introduction of the Pankhursts signifies an important change in her life as it appears in her treatment of her mother’s death: “It was in the same year that I met Christabel Pankhurst. With my mother’s death the cement of love that kept the home life together disappeared. We felt more like individuals in a big world than a family group, and each planned his life according to his or her ideals” (26). Before this section, Kenney mentions her mother’s illness and death around Christmas, and the lasting effects of her mother’s loss. Kenney’s introduction of the Pankhursts here is deliberate even as it appears incongruous. Kenney supplanted her family with the Pankhursts after her mother’s death. Her presentation of the relationships between militants intermingles with discussions of simple family topics, such as household maintenance.

Kenney describes her initial meeting with the Pankhursts in traditionally domestic tones to present both herself and them as traditional women:

It [the front door] was opened by a woman with one of the kindest faces I have ever seen. I found later it was the housekeeper. Helen was her name. She was a treasure; faithful, true, loving—and the last time I saw her, about four years ago, she was as good and true as ever. . . I was shown into a large drawing-room, very artistically-furnished, and Christabel introduced me to her mother. Mrs. Pankhurst had the gifts of putting you at your ease immediately. (29)
Some of the commonly identified elements of the domestic narrative include the description of Kenney and Christabel sitting by the fire talking or visiting other households for social and political reasons. These frequent sketches of domesticity ensured Kenney’s upholding traditional female qualities while participating in nontraditional political activities.

After some time in the movement, Kenney’s political and biological families seemed to merge within her sister, Jessie. Kenney spoke of Jessie infrequently but promoted her to a respected position as a member of the organization. The significance of Jessie’s introduction shows Kenney’s subordination of family for the movement:

Jessie and I had a long talk on her arrival. We agreed that in work we would act towards each other like members, that we would never confide Union secrets out of our own departments, or try to shelter each other if we were rebuked for any mistakes we might make; that no Union work or policy should be written about to other members of the family. We kept rigidly to these rules throughout the fight. My sister Jessie played a unique part in the movement—that is why I mention her name. (86)

At first, it appears peculiar that Kenney would feel the need to defend mentioning her sister in her own life narrative. However, because Kenney focuses on the movement and elevates the Pankhurst women, this refocusing on her sister stands out. Kenney’s justification is simply that her sister was important to the movement, which she further asserts when describing Jessie’s role in the cause:

She was in prison at twenty-one; and after that she had the greatest responsibility, next to Christabel and Mr. Lawrence, for the success of the great processions, Albert Hall meetings, and deputations. Afterwards she was the head of the London Militant
departments. Christabel insisted on Jessie’s room being next to hers, as she looked upon her as absolutely indispensable for carrying out her London plans. (87)

In the description above, Kenney highlights her pride in her sister’s accomplishment. That her idol, Christabel, thought Jessie was indispensable would be worth mentioning. These minor references to one member of her family create a tone of domesticity. As such, Kenney maintains the importance of her family in her presentation of herself and the movement, thereby conforming to the traditional Victorian values in women and ensuring additional audience acceptance.

Kenney was successful in constructing her life within a romantic narrative structure as she created a text that sang the praises of both the militant suffrage movement and the Pankhursts. There is no doubt that Kenney felt Christabel and militancy were important. Throughout the text, Kenney maintained the focus on heroic deeds as required by romantic structure. The key to this construction is its use of a journey to tie readers into the escapades and conflicts of the protagonists. Kenney knew how to appeal to the reading public. She used her past experience to achieve acceptance for both the movement and Christabel Pankhurst, as she believed they should be remembered. Kenney’s text shows control of the material and confidence in her speaking ability. This could be due to her involvement in the movement; writing speeches gave her experience in creating interesting texts that could be utilized for her purpose. In the next chapter, I move to the final text, that of an author who also maintains a single literary genre. However, the effects of childhood trauma problematize the text. Smith utilizes the genre of Bildungsroman to encourage acceptance of her troubled childhood. This penultimate chapter finalizes the case studies of working women writers who show their
competency and value as writers by attempting to construct their life narratives using literary models they hope will serve their individual purposes.
Chapter 5: Emma Smith

The previous chapters moved from the intensely personal life narrative of Cullwick’s diary and Johnston’s publicity piece to the politically charged writings of Kenney. I now turn to the most traditionally constructed life writing of all the texts: Emma Smith’s *A Cornish Waif* (1954).\(^4\) Virtually no meaningful scholarly discussions exist on this text. Notable mentions are limited to Smith’s class status or the horrors of nineteenth-century illegitimacy. This lack of analysis impoverishes women’s life writing scholarship because Smith’s text is a singular example of the strength of working women writers to mold their life into acceptable literary forms. In her youth, Smith underwent various forms of abuse before finding herself incarcerated in a convent for prostitutes. Similar to Johnston, Smith used this trauma to support her literary aspirations. However, unlike Johnston, Smith was not as selective about the biographical facts of her childhood; instead, Smith enticed readers by relating the facts of her biography, framing it as a familiar fictional story from the eighteenth-century onward. In this penultimate chapter, I argue that Smith fashioned her narrative within the popular literary structure of a Bildungsroman, to mold her outcast life into an acceptable middle-class story for readers who could assist with her literary aspirations. In other words, Smith constructed a traditional Coming-of-age tale signifying her

\(^{64}\) Emma Smith is the pseudonym for Mabel Lewis. I will be using the pen name to refer to the author as this was the name she chose.
middle class transformation. Her ability to mold her life, which included physical/sexual abuse, neglect, and extreme poverty, highlights her artistic choices and understanding of her audience.

First, I offer the context in which Smith’s publication appears. I then examine Smith’s writing, exploring how she shaped her life history into her chosen format. Her writing depends on the traditional literary form of Bildungsroman: the push into society while young, various conflicts between Smith and society, her numerous attempts at social conformity, and her final assumption of those same norms to which finalize her transformation. I conclude by examining the elements in Smith’s life that did not correspond to the literary genre and, in so doing, I emphasize the difficulties working women had in adapting their lives to any of the available models, either in fiction or nonfiction. This lack of options created additional obstacles for working women wishing to have a public voice.

**Biographical and Historical Background**

On the one hand, my analysis requires me to summarize Smith’s narrative. Yet, few sources exist with which to authenticate her biography. Smith’s childhood was a series of traumatic events culminating, at twelve years old, in her incarceration in a convent for troubled women. Outside of her writing and the accounts of those who knew her, Smith’s life left remarkably little historical evidence. Her early childhood, during the late 1800s, spent with her grandparents in Cornwall, was apparently loving and happy. Unfortunately, a work accident blinded her grandfather, after which her grandparents faced extreme poverty. Subsequently, Smith and her brother, Harry, spent stints in the local Union house. When Smith was six, her grandparents relocated, and her mother, Maude, settled into a new situation with her husband. He disliked Smith, as he was not her biological father, and refused any responsibility for her. This led Maude to sell Smith to the traveling entertainers Mr. and Mrs. Pratt. The Pratts were
impoverished as well, and Mr. Pratt sexually abused Smith in addition to occasional physical and verbal abuse. With the Pratts, Smith traveled the countryside performing folk and popular music. Smith eventually escaped (after about six years) and sought refuge with strangers. A doctor, then, labeled her “ruined by a man” without an examination, institutionalizing her in a convent penitentiary. It was not until years later that Smith realized she was confined with prostitutes for rehabilitation. As she aged, the convent placed Smith in a service position where she met and married her husband. They had two children and moved to Australia for six months until they returned to Cornwall. Once back, Smith attempted suicide at least twice, which led to further institutionalization for mental illness. These incidents conclude her narrative. Smith lived quietly with her husband while working toward further publications as indicated by her letters writer L. P Hartley.

Smith’s motivation for writing about her life first appears in the foreword of her narrative. She discusses why she submitted her life narrative for consumption, thereby breaching the public sphere. As mentioned, two of the women already discussed, Johnston and Kenney, felt this same compulsion in their life narratives. Much like Johnston, Smith assigns responsibility for her decision to an outside individual to make her writing more acceptable to readers. Johnston suggests her readers (mostly middle class, according to her) craved information about her life outside of writing. Smith likewise credits an academic friend for suggesting her composition:

Some time ago a friend who happens to be a sociologist suggested to me that it might be a good thing if I wrote my life story. At first I was against the idea. My second reason for not agreeing to his proposition at first was because I argued with myself that even if the record did no harm, I did not see that it could do any good either. (xvi)
While her version of the circumstances of publication is possible, many women felt pressure to give the responsibility to someone else for the product of their creative labors. Even with the influence of her friend, she decided to seek out A.L. Rowse, a Cornish writer, in hopes of publication. This is crucial because Smith’s efforts for publication hint at her desire for public recognition.

