

**TAH HW Lucy Larcom (1824-1893) HW Name: \_\_\_\_\_ date \_\_\_\_\_**

Although Lucy Larcom was a well-published poet in her lifetime, she is best known today for writing *A New England Girlhood* (1889). This autobiography is a classic book about the age of industrialization and her role in it as a textile mill worker – beginning at age eleven.

She was born on May 5, 1824, in the then-rural town of Beverly, Massachusetts, north of Boston. Lucy's life was greatly affected when her father, Benjamin, died when she was just eight. From then on, the family struggled to maintain middle-class status. Social Security, life insurance, and other mechanisms to assist such families had yet to be created, and the financial fate of widows often was hard. Instead of taking the usual path of finding a stepfather for her eight children, Lois Larcom moved to Lowell, Massachusetts, where the older girls worked in the textile mills, while she ran a boarding house for mill workers.

New England was transforming from an agricultural economy to an industrial one, as Americans learned from English factories how to run water-powered looms that spun and wove fabric – a task that women formerly did at home on spinning wheels and foot-peddled weaving looms. Women understandably proved better at this factory work than men, and textile mills soon became the new nation's biggest employer of women. Most textile workers were teenage girls, often recruited from surrounding farms where female labor was not particularly valued.



Some companies even ran horse-drawn buses as far as Canada and brought back girls eager to earn their own living. They lived in boarding houses such as the one run by Lois Larcom or in college-like dormitories owned by the factories. Because the mills were run by water-power, not electricity, working days were short in winter. When the mills darkened, many young women sought to use the time for self-improvement. They hired professors and studied literature, music, and even botany by candlelight. Work was the main priority, however, Lucy was not unusual when she left school to enter millwork before she was even in her teens.

Larcom and others who wrote about mill life often said that the biggest shock was the noise. The world was much quieter before electric motors and gas-powered cars, and many millworkers became deaf at an early age. The machinery was dangerous, too, and more than one girl was accidentally scalped when her long hair got caught in a machine.

Child laborers usually started by sweeping up scrap cloth, broken thread, etc., and then moved on to deliver supplies for loom operators. In their early teens, most learned to run the spinning machines that made thread. Weaving at power looms usually was the employment pinnacle – but Lucy was exceptional. She started as a spinner, using the education her mother had given her, rose to become a bookkeeper.

As a distraction from the arduous labor at the mills, Larcom wrote many short stories and poems. Her first work was published in *Operative Magazine*, which was founded by her sisters for other machine operators. These women were so unusual in their thirst for education that other such publications also existed; the most famous is *Lowell Offering*. In 1843, Lucy Larcom's writing caught the attention of John Greenleaf Whittier, a nationally known poet and Quaker activist against slavery, and they became long-time friends.

After more than a decade in the mills, she took the big step of moving from New England in 1846; at 22, Lucy accompanied her sister Emeline and Emeline's new husband to the boomtown of St. Louis. Although she had little formal education, Lucy had learned enough from her mother and older sisters that she was hired as a teacher in nearby Illinois. She continued to write poetry, and in 1849, was recognized with inclusion in *Female Poets of America*. She managed to save enough from her teaching salary that she soon could afford to enroll at Monticello Female Seminary in Godfrey, Illinois. She graduated in 1852, having earned the credentials to teach at similar institutions back East.

Larcom then became a teacher at Wheaton Seminary in Norton, Massachusetts, while also continuing to write. When she won a major poetry contest in 1854, Whittier introduced her to his publishing contacts. Soon her poetry

appeared in the leading periodicals of her time, including *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, and *The New England Magazine*. She also anonymously edited three volumes of Whittier's work.

Like Whittier and most educated people in Massachusetts, Larcum was an abolitionist and rejoiced when Abraham Lincoln was elected president. She became more conservative as she aged, however, and did not support Massachusetts' Lucy Stone or other women's rights leaders. Her chief ambition throughout life was maintaining middle-class respectability, while also asserting women's right to economic independence via education. The fact that she never married shows how fragile such freedom was in her place and time: a woman surrendered virtually all her legal rights when she signed a marriage license; even the wages of her work belonged to her husband.

In 1889, Larcum published *A New England Girlhood*, which detailed her life as a Lowell mill worker. The book became her most famous work and is still in print today. She was 65 when she wrote it, and her reminiscences understandably emphasized the positive side of life in the nation's early textile mills. It nonetheless has served as a valuable record of this unusual time in American history, when factories recruited teenage girls, paid them relatively well, and even provided opportunities such as *Operative Magazine*.

In 1835, when she was 11 years old, Lucy Larcum's father died, and her mother moved the family from the coastal town of Beverly, Massachusetts, to Lowell. There, Lucy's mother ran a boardinghouse, and Lucy went to work in the mills. She was a steady contributor to the *Lowell Offering*, and while at Lowell developed a friendship with John Greenleaf Whittier. In later years she became a teacher and poet, eventually publishing several books, among them *A New England Girlhood*.

