Chapter Five

Serving Superiors, Plowing Poverty: Manual Labourers

From the sphere of dressmakers we turn our attention to look at working class women – the world of manual labourers: domestic servants and field workers. Female manual labourers generally belonged to the impoverished strata of society: i.e. the working class. Novelists, journalists and critical thinkers did not really concern themselves with the trials and tribulations of these labouring women. There are comparatively less working-class heroine tales than the ‘governess-as-heroine’ novels. The unenviable situation of the governess and her precarious position in the Victorian household gathered much more sympathy and attention than the travails of the rough, usually uneducated or ill informed working class girl. With their assumed robust constitution, coarse language and behaviour, they were best left to do their work. It was commonly supposed that the working classes had always worked, and it was their lot in life to work and earn their bread.

This chapter focuses on women of the working classes who had to earn their bread by performing manual labour – especially in the twin categories of domestic servants and field labourers. Theresa M. McBride reasons that, ‘social and economic historians have ignored [domestic] servants because they performed what was traditionally women’s work which lay outside the most economic activities and had no ‘exchange’ value’.¹ She calls domestic service the ‘largest occupational category of women outside of agriculture’.²

² Ibid, p.11.
Novelists have conveniently employed servants – to use Bruce Robbins’s phrase – ‘to fill the margins of texts devoted to their superiors’. Literary tradition represents servants as ‘mere appendages of their masters’ who perform a functional role in the novels, as ‘messengers, and authorial mouthpieces, rhetorical “doublings” of the protagonist, accessories used to complicate or resolve the action’. Several novels include one or more servants whose presence is subtly felt in the novel. In *Pride and Prejudice*, it is widely acknowledged that Elizabeth Bennett’s perception of Darcy changed after her visit to Pemberley. Perhaps what is also noteworthy is that her conversation with the housekeeper, Mrs. Reynolds, provides her with a fresh insight into Darcy’s character. Mrs. Reynolds functions as an instrument of the plot when her opinion helps to bring the protagonists closer to each other by dislodging a part of Elizabeth’s entrenched prejudice against Darcy. Mrs. Reynolds takes pride in enumerating the virtues of her generous master, Mr. Darcy. She knows that she is lucky to have a master like Mr. Darcy who has never ever been rude to her. She praises him as the ‘best master’ and ‘best landlord’, claiming that all his servants and tenants would certify his virtues in a similar manner. She believes that some people call him proud only because of his reserved nature. Elizabeth reasons: ‘What praise is more valuable than the praise of an intelligent servant? As a brother, a landlord, a master, she considered how many people's happiness were in his guardianship!’ It shows how seriously the comments and judgement of a housekeeper are taken and how the housekeeper, being the insider, is expected to reveal the ‘true nature’ of the master and the ‘inside story’ of the household. It also shows how a housekeeper almost functioned as the mistress of the household when her employers were away. This idea is

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5 Ibid, p.x.
further endorsed in *Jane Eyre* where the housekeeper, Mrs. Fairfax, advertises and appoints Jane as the governess and welcomes Jane into Thornfield as her master, Mr. Rochester, is away. From Jane’s correspondence with Mrs. Fairfax, she had assumed that Mrs. Fairfax was the owner and consequently her employer, but on her arrival such assumptions are rectified. Unlike Mrs. Reynolds, Mrs. Fairfax does not lavish praise on her master, but gently cautions Jane about the violent history of the Rochester family, though she mentions lightly that he was ‘always civil’ to her. She informs her of Rochester’s reputation which, like Darcy’s, is a favourable one, of being a just and liberal landlord among his tenants. Grace Poole is apparently a seamstress in the household though, in actuality, she has been employed to take care of and keep under control the ‘madwoman in the attic’, Rochester’s first and hidden (lunatic) wife. Grace is apparently also expected to assist Leah, the housemaid, in her chores.

In Thomas Hardy’s novels rustics play a significant role often acting as catalysts to drive the action to its climax. In Hardy’s Preface to his *The Hand of Ethelberta*, he comments on the foregrounding of servants in the novel:

…to excite interest in a drama—if such a dignified word may be used in the connection—wherein servants were as important as, or more important than, their masters; wherein the drawing-room was sketched in many cases from the point of view of the servants’ hall. Such a reversal of the social foreground has, perhaps, since grown more welcome, and readers even of the finer crusted kind may now be disposed to pardon a writer for presenting the sons and daughters of Mr. and Mrs. Chickerel as beings who come within the scope of a congenial regard.\(^7\)

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This focuses on Hardy’s deliberate intention of paying attention to those who live on the social margins, those who usually do not matter, those who are meant to serve but whose feelings, opinions, existence, needs are seldom taken into consideration. Autobiographical elements may have cast a shadow on the characters of the novel (Hardy’s forefathers were masons, his mother was a maid and a cook); nonetheless, it is Hardy’s sensitivity to the servant class that shines through in the novel. Servants are not merely agents or instruments of the plot employed to propel action or express status, or be mentioned in passing. Hardy takes care to describe the Chickerel family at length, their appearances, their intelligence, their personal qualities, their feelings, their problems, their desires and their aspirations. He blurs the sharp lines demarcating class boundaries in making the genteel and beautiful heroine, Ethelberta, the daughter of a butler. Ethelberta has nine siblings and she employs two of her sisters as cooks and housemaids, while her brothers work as carpenters, house painters and page boy. Later another sister of hers, Picotee, gives up her job as pupil-teacher in Sandbourne and joins her family as governess to the children and as lady’s maid to Ethelberta. Her invalid mother keeps lodgers in their house due to pressing economic reasons. Ethelberta is apparently just another lodger in that house.