Interestingly, there are three introductory pieces to the 2010 (second) edition of Smith’s work. Simon Parker wrote the preface, A. L. Rowse provided the forward, and Smith provided an additional forward. Parker is a writer living and working in Cornwall. Rowse was a history scholar and writer specializing in Shakespeare and closely associated with Cornwall. The latter’s place of residence is, presumably, why Smith selected him to publish her manuscript. Both men were integral in the publication of Smith’s narrative. Initially, Rowse aided Smith in compiling her manuscript for publication in 1954. Then, Parker rediscovered the piece in a bookstore, eventually producing a new edition in 2010. Parker’s and Rowse’s introductory pieces highlight how others mediated and consumed Smith’s work. Readers’ valuation of Smith’s text is consistent through the two pieces. They regard biographical/historical truth as the highest goal in narration, above any other consideration. The difficulty of ascertaining truth in life writing problematizes the importance both men attribute to this element. Smith’s selection of a traditional fiction genre for her life narrative further complicates the notion of truth in her writing.

The publication and rediscovery of the text support the present contextual analysis. In the first introductory piece, Parker detailed his account of the new edition. After falling upon the work in a bookshop, he explored the life of Emma Smith and discovered her real identity in the process. He then found Smith’s given name, Mabel Lewis, and traveled to see Rowse for a
firsthand account of the publication of Smith’s narrative. Parker’s subsequent account revealed Rowse’s difficult relationship with the text and Smith. Parker contacted Rowse several times without success; however, once they met, Rowse was hostile towards the text he helped create as well as its author. Rowse described the text as follows: “A ‘Mass of illiterate rubbish’ is how noted Cornish academic and historian A. L. Rowse described the bundle of rough pages brought to him one day by a woman in her sixties, dressed in worn clothes and wearing a headscarf” (vii). Rowse also spoke plainly and disdainfully of his impressions of the author herself: “Clearly in a state of heighted, though unexplained, petulance, my first question about the author of A Cornish Waif’s Story resulted in him snapping: ‘She was a psychotic bitch. I know all about bitches. The woman was ignorant. She was rubbish’” (viii). Others, however, presented very different views of Smith. According to Parker’s research:

More important than establishing Mabel’s biographical details, however, was that research made it possible to state for certain that far from being the “psychotic bitch” described by Rowse, she was regarded highly by all who knew her. For instance, a shopkeeper at St. Uny remembered her fondly, telling me: “She was a very clever woman, a lovely person with a lovely way and a lovely disposition. She could converse well and did so often. She would go out of her way for anyone.” (ix)

Clearly, this description does not present the same psychotic bitch that Rowse described. He presents no explanation for why his description differs so drastically. Yet, Rowse would likely dismiss Smith if she was so unpleasant and her work so inadequate, but he chose to work with her. From his foreword, we know that he received other manuscripts from other writers that he presumably did not pursue. Rowse could have been jealous of the minimal success Smith’s text had garnered or desired more credit for discovering her. In the end, there are discrepancies
between Rowse’s comments on Smith and her work, and the glowing foreword he contributed to the book. Perhaps his real thoughts fell somewhere in between his positive comments for publication and his antagonism in later years.

If we examine the two introductory pieces, the consistency of the introductory contributors’ mediation over the fifty years between editions is evident. In the forward to the first edition, Rowse discusses his initial introduction to Smith’s work: “When the manuscript came to me through the post—after the initial resistance one puts up to unsolicited manuscripts (for they are rarely any good)—I very soon saw that this was an exception. Here was a story that held me, fascinated me, gripped me as no novel could; for it was a true story of life in the raw—and what a story!” (xi). Rowse brings up two ideas about his relationship with the work. First, by acknowledging he received numerous other manuscripts, Rowse identifies himself as a prominent member of the literary scene. Second, Rowse underscores the importance of truth (biographical fact) in Smith’s writing. As such, Smith’s honesty to Rowse is the foremost value in her writing. Therefore, honesty is a key to analyzing Smith’s audience appreciation, especially her rhetorical choice of highlighting the suffering of her childhood and her attempts to overcome it.

Rowse further praises Smith’s writing while tangibly concentrating more on her suffering than her writing. Multiple comparisons between Smith’s work and well-known literary works complicate his praise of Smith’s work. Rowse believes Smith’s life narrative developed into a non-fiction Bildungsroman through coincidence: he aptly characterizes Smith’s life narrative as literature but ignores Smith’s authorial ability or her control over the narrative. That is, by presenting Smith (the protagonist) as having overcome various obstacles for her acceptance into bourgeois society, Rowse values Smith’s work as a factual representation of fictional tales.
Rowse’s comparison between Smith’s text and literary figures goes further: “But it is the realism, the authentic note of truth that makes this book so impressive and disturbing, and all told so simply and vividly; it is not a book that one can ever forget. I find that its scenes are imprinted naturally and inescapably on the mind—as it might be Jane Eyre, so much of which is autobiographical” (xii). Here Rowse not only compares Smith’s text to an established fictional work but fiction to life writing. The connection between the two genres (traditional literature and life writing) is important for the value of each. Rowse also proposes a congruity between Smith’s work and *Le Grand Meaulnes* (1913) by Alain-Fournier. This latter text relates the tale of two young men searching the French countryside for a woman; one of them, Meaulnes, met her one evening but subsequently could not find her. Rowse draws a parallel between Smith’s longings for her grandmother’s cottage and Meaulnes’s search for the manor house where he last saw the woman. The connection is tenuous, however, because the sole link between the texts is nostalgia for home. Yet, for Rowse, these literary allusions give Smith’s text credibility that it alone does not seem to possess. He fails to consider that Smith intentionally constructed her narrative with the Bildungsroman structure in mind.

Rowse completes his discussion of Smith’s non-fiction Bildungsroman by emphasizing her conformity to society. The genre necessitated such a concern; her “happy ending” could not occur until she, as the protagonist, adopted or was adopted into bourgeois society. Rowse begins this section by highlighting Smith’s strength in overcoming obstacles with a positive spirit:

Not that those years have not left their scars: they have inevitably—and these are evident. But what is remarkable is the underlying strength, the toughness, of such a nature—to have come through and made good. Our author is rightly proud of her achievement, and even more of the brother who has risen to good rank as an officer in the Army. It restores
one’s belief in human nature to come across people who can rise above such circumstances, such handicaps. (xiii)

As Smith would also do, Rowse ties her life to British nationalism when she identifies her brother, Harry’s, rank. As this detail appears more of a digression from Smith’s narrative, the sole purpose of this identification is to illustrate Smith’s bourgeois progress. Notably, Rowse does not mention that Harry died in the war. His conclusion suggests to readers that they should understand Smith’s text as the fictional genre demanded: as a Coming-of-age story where the protagonist conforms to their society through bourgeois self-improvement. Nevertheless, what he describes as “scars” were damaging and were not healed given her suicidal tendencies later in life. Smith did not resolve her childhood troubles through her text. Try as she might to construct her own Bildungsroman, she could not fully craft her life into a traditional conclusion of acceptance into middle-class society because she was suicidal, had a contentious relationship with her mother, and a dull (if not completely unhappy) marriage. Rowse’s discussion of Smith’s narrative, much like that of Smith’s brother Harry, glosses over her struggles that could not fit the traditional Bildungsroman structure since she ends her narrative with her suicide attempts and institutionalization.