So I went to my first day's work in the mill with a light heart. The novelty of it made it seem easy, and it really was not hard, just to change the bobbins on the spinning-frames every three quarters of an hour or so, with half a dozen other little girls who were doing the same thing. When I came back at night, the family began to pity me for my long, tiresome day's work, but I laughed and said,--

"Why, it is nothing but fun. It is just like play."

And for a little while it was only a new amusement; I liked it better than going to school and "making believe" I was learning when I was not. And there was a great deal of play mixed with it. We were not occupied more than half the time. The intervals were spent frolicking around among the spinning-frames, teasing and talking to the older girls, or entertaining ourselves with the games and stories in a corner, or exploring with the overseer's permission, the mysteries of the carding-room, the dressing-room and the weaving-room.

There were compensations for being shut in to daily toil so early. The mill itself had its lessons for us. But it was not, and could not be, the right sort of life for a child, and we were happy in the knowledge that, at the longest, our employment was only to be temporary.

In the older times it was seldom said to little girls, as it always has been said to boys, that they ought to have some definite plan, while they were children, what to be and do when they were grown up. There was usually but one path open before them, to become good wives and housekeepers. And the ambition of most girls was to follow their mothers' footsteps in this direction; a natural and laudable ambition. But girls, as well as boys, must often have been conscious of their own peculiar capabilities,--must have desired to cultivate and make use of their individual powers. When I was growing up, they had already begun to be encouraged to do so. We were often told that it was our duty to develop any talent we might possess, or at least to learn how to do some one thing which the world needed, or which would make it a pleasanter world.

At this time I had learned to do a spinner's work, and I obtained permission to tend some frames that stood directly in front of the river-windows, with only them and the wall behind me, extending half the length of the mill,--and one young woman beside me, at the farther end of the row. She was a sober, mature person, who scarcely thought it worth her while to speak often to a child like me; and I was, when with strangers, rather a reserved girl; so I kept myself occupied with the river, my work, and my thoughts. . .

The printed regulations forbade us to bring books into the mill, so I made my window-seat into a small library of poetry, pasting its side all over with newspaper clippings. In those days we had only weekly papers, and they had always a "poet's corner," where standard writers were well represented, with anonymous ones, also. I was not, of course, much of a critic. I chose my verses for their sentiment, and because I wanted to commit them to memory; sometimes it was a long poem, sometimes a hymn, sometimes only a stray verse. . .

One great advantage which came to these many stranger girls through being brought together, away from their own homes, was that it taught them to go out of themselves, and enter into the lives of others. Home-life, when one always stays at home, is necessarily narrowing. That is one reason why so many women are petty and unthoughtful of any except their own family's interests. We have hardly begun to live until we can take in the idea of the whole human family as the one to which we truly belong. To me, it was an incalculable help to find myself among so many working-girls, all of us thrown upon our own resources, but thrown much more upon each others' sympathies.

Some of the girls could not believe that the Bible was meant to be counted among forbidden books. We all thought that the Scriptures had a right to go wherever we went, and that if we needed them anywhere, it was at our work. I evaded the law by carrying some leaves from a torn Testament in my pocket.

My grandfather came to see my mother once at about this time and visited the mills. When he had entered our room, and looked around for a moment, he took off his hat and made a low bow to the girls, first toward the right, and then toward the left. We were familiar with his courteous habits, partly due to his French descent; but we had never seen anybody bow to a room full of mill girls in that polite way, and some one of the family afterwards asked him why he did so. He looked a little surprised at the question, but answered promptly and with dignity, "I always take off my hat to ladies."

His courtesy was genuine. Still, we did not call ourselves ladies. We did not forget that we were working-girls, wearing coarse aprons suitable to our work, and that there was some danger of our becoming drudges. I know that sometimes the confinement of the mill became very wearisome to me. In the sweet June weather I would lean far out of the window, and try not to hear the unceasing clash of sound inside. Looking away to the hills, my whole stifled being would cry out

"Oh, that I had wings!"

Still I was there from choice, and

"The prison unto which we doom ourselves, No prison is." Questions:

1. How does Lucy Larcom think that the mill experience influenced the girls? \_\_\_\_\_

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2. How do you think it impacted her life and identity? \_\_\_\_\_

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3. What were the factory rules and the extent to which they could be bent? \_\_\_\_\_

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4. Did she believe that millwork was oppressive, or beneficial? \_\_\_\_\_

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5. How would you describe her religious outlook? \_\_\_\_\_

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6. What revolutionary changes occurred in women's education; do you find evidence of this in Larcom's text?

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