Ethelberta’s mother-in-law, Lady Petherwin’s maid, Mrs. Menlove, as her name suggests, is a compulsive flirt. She had served Lady Petherwin only for a period of three months, because of her ‘flightiness’, and later Menlove joins the Doncastle family. Ethelberta’s young brother Joey gets infatuated with the much older Menlove. Like many servants, Menlove overhears the talk at dinner tables and gossips about her social superiors. She calls her past mistress Ethelberta, an ‘awful flirt’. The servants (the housemaid, Menlove and the footmen) choose to keep themselves entertained by having a little game of ‘cat-and-
mice’ while the family is engaged at dinner with their guests; they swiftly dance and waltz across the room. When Menlove discovers the humble origins of Ethelberta, she gossips about it to Lord Mountclere’s valet, Mr. Tipman, who in turn informs his master. Lord Mountclere gives him strict instructions to keep it a secret and also sends a bribe to Mrs. Menlove to silence her. It is a glaring instance of how servants had the potential of spreading scandals and of ruining the social façade of their employers.

The narrator of Emile Bronte’s *Wuthering Heights* is a matronly housekeeper called Ellen (Nelly) Dean who not only narrates the major part of the story but is also a participant in it. At the beginning of the novel, we see her as the housekeeper in Thrushcross Grange, where she has served for eighteen years, first as lady’s maid to Catherine Earnshaw, then after Catherine’s death, as housekeeper. She has also been a nurse to Catherine’s daughter, the younger Catherine Linton. Nelly’s mother had been a nurse at Wuthering Heights, so Nelly grew up there with the Earnshaw children. The relationship between master and servants in *Wuthering Heights*, under old Mr. Earnshaw, appeared less distant and more cordial as Nelly is seen eating porridge with the children of the family. Lockwood observes that Nelly Dean has a cultivated manner of reflecting and her speech is almost free from ‘provincialisms’ which is quite unlike her social class. Nelly attributes it to her reading nearly all the books available in English in the Thrushcross Grange library. Critics have suspected the neutrality of Nelly Dean as a narrator, labeling her as ‘unreliable’ and doubting her role in the action of the story that she narrates. James Hafley accuses Nelly of being the ‘villain’ in the passionate and tragic love story of Catherine Earnshaw and Heathcliff. The charge levelled at Nelly is symptomatic of the suspicion cast upon many servant-narrators and of detecting their ‘hidden

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villainy’. James Newcomer’s incisive comment on Thady Quirk, the narrator of Maria Edgeworth’s *Castle Rackrent* could be similarly applied to other servant narrators like Nelly Dean, that of being ‘artful rather than artless, unsentimental rather than sentimental, shrewd rather than obtuse, clear-headed rather than confused, calculating rather than trusting’. In fact, some critics accuse Nelly Dean of ‘wilful malice’. The suspicion cast on servant-narrators is fuelled by the fact that servant-narratives suggest to many readers a sense of treacherous, misplaced social power, also the proverbial ‘matter-out-of-place’ syndrome, where the marginal, subjugated, almost invisible servant wields the power to control the narrative while inadvertently admitting his/her catalytic role in moving the plot.

The Victorian servant was almost indispensible in the administration of the large Victorian household. Interestingly, a considerable number of servants were employed in almost every household. These servants formed a distinct hierarchy beginning with those who came in contact with their masters/mistresses and ending with those who held the most menial position. Their duties and responsibilities were also clearly defined and they were supposed to maintain the restrictions and codes imposed on them.

Servants were inducted into the system at a very early age, usually when boys or girls were only eight or ten years old. A distance of thirty to fifty miles between their homes and employment houses was desirable as it would restrict their potential to spread rumours about the family, they would find it difficult to run back home, and it would the chances of ‘followers’ or suitors. Servants from a rural background were preferred as it was seen that they were easier to handle, more flexible and more diligent than urban youth. Servants were expected to follow strict rules and codes of conduct in the household.