While Parker does not ignore as much information from the text, his introduction also represents Smith’s narrative as a realistic literary piece. As such, Parker, too, insists on the connection between literary giants (i.e., Dickens and Austen) and Smith: “What Rowse didn’t realize then—and perhaps never quite understood—was that contained in that manuscript was perhaps the most authentic account of late-Victorian child abuse and suffering since Dickens’ A Walk In A Workhouse” (vii). Though he acknowledged the similarities between Smith’s work and these writers, Parker—like Rowse—ignores the possibility that Smith pursued the
comparison. Parker furthers this connection through a series of backhanded compliments, as he compares the product of her work with a novel: “Had *A Cornish Waif*’s story been a novel, it would have been well-constructed, neat and satisfying; all the loose ends tied up and cast off with a pleasing denouement. But real life isn’t like that; it’s untidy and unpredictable, which is what makes Mabel’s account so compelling” (x). Throughout the introduction, Parker comments on Smith’s failures as an author, though he maintains his overall approval of the text with his closing remarks, “*A Cornish Waif*’s story is authentic and accurate, the simple truth of the events described leaving no room for unnecessary embellishment” (x). These accolades point to the value of Smith’s work as a true depiction of life to many readers. However, they do not take into account her value as a creative author, which I argue was Smith’s overall goal.

Parker’s introductory piece continues by highlighting what he sees as Smith’s value as an author. Parker adds drama to his discussion when he exploits the appeal of suffering: “Ultimately, and despite his inexplicably hostile attitude to Mabel Lewis in later years, we have Rowse alone to thank for ensuring this unique account of harrowing poverty, child abuse, misery and degradation was preserved for future generations” (ix). The latter section of this quote could appear as an advertisement for a fictional novel. Parker focuses on the negative aspects of Smith’s life, even as he notes her success and positive outlook. Again, we are meant to understand the value of Smith’s work lies in its portrayal of childhood suffering from a distance and not the author’s talent. However, Smith clearly understood the benefits of suggesting this connection between her life and fictional characters. She purposely implied some of the literary comparisons herself, most notably with Dickens’ work. One characteristic example is her apt description of Mr. Pratt, the traveling performer, as Fagin from *Oliver Twist*—the morally questionable character who preys on children both physically and professionally. Identifying Mr.
Pratt’s resemblance to a Dickens character, in light of this writer’s notable contributions to the Bildungsroman genre, supports her ability to use fictional elements for artistic reasons.

In contrast to Parker and Rowse, I maintain Smith used fictional elements intentionally, not accidentally, to achieve middle-class approval. Not only is it difficult to base a life narrative’s value on truth, as I will discuss in the following section, doing so denies Smith the credibility she deserves as a creative force in her narrative. The truth that Parker and Rowse admire is problematized in the text since Smith’s narrative is vague and imprecise in areas, unlike many traditional life narratives. Smith freely admits to gaps in her memory and areas where she contradicts previous statements. However, using words such as “record” and “history” suggests her intention to adhere to biographical fact. Smith’s work, like many others, has a more complex relationship with truth than is appreciated by Parker and Rowse. As discussed in the first chapter of this study, many scholars have considered how truth or verifiable biographical information complicates life writing. The idea of honesty is central to the genre as a whole. Readers seek truth in autobiography and feel betrayed if there are inconsistencies or even outright lies. Smith and Watson (2010) discuss how essential the idea of truth is to life writing in their overview of life writing studies:

65 An example of her difficulties with memory appears while she discusses her limited food options while living with the Pratts: “Those mackerel tasted good when fried. I have written earlier on that I could not recall ever having anything but cheese and bacon with the Pratts. It was only as I recalled the memory of the fishing village that our one alternative diet presented itself to my mind, for when living at Penzance it was possible to go to Newlyn quay and bring home a bagful of fresh fish without paying one penny for the privilege” (Smith 29-30).

66 This has been an issue and continues to be one right up until recently with the controversy over Misha Defonseca’s Misha: A Mémoire of the Holocaust Years and James Frey’s A Million Little Pieces.

67 For example, see Janina Bauman’s Memory and Imagination: Truth in Autobiography, Gyorgy Konrad’s Truth in Autobiography, Roy Pascal’s Design and Truth in Autobiography, and Paul John Eakin’s The Ethics of Life Writing.
We might respond by asking what we expect life narrators to tell the truth about. Are we expecting fidelity to the facts of their biographies, to lived experience, to self-understanding, to the historical moment, to social community, to prevailing beliefs about diverse identities, to norms of autobiography as a literary genre itself? And truth for whom and for what? Other readers, a loved one, the narrating I, or for the coherent person we imagine ourselves to be? (15)

The variety of truths mentioned above suggests writers have many opportunities to fail to meet all readers’ understanding of true narratives. However, the facts of biography appear to be at the forefront of the readers’ expectations of the women. The general bias suggesting a lack of creativity in working women’s life writing adds to this focus on truth. I argue that this idea arises because many readers assume little personal insight or introspective ability in these women writers. Virginia Woolf’s Introductory Letter to Life As We Have Known It (1931) by the Women’s Co-Operative Guild highlights how readers perceived and evaluated women’s life writing:

It cannot be denied that the chapters here put together do not make a book—that as literature they have many limitations. The writing, a literary critic might say, lacks detachment and imaginative breadth, even as the women themselves lacked variety and play of feature. Here are no reflections, he might object, no view of life as a whole, and no attempt to enter into the lives of other people (xxxvii).

Even as Woolf is taking the position of a literary critic and not herself, her conflict about writing an introduction to the work suggests an alignment to her own thoughts about working women’s writing. There is a consistency in the individual pieces and writers, but that should not remove the possibility of a creative work worth reading. One could credit the discrepancy between
objective and subjective truth to the dual purpose that many of these texts are called upon to perform: that of a literary piece and a historical document about the lives of working people. Consequently, with such an array of truths and expectations, no writer can fulfill them all. By looking at the writers’ motivation for writing, we can better address the idea of truth in context. This effort would open the door to a fresh exchange of ideas for life writing readers/scholars.

Through the gaps and discrepancies between the narrative and life history, we, as readers, can infer why Smith excludes some events while including others and how these decision work towards her goal of publication. It is through the dialogic exchange, posited by Bakhtin, that the complexity of motivation, historical context, and subjectivity can be understood.

To begin to understand these gaps and discrepancies, we must examine Smith’s desire for publication. Smith’s letters to a fellow writer, her only other published writing, illuminate hidden motivations and add another dimension to the polished persona in her life writing. L. P. Hartley, an English novelist and short story writer, was relatively well known in mid-1900s England. Their letters complicate the version of Smith’s identity that she constructed for public consumption. A declaration of her ambitions clarifies why she constructed her identity as a Bildungsroman heroine. The letters, fragments of which are included in Hartley’s biography, discuss Smith’s life and literary ambitions. In a small passage from his biography, Smith and Hartley’s correspondence suggests that Smith was interested in Hartley for his literary influence. In these letters, Smith reveals a multidimensional persona that she left out of her published work. These letters support my argument that Smith’s text was a creative act presented for the specific purpose of achieving literary fame. As Wright notes in a biography of Hartley:

Hartley tried to persuade Putnam to publish her, but without success. Her budgerigar fluttering about her room as she wrote to him, she described her life with “My dear old
man [who] is the dullest person on earth for a woman with any intelligence to live alone with”. . . By 1962 she was, she told Hartley, “finished body soul and spirit,” “depressed and pain racked”. . . Still she wrote Hartley, still she was determined to write as well as she could, despite having no further luck with publishers. It was not for the want of Hartley’s trying. He even prodded Hamilton, assuring him that “she writes better when her pen is dipped in gall than it’s dipped in treacle,” but Hamilton was not impressed.

(Wright 201-202)

Without these fragments, we would only see Smith through her life narrative. However, in the letters, Smith hints at additional motivations besides the influence of her friend mentioned in her introduction. Even if we understand that she clearly desired publication, because she initially sought out Rowse, the importance of publication as an ongoing goal is emphasized through the letters. We also get a hint of what her other works might have entailed when Hartley mentions the success Smith has when writing while irritated. This is scant information, but it complicates the life narrative tremendously. In the narrative work, Smith by and large maintained a humble and forgiving attitude rather than one of irritation and gall. She appears to understand why she was treated poorly as a child and to accept it in some ways. I argue she adopted that tone because she could only complete her Bildungsroman with the removal of her various conflicts with society. Highlighting the anger and resentment that she might have still felt about her past would not align with Smith’s naturalization of middle class norms.

With the goal of publication in mind, the introductory piece that Smith provides shows her initial attempts to connect with readers. Smith infuses the forward with a nostalgic tone that allows the reader to see the culmination of her work to achieve bourgeois standards that she will elaborate on in the text proper. The theme of self-improvement permeates the text as she pairs
conflicts with her desire to overcome them. As such, she follows the generic format that emphasized improvement through adopting bourgeois norms. In her introductory piece, Smith additionally ties her own improvements to that of societies as well:

In the end, however, I decided that I would make the record, having come to the conclusion that though my story might be too late to do any active good, it was after all a bit of history showing forth the conditions under which some sections of the community existed in the days which are very often referred to as “the days of plenty,” or “the good old days…” If my story does nothing else, at least it will cheer the reader to reflect that what I describe in the following pages could not happen in this year of grace 1954. (xvi)

She suggests longing for an earlier time is inappropriate, since, similar to her, England overcame its neglect of the most vulnerable with the adoption of middle-class standards for all. By tying her experience to that of the nation, Smith shows a keen awareness of her audience. Smith also addresses how readers might enjoy seeing the changes which have transpired in English society since her youth. This would mirror the changes in Smith’s life and growth in becoming more in line with middle class values. Smith’s connection would have encouraged readers’ pride in their country, which flourished after WWII. The British were proud of their society and Smith taps into this pride. Tracing audience awareness throughout the work demonstrates how Smith constructed her work for their pleasure, fostering further publication opportunities that, unfortunately, did not materialize.

The introductory piece contains more than Smith’s inspiration for writing; it also provides insight into her rhetorical choices. First, Smith sets her initial narrative tone by contemplating the lasting quality of childhood trauma: “‘Happy is the man (or woman) who has no history.’ Never were truer words spoken than these. I who am about to record the facts of my
own life would give a great deal to be in the blessed state” (x). Her desire to forget the past is easy to imagine. However, throughout the piece, she presents acceptance and tolerance toward the past that belie the tone of the beginning. For instance, the introduction of her mother, Maude, displays Smith’s purpose for, at least, the appearance of resolution with her past as she explains why she initially declined to write her narrative: “For one thing I have a mother living who in these latter years I have grown to love, and the last thing on earth I would wish to do would be to cause her pain; for, though most of the blame for what I suffered and endured lies at her door, I have in these latter years learned to be tolerant and can find many excuses for her” (xi).

Considering her mother sold her to an abusive man, her efforts toward forgiveness must have been considerable. As discussed in the previous section, Rowse found her forgiveness and resolution remarkable. We cannot know whether Smith truly forgave her mother; however, she actively promotes this aspect of her persona. By demonstrating forgiveness, Smith entices her readers with a literary element familiar to them. Having established Smith’s motives and background, I now move to discussing the scant scholarship of Smith’s text.

One of the only literary scholars to address Smith’s text, Regina Gagnier, argues in *Subjectivity* that Smith, along with a few other working women life writers, uses literary techniques in order to highlight their role as victims:

Like the tales of “low life” the middle classes had told themselves much earlier, Smith constructs her life from the perspective of the ordinary person trapped in the margins of society. Thus the Dickensian “Fagin” is both her exploiter and necessary protector, and her identification with the orphaned Oliver draws upon fiction to legitimate her very real sense of victimization. (49)
I have already mentioned the connection Smith makes between Fagin and Mr. Pratt; however, it is interesting that here Gagnier identifies Smith with Oliver, the character rather than Dickens, the writer. Clearly, having been abused, Smith would fit the Oliver role. As such, Smith uses this connection creatively to show her victimization and to have the text accepted by her readers. I argue that she uses the connection between herself and Dickens to highlight her abilities as a competent author as opposed to suggesting the relationship she bears to Oliver. As such, Smith is emphasizing her subjectivity as an author more than her status as victim as Gagnier posits. One point on which I agree with Gagnier is how Smith’s troubled ending signals the discontinuity between fiction and reality. According to Gagnier, Smith’s appropriation of bourgeois norms does not end with contentment: “rather than a parish girl’s progress to financial and domestic stability, Smith’s is a ‘hysterical’ narrative indicating her nonadjustment to married life and maternity” (50). The suicide attempts, unhappy marriage, and lack of subsequent publications indicate the drawbacks of a working woman’s attempt to conform to middle class norms.

*The Bildungsroman*

To ground my discussion of Smith’s style and structure, I will now discuss the basic components of the Bildungsroman, including the middle-class appreciation of the genre, which justifies Smith’s motivation for choosing the genre for her narrative. Finally, I examine how memory is incorporated into the genre. As noted by Smith and Watson, life narratives can use different versions of the Bildungsroman, “which in different ways use its paradigm of a self development through education, self-directed ‘intellectual cultivation’ through reading, and encounters with social institutions” (120). There are instances in Smith’s work where she focuses on all of these options. She was diligent in trying to get an education, read as much as possible, and was achieved a more acceptable life in part through the penitentiary for prostitutes. While
the criteria for Bildungsroman vary, there are some accepted norms. Significantly, the genre has a strong connection with middle class development in England. The genre was rooted in Germany; however, it became quite popular in middle-class England throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As Patricia Alden (1988) suggests in her discussion of social mobility and the English Bildungsroman:

The genre focuses on the development of a single individual within a particular social world; it may be in part autobiographical; it is likely to give the history of this individual from childhood up to a point at which the development or unfolding of his or her character is achieved; in other words it is a story of an apprenticeship rather than a life history. Central to the genre is the notion of individual selfhood achieved through growth and of social experience as an education which forms, and sometimes deforms, that self.

(1)

As such, Smith uses the genre as the apprenticeship described as she works to educate herself and conform to British society. These tropes include Smith’s development from a young illegitimate child to a wife and mother as she encounters numerous conflicts with both individuals and institutions. However, some real-life issues cannot be resolved as easily as in fictional worlds and, therefore, disrupt her attempts to mold her text into this fictional model.

Further scholars also consider the importance of the genre to Victorian middle class readers. For instance, Alden suggests, “It readily accommodated the concerns of a new middle-class reading public, willing to be absorbed by the history of an individual and gratified to see how its collective experience of social mobility might be rendered as the individual’s pursuits of an ideal of self-development” (2). Smith’s use of a genre that highlights success through self-improvement and financial gain is reasonable in light of her desire for middle-class acceptance.
Consequently, Smith frequently emphasizes self-improving activities. Furthermore, she focuses specifically on bourgeois improvements through education, religion, and family – the type of development which might appeal to her readers’ understanding of a valuable life. Smith also identifies herself as a faithful wife and doting mother who overcame the suffering of her youth in her final attempt at societal acceptance.

When considering the purposes of bildungsroman, Elisabeth Jay (2010) adds another dimension by addressing the role of memory in reference to the moral focus of the genre. Jay highlights the need for reflection and self development central to the genre:

As is commonly acknowledged, the Bildungsroman, a fictional developmental case history, was especially well-adapted for dramatizing the various influences on the moral growth of the individual. Furthermore, the retrospective narrative mode it frequently employed allowed full scope for reflections highlighting the pivotal moments in this process. (361)

Although Jay focuses on fiction, her description could easily apply to Smith’s text. Smith utilizes the reflective nature of the genre to consider the changes between her life during composition and that of her childhood. The frequent direct references to recalling memories and experiences suggest Smith understood the reflective nature of the genre. Through the text, Smith calls attention to the work of memory. Specific examples include: “Harry once again figures into my memory. In spite of what I have previously said…”(4-5), “Looking back over it all…”(7), “I do not remember…” (114), and “I have since worked this out…” (38). Whether Smith is looking back on her life, making a realization or contradicting a previous statement, the work of memory is always present in the text. In doing so, as will be discussed, Smith can emphasize her development into the moral norms of middle class society.
Analysis

In this section, I examine Smith’s text through close reading, focusing on how Smith molds her biography to achieve middle class acceptance for subsequent publications. To those ends, Smith uses the framework of Bildungsroman to legitimize her traumatic youth to readers. The genre that highlights coming of age and reform of middle class norms allows Smith to characterize herself as both a victim and survivor of societal neglect. First, I examine Smith’s own introduction. Next, I move to the conflicts she faced as an illegitimate child. Finally, I treat her attempts to resolve her subjectivity with that of bourgeois society. Examining Smith’s audience awareness and rhetorical choices is vital for understanding her text.