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An example of rules for Victorian servants:  

1. When being spoken to, stand still, keeping your hands quiet and always look at the person speaking.
2. Never let your voice be heard by the ladies and gentlemen of the household unless they have spoken directly to you a question or statement which requires a response, at which time speak as little as possible.
3. In the presence of your mistress, never speak to another servant or person of your own rank or to a child unless only for necessity and then as little as possible and as quietly as possible.
4. Never begin to talk to the ladies or gentlemen unless to deliver a message or to ask a necessary question and then do it in as few words as possible.
5. Whenever possible, items that have been dropped, such as spectacles or handkerchiefs and other small items should be returned to their owners on a salver.
6. Always respond when you have received an order and always use the proper address: “Sir”, “Ma’am”, “Miss” or “Mrs” as the case may be.
7. Never offer your opinion to your employer.
8. Always “give room”: that is, if you encounter one of your betters in the house or on the stairs, you are to make yourself as invisible as possible, turning yourself toward the wall and averting your eyes.
9. Except in reply to a salutation offered, never say “good morning” or “goodnight” to your employer.
10. If you are required to walk with a lady or gentleman in order to carry packages or for any other reason, always keep a few paces back.
11. You are expected to be punctual to your place at mealtime.
12. You shall not receive any Relative, Visitor or Friend into the house nor shall you introduce any person into the Servant’s Hall without the consent of the Butler or Housekeeper.
13. Followers are strictly forbidden. Any member of the female staff who is found to be fraternising shall be immediately dismissed.
14. Expect that any breakages or damages in the house shall be deducted from your wages.

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Great households of Victorian gentility employed a fairly large number of servants. This servant body functioned smoothly in a hierarchical set up, with scope for promotions (in case of a sudden vacancy or with proven efficiency) and demotions (in case of proven misdemeanor or severe and repeated dereliction of duty). It is said that the Duke of Westminster had a staff of a hundred servants - 50 indoors and 50 outdoors. Exploitation of servants, resulting from the huge economic disparity, enabled such luxury on the part of employers.

In the hierarchy, servants could broadly be categorized as Upper Servants (those who reported to the Master or Mistress) and Lower Servants (those who reported to an Upper Servant like the Head Butler or Housekeeper). The Upper Servants usually included the Butler, Housekeeper, Valet, Lady’s Maid and Cook.

The Butler was generally considered the highest ranking official servant. He was responsible for the general management of the household affairs, sometimes even recruitment and dismissal of other male serving staff. In the absence of a House Steward, he kept accounts of the work done by male servants and the salary due to them.

The Valet was the gentlemen’s personal assistant, entrusted with the care of the gentleman’s clothes, running his bath and so on.

Ranking below the Butler but sometimes earning more than him, the Cook or the Chef reigned supreme in the kitchen, cooking for his masters and their guests, while an Undercook prepared meals for all the domestic staff. The Cook prepared the menu for luncheon and dinner, which the mistress would sometimes oversee and suggest variations. The post of a Cook could be filled by either a male staff or a female one. Being a prestigious position, all kitchen maids and under cooks would aspire to be promoted to the position of a Cook. Almost
an apprentice to the Cook, the Undercook was badly paid and had to work his/her way to the Chef’s position.

Among outdoor servants, the First Footman was used to represent the estate’s grandeur. His tall and handsome person was a major consideration for his employment. He assisted the butler in the house, served meals to his masters and even accompanied the mistress in her shopping excursions. He was not expected to do heavy work like carrying water or coal. The Second Footman seemed to be an apprentice to the First Footman. The ordinary Footman was a menial staff, expected to open doors, to wait at tables, and to run errands as and when required. A young boy, usually a teenager, was apprenticed below the footman as a Page, and expected to do as ordered.

The Coachman or Head Groom or Stable Master was given the responsibility of driving a pair of horses, and of the management of the stables. The Groom was placed under him and was expected to care for the horses and saddle the horses. The Stable Boy had to clean the stables. A Boot Boy was employed in grand households to polish the shoes of his masters.

Like the Head Groom, the Head Gardener was stationed outside the house, and his position of authority rose from the upkeep of the large grounds of the estate.

The Game Keepers had to maintain the poultry and other birds of the estate. The Ground Keepers would cut trees, plant flowers, mow the grass and they had to report to the Head Gardener. The Gate Keeper, as the name suggests, had to guard the main entrance to the estate.
The female servants were supervised by the Housekeeper who was also entrusted with the overall administration of the household but her pay was usually lower than the Butler’s. Like her male counterpart, she could recruit and dismiss the female employees under her.

Below the housekeeper, was the Lady’s Maid who functioned as the private assistant to the lady of the house. Her duties included assisting her mistress to dress, caring for the mistress’s clothes, being a general companion to the mistress and even running secretarial errands for her mistress. She packed and unpacked for the mistress while travelling, arranged necessities for walking, driving or riding, and was also required to care for the mistress’s pets if any. The Valet was the male equivalent of the Lady’s Maid.

The Head Nurse supervised the nurses under her and was in charge of the nursery. She was mainly responsible for the well-being of the children of the house. The Nursery Maid had to raise and nurture the infants in the house.

Chamber Maids had to clean the bedrooms of the employers whereas the Parlour Maids were supposed to clean and maintain sitting rooms, drawing rooms, the library or study of the house.

The House Maid, sometimes called the general servant, or the ‘maid-of-all-work’ (or even the House Wife in some cases) had general and varied duties. The Kitchen Maid assisted in kitchen work. Below the kitchen maid was the scullery maid, who would wash dishes; then the laundry maid, employed for washing and ironing of clothes.

The female staff outnumbered their male counterparts and performed most of the heavy and actual work. While the males were ‘visible’ as part of a family’s social standing, the females were expected to be largely invisible. Nursery Maids rarely left the nursery, Kitchen Maids remained in the kitchen below stairs, house maids and parlour maids were also
expected to keep out of sight. In Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre*, Mrs. Fairfax, the housekeeper, gently welcomes the governess, Jane Eyre, by saying that she was ‘glad’ to get a companion in the governess. She explains to Jane ‘you see, they are only servants, and one can’t converse with them on terms of equality; one must keep them at due distance for fear of losing one’s authority.’

The hierarchy among servants was scrupulously followed and lower servants were expected to show deference not only to the owners of the house but also to the upper servants and abide by the hierarchy strictly. This was successfully achieved as promotions to the privileged positions of Butler and Housekeeper could be gained on ascending the service ladder successfully.

Mrs. Beeton in her *Book of Household Management*, published in 1861, enlisted the order of the ‘Upper Ten’ and the ‘Lower Five’ category of servants. The ‘Upper’ category included Butlers, Wine Butlers, Under Butlers, Grooms, Valets, Housekeepers, Ladies’ Maids, Housemaids, and any other servants with whom the masters and mistresses came into contact. All the others were grouped under the ‘Lower Five’ who ate and socialized separately, and even wore totally dissimilar clothes. Servants of large and established households were marked by their uniforms. By 1880s, the caps and aprons of the servants were meant to reveal the rank of the wearer: housemaid, cook, nurse, chamber maid, parlour maid, nurse and so on. Butlers and Housekeepers were exempt from wearing uniforms due to their privileged position in the domestic staff hierarchy. The ‘Upper’ category could be allowed to follow fashion but not the ‘Lower’ group. It has been suggested that hierarchy was more severely maintained downstairs in the servants’ hall than among the masters!

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The presence of servant hierarchy can be plainly seen in *Esther Waters*. Housemaids stand at the door listening to the Cook. On her arrival, when Esther refuses to prepare the vegetables as ordered by the Cook, she is warned by the others to win the Cook over to her side if she wishes to stay in that house. The Cook, Mrs. Latch, is a figure of authority who cannot be trifled with. Miss Grover, the lady’s maid, talks to Esther Waters with an air of superiority as she is conscious of her higher rank in comparison to the kitchen maid. Given the importance accorded to gambling (betting on race horses) in that household, it is not surprising that Ward, the Head Groom, was the cynosure of all servants. He, being a jockey, had to maintain his weight (it had to be less than six stone), so he avoided desserts at the breakfast table. His ‘diminutive stature’ possibly made him effective in his job.

Esther tries to please Mrs. Latch to induce the cook to teach her how to make pastry and jellies. Esther is determined to better her lot in life by learning how to cook, so that she might be equipped for a higher post in her next place of work. Mrs. Latch jealously guarded her trade secrets and either sent Esther out of the kitchen when she was mixing the ingredients for the jellies or made her do scullery jobs so that Esther could not learn from her cooking. The Cook had decided that no kitchen maid should unseat her and so had already dismissed three previous assistants in the previous four months. Esther’s aspiration of becoming a cook remains unfulfilled and she works as a general servant or ‘maid-of-all-work’ for the better part of her life.

Before her proper situation as a kitchen maid, Esther had worked in filthy lodging houses from early morning to late in the evening as a ‘slavey’. The term slavey was used to denote a young servant girl who would undertake to perform all kinds of domestic chores from morning to night. Slaveys or untrained servants were given all sorts of menial work.
Pauperized girls from the workhouse could become ‘slaveys’. Lodging houses usually did not ask for a ‘character’ before inducting a ‘slavey’. Bruce Robbins defines a ‘character’ as ‘a statement in which one employer described to another employer the habits and qualities of a servant, vouching for and thus controlling such key traits as honesty, chastity, sobriety, and industriousness’. A ‘character’ thus functioned as a ‘labour passport’ or a ‘work permit’. The ‘slavey’ was probably the lowest in the hierarchy of servants, without the protection of a decent household and even a proper employer. The nature of their jobs being short term and irregular, they could be hired and fired at random. As a slavey, Esther performed varied chores like that of ‘scrubbing grates, preparing bacon and eggs, cooking chops, and making beds’. When two of her mistresses in succession ‘had been sold up’ and other rooms in her neighbourhood were ‘unlet’, Esther could not find work as a slavey.