Typically, a Bildungsroman begins with the protagonist’s entrance into the world alone because of a familial or guardian’s loss. In Smith’s narrative, however, no sudden death or other such occurrence resulted in Smith’s abandonment. Instead, ongoing problems at home compelled her out of the family she spent her early life with. Through her grandparents’ worsening financial situation and her step-father’s dislike of her, Smith was unable to stay with her family. Without other options, Maude sold Smith to Mr. and Mrs. Pratt, essentially ending any sense of safety or comfort for her. Although Smith lived with a new family with the Pratts, she was no longer cared for or protected in any meaningful fashion. Her previous stints at the Union were not nearly as traumatic or final as this action by Maude. Smith highlights the abrupt nature of the change from a loving family home to the cold world as she recreates her first night with the Pratts:

“Look, Emma,” the man said, as he rose and came over to me in a threatening manner.

“You belong to us now, so shut yer row and be quiet, do you hear?” Terrified, I choked back my sobs and allowed myself to be led to the filthy pile of rags in the corner. A dirty jacket was rolled up for my pillow, and as I lay down Mrs Pratt covered me with other
dirty jackets and coats. For a while I wept softly, then sleep brought temporary forgetfulness. O could not have been asleep long before I was awakened by a horrible sense of things crawling over me. I opened my eyes. The lamp was still burning; Mr and Mrs Pratt were reading a newspaper. As realization came upon me of my whereabouts, I turned to face the wall for I could not bear to look upon these people. I was stifled in the filthy bedding; I itched and scratched. Then, to my horror, I saw pink insects creeping up the wall. I put my finger on one to squash it; the smell made me feel sick. I closed my eyes again. I could shut out the sight of those horrid bugs as I later learned to call them, but I could not shut out the smell. I don’t think there is a more sickening smell on earth than the smell of bugs, but perhaps I am prejudiced. Turning once again in my efforts to stop the awful itching brought a sharp rebuke from behind the newspaper. (16-17)

As Smith makes clear, she could have no more drastic an introduction to the unforgiving world than this experience. Juxtaposing the warmth and love that she knew with her grandparents with her new circumstances enhances the trauma of confronting her new life. From here, Smith continues the construction of her Bildungsroman by describing her life with the Pratts, her eventual escape, and her conflicts with society until she achieved acceptance as a respectable working woman. Smith’s three major sources of her conflict—her mother, her experience with the Pratts and her societal problems—account for the majority of the text, much like a typical Bildungsroman. A few specific scenes highlight the harm these three life conditions caused her, especially her mother’s abandonment.

Throughout the text, Smith highlights her conflict with Maude as a recurring source of pain. Maude’s decisions increased Smith’s trauma and her fraught relationship with society on numerous occasions. Maude’s choice to force Smith into the life of a traveling performer and
victim is just one of the most disturbing. It was not the physical or economic hardships that prevented Maude from caring for Smith; instead, her husband denied any responsibility for Maude’s children from a previous relationship. Eventually, he welcomed Harry into the family; however, Smith remained an outcast. Smith’s complete exclusion from the family extended to the dinner table during one of the rare occasions when she visited her mother’s house:

Mother cooked some fish for the evening meal. Harry (to whom now I was a stranger) and Willie (my stepfather’s eldest boy) sat round the table with Mother and her husband. Each was served. I patiently sat on an orange box away from the table, looking with hungry eyes at the food, but quite accepting the fact that I didn’t belong. (56)

Maude’s husband might have accepted Harry into the family because he was potentially an additional source of income. Regardless, Maude’s complete disregard for Smith is remarkable as demonstrated in the following example from before Smith lived with the Pratts permanently.

Smith was allocated a guinea as she left the Union House to get a new dress. Her mother was given the money to purchase Smith’s clothes, but chose to keep the money. Her mother was also clueless in one notable circumstance:

Now and then a happy thought would cross my mind, that when Mother did appear I should have nice new clothes. Daylight was fading when at last she put in an appearance. She explained that she had had to meet her man who had that day come out of prison where he had been for some days for being drunk and disorderly. The news left me quite indifferent. Prison seemed to me a household word. What did interest me was the bundle of clothing. I waited breathlessly while she undid the bundle. There was nothing new; to make matters worse my boots were too tight and I was very uncomfortable. I started to weep, and Mother thought it was because I had not been fetched earlier. She was on the
defensive at once. “Look, Emma,” she said, “my man comes first. I had to meet him, and I couldn’t be here as well, could I?” “No,” I said, trying hard to stop the flow of tears. She never knew that I had heard about the guinea, or what a disappointment I had undergone. (67)

This tiny moment of hope and subsequent disappointment emphasizes how little Smith expected from anyone in her young life. Smith was excited about the receiving a new dress and then discovered that her mother stole her money. Smith remembered this betrayal in detail, which suggests that the incident contributed to her sense of abandonment and worthlessness. It is not surprising then that Smith’s narrative could not achieve the resolution she sought through her choice of genre.

Before Maude caused countless complications for Smith, she was largely absent from Smith’s life. Smith’s grandmother, whom she thought was her mother, was the only maternal influence early on in her life. Maude’s inauspicious appearance occurred while Smith slept in her grandmother’s cottage:

Presently a heavy step sounded on the stairs and someone entered the room, and in the darkness a woman crept over to our corner. My heart beat wildly as a voice whispered loudly, “Are you awake, Emma?” “Yes,” I whispered back. The woman then thrust a bag of sweets into my hand, telling me to share them with Harry. This is my first memory of our mother, though it was not until long afterwards that I realized that was the relationship between us. (2)

At this point, Smith was four or five years old and had no relationship with her mother. Her grandmother revealed her mother’s identity: “Little by little I became aware of the unhappy status of my brother and me. Never shall I forget how the bottom dropped out of my world when
in a moment of intense irritation my grandmother said crossly: “I’m not your Ma. Maud is your Ma.” I just could not take it in at first, but when I knew that she really meant it broke my heart” (8). The loving family she had known up until this moment was unstable now. As Smith aged, her maternal relationship deteriorated even further, culminating in Smith’s denial of any emotional connection with her mother: “I went in and stood shyly by her chair, feeling ill at ease, for it was a very long time now since I had met her. ‘Hallo, Emma,’ she said, then, uncovering the baby’s face, she invited me to kiss ‘my little brother.’ I did so. ‘Haven’t you got a kiss for me?’ she asked. I kissed her coldly. She meant nothing to me” (54). While this last pronouncement seems final, Smith softens her attitude towards her mother as the text progresses. However, the majority of the text emphasizes Smith’s troubled relationship with Maude. Smith’s illegitimacy and maternal abandonment account for the stigma and unhappy status she held. Maude was oblivious to her responsibility for Smith’s difficulties, at least as Smith remembers. The magnitude of neglect and pain Smith experienced because of Maude’s choices accounts for Smith’s parental abandonment, as is typical of the genre, even as she was never an orphan.

Although Smith was disheartened by her maternal abandonment, her experience with the Pratts left the most unpleasant mark and signaled her complete break from anything that could, even remotely, be considered a family. In a typical Bildungsroman, characters are forced into complete isolation, a structure followed in Smith’s narrative. From her vague timeline, Smith seems to have spent most of her childhood (about six years) with the Pratts. During this period, the Pratts’ continued sexual abuse and neglect was obviously traumatic. The first abuse transpired when Smith was just six years old:

I had been with the Pratts for perhaps two or three weeks, during which time I was learning to get accustomed to my new existence and to being without my grandparents
and Harry when one evening I found myself alone with Mr. Pratt. For a while he sat looking at me in an evil way that made me afraid. At last he said, “Come here, Emma.” I obeyed, slowly. This beast—old enough to be my grandfather—grabbed hold of me, a child about six years of age, if I was that. He undid some of my clothing and behaved in a disgusting way. Presently he said, “Don’t tell Ma or Charlie what I’ve done, or something awful will happen.” As he said this his face was so evil and threatening that I was overwhelmed with fear. (21)

The specific nature of Mr. Pratt’s abuse is never explicitly stated, Smith’s fear and shame are indicative of sexual abuse. Unlike the situation with her mother and a few others, Smith could not represent Pratt as anything other than “evil,” as she stated twice in this small passage. Her inability to forgive Mr. Pratt’s abuse could emphasize the magnitude of her suffering while living with him. Additionally, by distancing herself from him and his deviancy, Smith also shows her alignment with middle class standards that would not approve of an abusive traveling performer.