Esther Waters, on entering Woodview, is impressed by the ‘white-capped servants’ who look elegant to her in the luxurious and grand kitchen of her employer’s house. The two housemaids wear print dresses. *Esther Waters* opens with Esther about to enter into service as a kitchen maid. Before reaching her future employer’s household, she thinks of her personal deficiencies. Her mind is full of ideas about what other servants wear and what code of conduct is imposed upon them in such households. Her own clothes appear shabby to her as she presumes that ‘housemaids in places like Woodview always changed their dresses twice a day, and on Sundays went out in silk mantles and hats in the newest fashion. As for the lady’s-maid, she of course had all her mistress’s clothes, and walked with the butler’.

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14 Ibid, p.25.
15 Ibid, pp.4-5.
The social background of the servants was often quite varied. For instance, Mrs. Fairfax’s dead husband was a clergyman and a distant maternal relative of Mr. Rochester. Esther Waters was the daughter of John Waters, a dealer in artistic wares who sold glass, jewellery and furniture. At the age of seventeen, Esther was compelled to go into service as her step-father, a painter of engines, asked her to leave his house and fend for herself. Nelly Dean’s mother was a nurse. Changing class patterns can be seen in the case of Mrs. Barfield, the mistress of Woodview, who was the daughter of a farmer.

Education was not a prerequisite for a servant. Esther Waters could not read but she is warned that she would have to mind her “p’s and q’s” to be accepted as a kitchen maid. Formal education or literacy was not very important but polished manners were essential. In the same Woodview household, Sarah Tucker, the upper-housemaid, is a ‘wonderful reader’, who has a good memory and can recall ‘all the names’ (that is, of the characters) of all the stories she has read in a popular ‘penny weekly’ magazine called the Bow Bells.

To go into service a servant required references, that is, a recommendation and a ‘character’ from previous employers. The awarding of certificates of character was meant to protect the employer from the wiles of a corrupt or dangerous servant, and was a method of bringing servants under control. Servants could not escape or quit unceremoniously as they would be denied a ‘character’ in such circumstances. Knowing that without a ‘character’, it would be nearly impossible to get employment in any household, the good natured Mrs. Barfield, Esther Waters’s mistress, does not deny Esther a ‘character’ even after she learns of the unmarried Esther’s pregnancy.
A housemaid had to undertake varied household chores like sweeping rooms and staircases, carrying hot water for family and guests (in the morning, then before lunch, again before dinner), dusting and tidying bedrooms (at least twice or thrice a day), making beds (similarly twice or thrice a day), refilling coal buckets, lighting and re lighting bedroom fires, cleaning glass and china in the drawing and dining room, among several other odd jobs. Usually a young, fit and active girl was employed as a general servant.

When guests came to the house for visiting or parties, the work load would increase. In *Esther Waters*, the cook, Mrs. Latch, grumbles that six guests were expected to come for dinner and she is alone, that is, without a kitchen maid, arranging and preparing dinner. A house maid helps her with the chores of the kitchen maid. Mrs. Latch fills the oven-fresh tartlets with jam while she orders Esther to prepare the vegetables.

Next morning Esther first has to serve breakfast to the stable hands, as they have to leave early for their outdoor work, and then to the other servants. She had to wash plates and knives, clean, cut and chop vegetables, fill saucepans with water and fetch coal for the fire. On her first day at work, Esther was rebuked for being unable to distinguish between the plates reserved for the masters and the plates meant for the servants.

The servants in the Woodview household were happy with the food they got to eat. Beef steak pudding, potatoes, greens, and desserts like pudding and currant tart were devoured for dinner and the upper servants got to relish a leg of mutton. All the servants sitting down to dine also had beer to drink. The Woodview household, engaged in betting on horses, was in a congratulatory mood when their horse Silver Braid won. Orders were given that the servants could drink as much as they wanted. Mutton, beefsteak pudding and cheese
were washed down with beer. Proper food and drink was one of the comforts of domestic service.

Studies suggest that the salaries of servants varied greatly from household to household depending on the size of the house, the economic standing of the employer, the servant’s capabilities, looks, attitude, references and past experience. Salaries were meagre but nearly all servants were residents in their employers’ houses, therefore they benefited from rooms, food, and even clothes. Their typical work schedule was sixteen hours a day, seven days a week. As they worked to survive, they did not demand space and time for leisure, recreation or entertainment. Moore’s Esther Waters is paid her salary quarterly. Like many servants, the kitchen maid Esther had to send her wages home, early in the novel, to support her family with her earnings. She was also petrified of being unable to ‘keep the place’, meaning ‘sustain her job’.

As a general servant for Mrs. Bingley, Esther works seventeen hours a day and is paid sixteen pounds a year. Servants were generally expected to work for sixteen to even twenty hours a day. A House Maid or General servant could start at six in the morning and retire to bed past eleven thirty at night. Servants were generally not given regular or fixed relaxation hours, and it was expected that they would be available at all hours of the day and night. They had to ask for permission even if they had to go out for a short duration. The concept of a Sunday off for servants slowly crept in towards the end of the nineteenth century. Church going was viewed variably a means of socializing for servants as well as, but sometimes they were irked by the restrictions that the employer’s family placed on them on Sundays. As servants would live in their employers’ homes, they would be given a week’s (or two) holiday in a year to visit their homes but they were supposed to pay for their travel through their
savings. When Esther works as a general servant for a lonely spinster, Miss Rice, she manages to get some free time for herself, between the minimal household chores and errands for note paper, blotting paper, stamps, grocery, or to post letters.

Domestic servants were susceptible to accidents like a fall on the stairs, or cuts and burns and even scalding. Most employers did not bother about the home safety of servants as the masters were not exposed to such risks. Frequently domestic servants complained of anaemia, digestive and nervous disorders as a result of the indoor nature of their work, the drudgery of their work and the very long hours of their work. Servants were aggrieved about their monotonous work schedule, lack of control over the pattern and pressure of work, and their low pay. Minor and short term illnesses of servants would be taken care of in the master’s house but servants or their families would have to bear the effects of long term illness. Servants had to support themselves when they were between situations, and some would be compelled to work without wages for the sake of board and lodgings till they found a paying job. Charitable institutions like ‘The Female Servants’ Home Society for the Encouragement of Faithful Female Servants’ (established in 1836) provided hostels for a limited number of maids who were left both homeless and temporarily jobless.

One morning Esther complains of severe headache and says that she had not slept the entire night, so she would be unable to report for duty that day, but her roommate Margaret reminds her: ‘That’s the worst of being a servant. Well or ill, it makes no matter.’\textsuperscript{16} Esther is obliged to do downstairs and perform her regular chores. As a general servant or ‘maid-of-all-work’, the heavy manual labour for seventeen long hours a day drains Esther of all energy. A few minutes rest after dinner makes her aware of the demanding nature of her work and the ‘painful weariness’ of her limbs made the task of beating carpets or sweeping down stairs too

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid, p.71.
heavy to carry out. Her mistress, Mrs. Bingley, could not tolerate idleness in a servant and coming into the kitchen would demand to know: ‘Now, Esther, is there nothing for you to do?’\(^\text{17}\) An exhausting fourteen hours of toil made the last three hours too difficult to get through and, at night, she would be ‘too tired to rest’, contorting in body ache, a clear symptom of being overworked. When her mistress, Mrs. Bingley, demands to know how Esther spends her wages, Esther gets offended and she takes the opportunity to quit that service as ‘her whole body cried for rest, she must have rest’. \(^\text{18}\) On quitting the Bingleys, Esther has to give a month’s ‘warning’ and serve during the notice period.

As young girls left their homes to work and live in their employers’ houses, they often suffered from loneliness. This egged many servant girls to get involved in relationships which could never evolve into marriage. They would go out of their employer’s houses to run errands or attend church or go for walks and young men would befriend them. Other than these outsiders, servant girls were also seduced into having private liaisons with the sons and guests and young men in the family or with the other males employed by the family. Babies abandoned by the bushes were presumed to belong to these servant girls. Esther Waters receives the attention of the cook’s son William Latch, who seduces her, promising marriage, and later Esther discovers that she has become pregnant. William, in the meanwhile, has eloped with another girl, a cousin of his master. Learning of her pregnancy, her fellow servants, who had earlier teased Esther for her religiosity, become sympathetic to her. Esther’s mistress, Mrs. Barfield, feels sorry for Esther but has to send her away as Esther would set a bad example to other servant girls.

\(^{\text{18}}\) Ibid, p. 155.
Depending on the stature of the family, the relationship between master and servants differed from household to household, from being very formal and distant to one of almost kinship and friendliness. Esther Waters found a sympathetic employer in Mrs. Barfield, as they also shared similar religious beliefs. Her employer’s kindness and soft spoken nature moved Esther. Mrs. Barfield would collect all her female staff and instruct them about religion on Sunday afternoons. On learning of Esther’s illiteracy, she offered to teach Esther how to read and write but these lessons did not help Esther much as she was a slow learner. Before leaving Woodview, Esther, with some justification, calls Mrs. Barfield ‘the best mistress a servant ever had’. Mrs. Barfield’s goodness and kindness partly explains why the servants had nicknamed her ‘the Saint’.

With Miss Rice, Esther shares a warm, comfortable and pleasant relationship. At the time of her recruitment, Miss Rice wants to pay fourteen pounds to her servant, but on learning of Esther’s pressing needs and her only alternative of entering the workhouse, she agrees to pay Esther sixteen pounds to save Esther from being forced to enter the workhouse. Both the mistress and the servant were ‘quiet, instinctive Englishwomen’ who shared ‘strong, warm natures’; both maintained a formal and reserved relationship for quite some time before they could put it aside. Gradually Esther became protective and caring about her mistress’s health and money. Both took an interest in each other’s personal lives, Esther hoping that Miss Rice’s long conversations with Mr. Alden, the fashionably attired young novelist, would only be about books and not be an unrequited love from her mistress’ end; while Miss Rice was concerned on seeing Esther visibly disturbed. The mistress tried to lessen the resentment Esther felt towards her son’s father, William, and ultimately was satisfied to learn that Esther had decided to move in with William and marry him after his divorce. Miss Rice listened

19 Ibid, p.83.
patiently to Esther’s troubles and comforted her. On parting from her mistress, Esther impulsively kisses her, forgetting class boundaries, but such is the tenderness of their relation that Miss Rice does not take offence.