Aside from the sexual abuse, Smith’s short time with the Pratts was full of other suffering, such as the infestation of bugs, hunger, humiliation, and physical trauma. On her first night with the Pratts, Mr. Pratt threw a shoe at Charlie (the older boy staying with the Pratts at the same time as Smith) that hit Smith in the forehead, causing severe pain and a visible wound. The Pratts gave her wound no meaningful treatment and forced Smith to remain inside, thus avoiding any questions from others about her condition. While Smith documented no other physical abuse, their neglect continued until she finally ran away when she was twelve:

This to me was the last straw. I felt now more disgraced and humiliated than ever before. Pratt’s continuous nagging, on top of all the mental strain I had borne on his account,
now drove me desperate. I could bear no more. I suddenly made up my mind I would run away. Telling Mrs. Pratt I was attending a free breakfast the following morning gave me the excuse for early rising. The next morning I set out with just the clothes I stood in, and not one penny in my pocket. I never saw Mr. or Mrs. Pratt again. (92)

Smith’s escape occurred after a severe case of the chicken pox matted her hair and produced puss-filled scabs all over her head. Because of her appearance, Smith was dismissed from school, an event that signaled the end of her patience with the Pratts. The Pratts were an obstacle to her self-development, especially as it came to education and religion, so Smith had no option other than to leave their home to seek more appropriate assistance. The Pratts symbolized her last attachment to her past of illegitimacy, abuse, and neglect that Smith had to overcome in order to fulfill the adoption of middle class moral norms. However, without a family or other resources, Smith was institutionalized with prostitutes for rehabilitation until she became a domestic.

Even after Smith fled the Pratts, her status in society did not improve and provided a further conflict for her to overcome because her rescuers assumed Smith was a prostitute. This assumption became clear when they sent Smith to a doctor to confirm her unfortunate state: “‘This child has been ruined by a man,’ she said. ‘Will you supply me with a certificate?’”(101). The doctor would not perform any exam because Smith was dirty, neglected, and covered with sores. Once Smith was cleaned up, the doctor still refused to examine her to make sure Smith had been involved in prostitution. Because of the doctor’s behavior, Smith entered a convent penitentiary for older prostitutes: “I was twelve years old on the twenty-fourth of January. Just over three weeks later, that was on the seventeenth of February, I entered a penitentiary” (104). While the convent treated her well, providing useful skills and a relatively homelike environment, the experience stamped her with another stigma, that of a young prostitute.
From these experiences, though no fault of her own, Smith felt tormented by society:

Every day when I went to my room to wash and change into my afternoon dress, I threw myself on the bed weeping bitterly. I tried to figure out. “Why, oh why,” I kept asking myself, “had my life been so full of stigmas?—first illegitimacy, then my place of birth being a workhouse, and now for the rest of my life I must always be trying to hide the fact I had spent years in a penitentiary.” (134)

The anguish Smith feels is clear in this passage. She was well aware of the way society viewed her, even as she had little to no control over the stigmas she discusses. On some level, society condemned almost every aspect of her life from the start. As mentioned, Smith became aware of her low status when she discovered her biological mother was Maude and not her grandmother. The Union house further increased her awareness of her low class/status. Smith grew to realize the shame of poverty as a result of frequent badgering by her classmates and other children. Along with severe poverty, she was illegitimate, which Smith slowly understood as an additional source of humiliation. Because her family never mentioned her status, she learned of it through the reactions of her community. Smith identifies the moment when she first understood her stigmatized state: “At that early age I did not know the meaning of the word ‘bastard.’ I only know that the angry tone in which the word was always used conveyed to my sensitive mind the realization that Harry and I were in some dreadful mysterious way different from other children; that indeed we had no right to be in the world at all” (9). Every area of Smith’s existence worked against her desire to present more than a simple working-class subjectivity. By combining elements of parental abandonment and societal condemnation, along with positive self-improvement such as personal success, good attitude, and social advancement Smith utilized her history and the criteria of Bildungsroman to suggest her acceptance of middle class norms and
values. Unfortunately, even after Smith created an acceptable life for herself with a husband, house, and children, she encouraged further stigmas when she was institutionalized for suicidal tendencies.

After establishing her abandonment, loss of family, and numerous societal conflicts, Smith’s text progresses to the final stages of the Bildungsroman focusing on self improvement. Smith’s specific improvements comprise education, religion, and, marriage. The protagonist must leave behind his or her troublesome life events to gain society’s acceptance. Even as Smith’s traumatic life encompasses most of her narrative, other moments display her attempts at self-improvement through aligning her life with respectable society. This theme is essential for a successful Bildungsroman as it legitimizes middle-class values. One of the first and most consistent attempts at betterment concerns Smith’s efforts to achieve formal education. Due to travelling and extreme poverty, she lacked the resources to attend school regularly until her convent experience. Prior to this, Smith attempted school on three occasions. When she first lived with the Pratts, they hid her, so that school inspectors would not require Smith to attend school. However, the Pratts allowed Smith to attend school near the end of her time there. This experience reinforced her isolation from the working-class community around her:

As time went on and more and more of my schoolfellows had seen me singing in the streets on Saturdays, the old feeling of inferiority crept over me miserably, for children began to shun me in the playground and refer to me, not only as “that old Eytaian maid,” but “that old maid that goes out singing.” Besides all this I was sent to school dirty and unkempt, and though for the most part my fellow pupils came from mean streets, there were exceptions, and even those from the mean streets were all, without exception, better dressed and cleaner than I was. (72)
Much like the insults she experiences from children when they knew of her illegitimacy, the students targeted her for activities the Pratts forced her to perform. Even as Smith never seemed to be accepted by her fellow students, she never gave up on trying to receive an education. Smith aspired to succeed in her third attempt at school, yet the stigma of her appearance and work with the Pratts encouraged her peers’ condemnation. Much like the children in the passage above, Smith experienced merciless taunting from her peers. Whether they shamed her for her appearance or her illegitimacy, Smith’s torment was inescapable. These events left a lasting effect that Smith could not resolve as easily as in a fictional work.

Although education was the most prominent form of self-development to Smith, she worked to make every aspect of her life palatable to middle class values. While with the Pratts, Smith experienced the kindness of strangers she met through their travels and had a religious conversion. At the revival, Smith felt not only religious fervor but also the acceptance of the community:

After the service many people came round and spoke kindly to me. I felt good, clean, and full of determination that in future neither Pratt nor anybody else should rob me of my new found joy. The farmer and his wife both congratulated me in a kindly fashion in that I had, as they expressed it, been “saved” that night. Pratt seemed pleased of the notice that was showered upon me, and I think I was justified in thinking that he would in the future leave me alone. Alas for my comforting belief! Through the farmer’s kindness we slept in the barn that night, and for all Pratt had seemed pleased at my being saved, he behaved in his usual way. (94-95)

Being “saved,” as Smith discussed at various times in her story, developed a sense of morality in her which was more in line with societal norms. However, as with Smith’s other attempts at
conformity, the happy moment did not last since Pratt once again molested her after she experienced the cleansing of her consciousness. Since Pratt would assault Smith right after this religious conversation, he continues to work as a symbol of the life Smith is trying to leave. It is the Pratts that stand in the way of her schooling, the Pratts that deny her an appropriate and clean appearance, and the Pratts that sully her religious awakening. As such, it is no wonder that Smith never suggests forgiving them as she does her mother. Even as Smith attempted to conform to society, her actual transition from bastard child to productive member of society was fraught with obstacles.