Esther may have faced sudden dismissals but nearly all her employers were satisfied with her work and her mistresses were generally sympathetic to her, supplying her with excellent ‘characters’ while mourning the loss of a good servant. Esther’s career begins with Woodview and she comes back to Woodview as a widow. Both mistress and maid are seen to go for long walks together and they attend prayer meetings together. The fondness she had for Mrs. Barfield remains and the novel ends on a poetic note with a former kitchen maid returning after years and staying on in the house almost as an old acquaintance and a companion to her mistress. The two women live in Woodview ‘more like friends and less like mistress and maid’. Esther accepts Woodview as a ‘final stage’ in her life and does not desire any change, nor does she find life there lonely anymore. Her return is almost like a homecoming for Esther.

Domestic servants living in the employer’s household could suffer from the pangs of alienation at living the life of an ‘internal exile’. Donald D. Stone is struck by what he calls, ‘the absence’ in Hardy’s fiction of ‘home and all that the word represents to other Victorian novelists’. Critic John Bayley notices that ‘there are no homes in Hardy’. A substantial part of Ethelberta’s journey takes the form of a quest for a house, where she can play the role of a fashionable mistress and support her large family by letting them live with her. She wants them to live incognito in that house, appearing as her servants in front of society, and as her

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family in private. It would give them the opportunity of living together, as well as afford a possibility for the realization of their desire of a home. It would also lessen the degradation of serving in another’s household. This homelessness or a ‘no home, no anchorage’ status is especially true of the Victorian servant class who live in their employers’ houses, but seldom have homes of their own to go back to. Mrs. Chickerel bemoans the predicament of her husband, the butler, who ‘never feels at home except in somebody else’s house, and is nervous and quite a stranger in his own. Sich is the fatal effects of service!’

Servants, like governesses, lived in their employer’s houses, but with the acute awareness of the fact that the house where they served, worked, ate, lived and slept was not theirs. Servants were living in the house, seemingly as insiders, yet they were in exile from the warmth and comfort of their own homes.

It was not uncommon for a lady to re-name her servants if she was not pleased with their names. Sometimes ladies also chose to re-name their servants by giving them such names as they deemed fit or they could easily recall. Some employers took their servants along with them to Church. While walking, the servants walked behind, usually being ordered into a uniform to demarcate their difference from the family. They also sat in a separate pew at the back of the Church. In Hardy’s *Tess of the d’Urberville*, Angel Clare’s father insists that the entire household, including the servants, attend church.

Employers always suffered from the anxiety of the servant acting as a spy, or being in a position to blackmail the employers, or letting in thieves into the house. The employer’s reputation and security was at risk in the hands of the servants. Nineteenth-century periodicals and household manuals warn against the spying and eavesdropping of servants. Mary

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Elizabeth Braddon refers to the lady’s maid as one of the most ‘privileged spies’ in *Lady Audley’s Secret*. The critic Brian W. McCuskey comments: ‘Privacy, one of the cornerstones of Victorian domestic ideology, remains under siege as long as the family remains under surveillance…. Through servant’s curiosity and gossip, the private affairs of the family become public knowledge: the master’s business interests are disclosed, the mistress’ confidences broadcast, the daughter’s flirtations and son’s debts exposed.’

Servants could be dismissed from their jobs on grounds of immorality, drunkenness, misbehaviour, insolence and disobedience to their betters as well as for utterly callous work. As Nicola warns Louka in Shaw’s *Arms and the Man*, servants could be dismissed if they revealed the secrets of the family or the gossip they overheard or the scandals they had been witness to; in such cases, the servant would be charged with lying and discharged from service. Servants were conveniently put to blame in order to make situations comfortable for their masters. On entering Woodview, Esther Waters gets to know that a stable hand had been fired because ‘he’d tell every blessed thing that was done in the stables’ after drinking in the Red Lion Inn. Gambling and betting on race horses was common, hence the secrets of the stables had to be maintained strictly. This abrupt and sudden dismissal is termed as being the ‘worst’ aspect of servant life by Margaret Gale, who was very friendly with the dismissed Jim Story, and would have liked to marry him. ‘They sent Jim away just as if he was a dog’, Margaret justly complains.

Learning of Esther’s pregnancy, Mrs. Barfield discharges Esther who has no place to go to except her home. Her act of kindness to Esther, in giving her money to help her through

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26 *Esther Waters*, p.6.

her pregnancy, was probably unusual for a mistress in similar circumstances. She offers Esther a service (in future) in that very house should Esther need one and provided Woodview had a vacancy for a servant. This willingness to accept Esther back shows the mistress’ generosity and also Esther’s success in proving herself to be an efficient and obedient servant.