The marriage and children were required for a woman to make the final step toward societal acceptance initiated by Smith’s religious conversion and education. Though she chose a husband based on societal norms, (a fellow laborer) she could not achieve the happy conclusion she desired:

If I have spoken very little of our courtship, it is because I hardly know myself how it all came about. I remember a remark one of my young ladies made to me one day: she said—“If you have two servants, a man and a woman, the thing to do is to marry them up. Then you have two servants for the price of one.” I often recalled that remark in later years. I think it was suggested so often that I should fall in love with this gardener (a man fourteen years older than myself) that in the end I think I believed myself in love; and I am sure I must have taken the initiative, for I am quite certain my shy husband would never have had the pluck to make a direct proposal. Anyhow, we drifted into this engagement and once engaged, I could never find the courage to break it off and admit

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68 “When I tearfully pleaded with him and told him it was wrong, he simply said there was nothing wrong about it at all, and that God made us that way, and it was perfectly natural; but it would not do to talk about it, because people thought it was wrong. Gone was my happy, clean-souled feeling after this, and I felt depressed and miserable” (95).
the whole thing was a mistake. Though I am bound to admit, there were many times when I felt it was. (154)

Nowhere does Smith suggest that she married for any reason aside from societal pressure to choose a fellow laborer. In the correspondence between Smith and Hartley, there is no indication that the marriage improved with time. As such, Smith accepted her relationship much like she had everything else—with resignation. Disappointment carries Smith’s narrative throughout even as she molds her life into a Bildungsroman, but the form is not complete because she cannot overcome the lasting impact of her troubled childhood as shown through her later institutionalization.

Much like Kenney used common domestic elements to enhance her use of romance genre, Smith completes her Bildungsroman by infusing the text with a sense of forgiveness and acceptance that distances society and her mother from blame while also showing how far Smith has come by internalizing bourgeois norms. By doing so, Smith acknowledges her adherence to the bourgeois values that caused much of her suffering as well as completes her adoption of these same norms. Smith’s treatment of her mother is the most prominent example of Smith’s forgiving tone. While Smith focused on the distress Maude’s decisions created, she did blame Maude completely. The society of Smith’s youth prevented any attempt Maude made against her husband to support Smith. Smith acknowledges that Maude’s situation might not have been as clear as she thought it was as a child: “I think she was more to be pitied than blamed in that before a wedding ring was placed on her figure she found herself the mother of two children” (7); and “Poor Mother—it is only as I write that I realized what a time she must have had” (65). These statements attempt to absolve Maude of blame as Smith works through her narrative. Smith can allow herself this acceptance in the narrative, since she has already suggested the ways
the English society has changed which would have forced her mother into these difficult
decisions. By suggesting societies’ improvements, Smith can forgive her mother while not
alienating/blaming her contemporary readers for the circumstances of her life and illegitimacy.

In addition to providing her mother with acceptance, Smith tries to paint her childhood in
a more positive light as well. Her youth also receives a brighter outlook at times: “Before writing
this book, I always felt my young days were just bad and sordid all through; but as I write, much
that was lovely has forced itself upon my memory” (72). The idea of forced memory here
suggests resistance to looking at her life in a new light. The conflict could be with Smith’s desire
to conform to middle class norms of acceptance in her narrative, while personally still being
quite traumatized by her youth. The slip is therefore telling of her desire to present only that
subjectivity that would coincide with her understanding of the audience’s values and ideals.
However, she is fond of the affection she received from strangers as a traveling performer in the
countryside. She muses on the kindness of villagers who shared what little they had: “Looking
back, it seems to me that these cottages were wonderfully kind to me. Sometimes a kindly
mother would say: ‘wait a minute, I’ll get you a glass of milk, dear, and could you eat a piece of
cake?’ to which I always replied in the affirmative” (25). Still, she found beauty in strangers she
encountered and in the landscape through which she traveled with the Pratts; the narrative
includes a scene where a woman took Smith to her home and provided her with new stockings
and candy: “As I have said before, there was much kindliness among our fellow wayfarers. Then,
again, more than once I have known some kindly landlady to supply me with a decent pair of her
own child’s stockings, which for a time at least made life more bearable” (41). While these
handouts could not compensate for the neglect Smith experienced, the memory of them appears
throughout the text. Through her youthful memories, Smith notes the support accessible to
herself and others facing financial/familial hardships which occurred during the time of composition.

It is not just Smith’s own experiences that she can look back on with less difficulty. When discussing her grandfather’s disability and his need to beg as his only means of support, Smith juxtaposes how hard it must have been for him with what might happen if he were alive at the time of composition: “Not until I started writing this book did I realize what a strain it must have been for the poor fellow always to stand in that same way, the right hand holding the mug, the left holding the laces” (85) as compared with current society: “In these days he would have had a pension of some sort, so that it would not be necessary to stand all hours with his hands in the same position as he did” (84). Smith makes two observations about this situation. The first depicts the pain and shame her grandfather must have experienced begging for money. The second suggests how the government would subsequently assist in a similar situation (where, in her grandfather’s case, it didn’t). By thus underscoring the progress of British society, the author is able to connect to her audience’s pride in the nation’s accomplishments. When speaking of her daughters, Smith suggests that children who have more opportunities and stability are more developed: “For all my sordid upbringing, I was, I realize it now, much younger in mind than most girls my age. I recall that my own daughters at the same age, who had had a normal upbringing, were much more sensible and advanced than I was” (115). While Smith cannot change the nineteenth-century ideology that underpinned her troubles, she highlights the generosity of the poor while she was young and the social reforms in England: “I am sure such simple things would have been forgotten long ago if I had had an ordinary childhood, but it was the contrast between these simple homely sights and my other life at the Union that has so firmly embedded them in my mind, and with such affection” (6). It is this call to national pride that
connects Smith with Britain’s advancements. Smith made this connection clear through phrases such as “as I am writing I” and variations of this to highlight the contemporary situation.

Given the lengths to which Smith goes to portray her narrative in this bourgeois style as well as the comments from Rowse and Parker, one could assume Smith achieved complete resolution typically found in her chosen genre. However, the reality appears to be more complicated. As mentioned, Smith did not appear fulfilled in her marriage, she did not publish again, and she attempted suicide multiple times and, as a result, was briefly institutionalized. None of these circumstances conform to the genre’s standard. Yet, the text could not conform because her life could not be wrapped up neatly as fiction. The class structure and ideology of nineteenth-century English society made social advancements, such as those seen in Bildungsroman texts, incredibly unlikely. Through her humble persona in the face of severe neglect, Smith cemented her purpose in writing. First, by portraying her childhood self as compassionate toward her mother, Smith gives readers the opportunity to accept her mother as a woman created by circumstances out of her control instead of a villain, which would be more likely given the trauma Maude inflicted on Smith. Furthermore, by focusing on societal factors of neglect, in terms of how England treated the poor and illegitimate, Smith establishes a basis for emphasizing the advancements in British society that helped the lives of working people and illegitimate children. This last aspect, I argue, stems from her wish to link her writing with the growing nationalism in England after WWI and II. By doing so, Smith appeals to her readers beyond the Bildungsroman tropes.

In this chapter, I argued that Smith constructed her life narrative as a Bildungsroman, thus attempting to gain approval from her middle-class readers. The life writing of Smith reveals a difficult balance of blending public and private motivations in the creation of a life narrative.
Smith wanted her life writing to open the literary world for her. We do not know the type of writing she tried to publish after this text, though her correspondence with Hartley clearly identifies her desire for further public recognition. None of her other work is available, but that should not diminish the efforts made to appeal to her readership. Three aspects highlight Smith’s manipulation of her readers. Through her use of fictional Bildungsroman, she framed her life narrative into a well-known acceptable archetype for her readers. To that end, Smith also used the middle class’ voyeuristic interest in poor children’s lives. Finally, Smith appealed to her audience by acknowledging England’s achievements, thus invoking a sense of nationalism. In addition to these public concerns, Smith’s portrayal of pain and suffering in her youth is intensely personal. It is from these two very different motivations, both public and private, that Smith’s text emerged. Whether it was her choice of future topics, her suicide attempts, institutionalization, or some outside influence, Smith was never able to publish again. Yet, the work that she was able to create stands as a testament to her abilities as a creative author with a keen sense of audience appreciation.
In this study, I set out to examine the various methods working women writers employed to achieve their specific goals of further publications, political acceptance, and autonomy in relationships. As such, they produced unique pieces, using diverse strategies even when choosing similar forms. By analyzing the different types of life writing, we can better understand the value and adaptability of the genre. My analysis of the texts highlights the artistic ability/choices of the authors, which readers do not typically appreciate, despite the growth of life writing studies. They should be valued more as creative writers, capable of crafting their life narratives for purposes outside of simply recording their lives, an idea frequently dismissed since they were mostly uneducated and composed in less than ideal circumstances. As such, judging these texts by male/bourgeois standards limits not only our perception of the texts but our scholarship as well. Stopping at the writers’ status as working women and basing all conclusions on this fact has almost completely silenced the writers. Given this, the current work is essential in continuing the challenge that has been growing for the last thirty or more years. More scholars have discovered examples of life writing by a variety of writers, both men and women, which previously did not appear to have any scholarly importance. Scholars such as Sidonie Smith, Julia Watson, Meta Harris, and Johnnie Stover have added to the discussion of women’s life writing especially. This growing field gives us a broader view of life writing and its value.
When I set out to study the four texts analyzed in this dissertation, I wanted to examine not only why these working women chose to write their life narratives, but how and why they constructed their unique subjectivity. To this end, I have suggested that all four writers were able to mold their life narratives to present themselves in the manner best suited for their individual needs whether relational, political, or literary. Therefore, I open the door to better understanding and appreciation of the depth of life writings. The value of these writers’ works is not simply in their historical significance, even though that is evident, but in their creative constructions of their life narratives. By appreciating these writers, we can give voice to many others whose life narratives have been ignored for various reasons, typically due to their lack of conformity to more established writers and life writing texts. I am challenging traditional readings that have denied working people, women, and others a voice that is respected and analyzed for their merits and not simply through comparison to other life writing and/or historical record. By doing so, we can add greatly to our understanding of how subjectivity and purpose work within the genre of life writing.

Summary

Throughout the previous chapters, we have seen how writers, at times, incorporated established genres in order to enhance their life writing. All the writers chose a more public avenue for their writings, each seeking her own version of publication success. They used different literary genres for their goals to maneuver through the ideology and restrictions of their era. The genres are also quite varied, from Cullwick’s letters, to Johnston’s integration of multiple genres, Kenney’s heroic romance, and Smith’s Bildungsroman. All of the women in this study were able to craft their life writing into different forms for their own purposes. While their success is not always apparent, appreciating they had creative control over how they presented
their lives is important. By doing so, we avoid silencing them and challenge the traditional criteria for valuable life writing.

In Chapter 2, I examined the work of Hannah Cullwick to suggest that she used her life writing in order to discuss her relationship and her desires with her middle class lover/husband Arthur Munby. Through pointed asides and personal information, Cullwick shares her identity as a waged laborer who does not wish to conform to the status norms of a middle class wife after her marriage to Munby. Cullwick asserts her desire to maintain her working class status and the play-acting she and Munby had enjoyed in their relationship. This is especially telling as their relationship did not prosper with their marriage and co-habitation. Neither was happy with the adjustment, which they ended not long after their marriage when Cullwick moved, without Munby, to the countryside. It is these circumstances that highlight how Cullwick crafted her writing for personal expression. Notable is the longer narrative structure of the sections that I examined due to their epistolary form. Letters allowed for more detail and creativity as she had more time and privacy to compose her narrative and expand on her usual entries.

In Chapter 3, I discussed the use of life writing for literary advancement. Ellen Johnston produced a small life narrative piece attached to her series of poems and songs in order to establish her literary credibility. Johnston uses various literary elements in the form of dramatic tone, suicide by drowning, and direct address to the reader, to argue for her place in the literary community. She also employs multiple literary allusions, showcasing the extent of her awareness of literature to complete her presentation of her working class literary subjectivity. I argue that this is the natural outcome of her desire to achieve renown in a field that was essentially closed to her due to her class, gender, and political activism. While Johnston’s health and economic circumstances likely combined to prevent any further publication, her text did include a second
edition and had a lasting impact on her readers which suggests her strategies to present the persona she desired were successful.

In Chapter 4, I positioned life writing as a means of gaining political acceptance for militancy. Annie Kenney used her life writing in order to promote the Militant Suffrage Movement and Christabel Pankhurst more specifically. Kenney crafts her text as a traditional romance that casts Christabel as the hero in an epic struggle against patriarchy and the subjugation of women. By doing so, Kenney also suggests the importance and necessity of militarism, in the form of protests, arson, and general vandalism, since she notes that this is a war that could not be won with the peaceful demonstrations prevalent during the constitutional component of the suffrage movement. Throughout the text, Kenney subjugates her own role as the focus of her life writing to highlight the movement. This choice is appropriate for the type of hero she inhabits: the everyday hero. By crafting her life writing as a romance with two female heroes, Kenney shows how important the movement was, not only to her life, but to the success of the suffrage movement as well.

The final chapter focuses on Emma Smith’s life writing in order to examine a different method for working women to attempt to achieve literary credibility through their personal stories. In this case, Smith uses her tragic biography to connect her narrative to well-known Bildungsroman genre popular during her lifetime. Through her creative choices, Smith crafts a text in the Dickensian vein, where she accepts the negative aspects of her childhood while projecting her own innocence and acceptance of middle class norms. The focus on one genre, and one that more readily fits Smith’s life, produces a much more cohesive text than Johnston’s, but still not one that was able to procure her further publication. However, even this genre, I argue, could not completely account for the reality of Smith’s life. She must conclude her
narrative with the disappointments of a marriage that is not terribly fulfilling, suicide attempts, and subsequent institutionalization. These realities again highlight, much like they did for Johnston, the limits placed on working women who wished to join the literary community and did so through established literary genres.

**Limitations**

One of the difficult factors in analyzing these texts is the lack of primary sources for many of their biographies. While all have left some documentation, many left little verifiable information. These fragments have included poor relief data, references in other writers’ biographies, and visual depictions. As such, I had to rely on historical context and what little information was available to assess some of the more debatable biographical facts. For example, Johnston’s educational prowess is likely exaggerated due to the lack of possibilities available for a poor young girl in the mid 1800s. While this has been an obstacle, it has not hindered the final conclusions as I have stayed as near to close reading as possible. Thus, my conclusions are mainly based on the authors’ writing as opposed to biographical facts that are difficult to verify. The focus on subjectivity allowed me to present clear conclusions since I am interested in how the writers chose to present themselves in their narratives.

Another difficulty of this project is the limited number of texts available. As such, while it is clear that these four women manipulated their life narratives into forms appropriate for their needs, I cannot claim this is true for the entire category of Victorian working women’s life writing. As such, this dissertation is a case study of the available texts providing an in-depth analysis of the variety of strategies/methods of life narrating. Two main reasons account for the limited conclusions possible. First, the limited scope and length of the study required some exclusion in order to allow more depth for the authors discussed here. Second, there are only a
limited number of texts in this category. Men’s life writings by working as well as middle class authors are more common. This could be due to the actual larger number of writers or men’s writing being better preserved. In light of this issue, one of my ideas for future collections is to obtain additional texts that have not been published yet as well as those that I had to exclude due to practical concerns of space.

Future Research

One future area of research is to acquire some of the texts Burnett found and discarded while he was compiling his collections as I mentioned in the introduction. As Burnett dismissed any discrepancies based on gender,\(^6^9\) there is likely a wealth of information that could be garnered. He mentions acquiring approximately 200 manuscripts, many of which he chose not to include in his volumes on working people’s labor and childhood respectively. Because there is such a limited number of complete or semi-complete life writing texts by working women currently available, this could be an especially fruitful avenue to explore. By acquiring whatever texts are available, I could more readily ascertain if the elements of genre usage that I have found in the texts discussed in this study are widely used by working women life writers.

Another research topic worth pursuing is the reception of these texts at the time of publication. This very well could be a tricky endeavor as very little has been written about the texts at all, but seeing how contemporary readers viewed and responded to their work could further highlight the viability of their choices in genre and tropes that I have been analyzing at this point. Aside from noting the lack of further publications for Johnston and Smith, there is no way to see how well the general public appreciated their abilities without the reception history.

\(^{6^9}\) As discussed in the introduction, Barret suggests that there are no clear differences in life experience/narrative created by gender.
Since none of the women had further publications, it is likely their writings did not have much impact on readers; however, any information could add to the available scholarship.

Lastly, given that Stanley’s text is the only available version that compiles Cullwick’s seventeen years of diaries, it would be beneficial to studies of Cullwick to have an additional compilation. The likelihood that there are still various avenues of discussion available from the extensiveness of the writings suggests it would be a valuable path to follow. For this study, I would have to spend time at Trinity College’s Munby collection to access all the diaries. This would be an extensive research plan that could add greatly to Victorian Working Women’s life writing. While it is unclear what I could find, having a more complete version of Cullwick’s text would be worth the time and effort.
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