The news of her pregnancy cost Esther her job of a kitchen maid, later she is dismissed from the Trubner family when they learn that she has an illegitimate son. Her earlier employer, Mrs. Barfield, is severely blamed for giving a ‘character’ to an immoral girl like Esther and Esther feels saddened by the ‘unfeeling’ nature of her employers. Esther realizes that, in future, she would have to keep the existence of her son a secret if she wishes to get a job and retain it.

In another rich household in West End, Esther works for two years but gets dismissed unceremoniously when she shows the mistress of the house a declaration of love written to her by the son of the family, Master Harry. He had spoken to her twice and his school-boy infatuation with the pretty Esther cost Esther her job. The mistress claims to be sorry to ‘part’ with her, but decides that she can no longer keep her, and tells her to leave that very day by paying her a month’s wages. She gives Esther a letter of recommendation but the unhappy circumstance reveals the vulnerability of the servant who could lose her job through no fault of hers. Her mistress’ mutterings about the danger of hiring good looking servants stress on how attractiveness was considered a disadvantage for both the servant girl and the governess, as it would be likely to tempt the susceptible male of the Victorian family. When Esther hears of any vacancy, she goes to offer her services but she gets refused for varied reasons ranging from her height, to her good looks, and even her religious beliefs. In the registry office she is
told: ‘If you were only an inch or two taller I could get you a dozen places as housemaid; tall servants are the fashion.’

On her return home from Woodview, Esther is admired by her younger siblings as she looks ‘grand’ to them. Domestic service helps her to live a healthy life and the food that she got at her employer’s place was better than what she could have got in her own home. Her step-father is also impressed by her fine looks and believes that service has proved to be good for her. He encourages his daughter Jenny to go into service as ‘There’s nothing like service for a girl’. Esther was obliged to pay rent to her step-father and give him money to buy beer; but he would get drunk and ill treat both Esther and her mother. Esther is forced to move to lodgings near the hospital to safeguard her limited savings (from her drunken and greedy step father) for the sake of her unborn child.

When the employers left their homes periodically for travelling elsewhere, servants breathed a sigh of relief and enjoyed the free time. Food was not cooked, so servants were given an extra stipend. They could save this money if they got invited to other servants’ houses to eat with them. There being an acute shortage of recreational activities for servants, this poor class got involved in such thrills as gambling, or betting on race horses. Mrs. Latch laments that betting is the curse of servant life. Servants were easily lured by the opportunity to earn quick money and the anticipation and excitement offered by horse racing. When the employer’s family is absent from Woodview, Esther gets more free time than she can manage. At first she tried to absorb the scenic beauty of nature around her, later she began to feel

28 Ibid, p.163.
29 Ibid, p.96.
lonely and this leisure brought in monotony and boredom. All Esther could do was to keep herself occupied with sewing by the kitchen window or taking a walk up the hills.

Bruce Robbins in his path breaking literary, sociological and cultural analysis, *The Servant’s Hand: English Fiction from Below*, critically looks at the representations of servants in literature. He argues that the ‘prefabricated tropes’ of servants are only represented for ‘their effects’. They are employed as ‘expository prologues, oracular messengers, and authorial mouthpieces, rhetorical “doublings” of the protagonist, accessories used to complicate or resolve the action’.30

Domestic servants were often designated by the term ‘hands’. Hands symbolized menial work. The contrast between the little, white, smooth, soft, perfumed hand of a lady and the large, rough, red, work-hardened hands of servants and other working girls intrigued Victorian poet and writer, A. J. Munby. Munby’s acute interest in working class girls make his collection of diaries, letters, drawings and photographs, a precious source for social historians. His relationship with a ‘maid-of-all-work’ Hannah Cullwick, whom he later secretly married, was due to his fascination with labour and with servant class girls. The inclination of appropriating labourers as ‘hands’ refers not just to the obvious utility of that body part, or its proverbial use in phrases like ‘helping hands’ or ‘hands that serve’, but also to a disturbing notion that, for the class of manual labourers, their human existence does not matter, they are only ‘hands that toil’, or hands that accomplish work and make their superior’s life more comfortable. The critic Leonore Davidoff explains: ‘the Hands were the unthinking, unfeeling “doer”, without characteristics of sex, age, or other identity.’31 Dickens in *Hard Times* derides the dehumanizing tendency in referring to the workers as ‘hands’ and

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he describes the hands as ‘a race who would have found more favour with some people, if Providence had seen fit to make them only hands, or, like the lower creatures of the seashore, only hands and stomachs’.  

Dickens’s Bounderby refers to his workforce as Coketown Hands and does not wish to think of them as anything else but hands. Bruce Robbins speculates on the importance given to hands: ‘In a servant’s “brawny, brick red, coarse-grained (work hardened) hand” Munby admired what his age admired…. the signs of work accomplished, productive value signified and stored up in the hand’s strength, size, redness, dirt.’  

Hardy makes a pertinent comment in The Woodlanders, in connection with the bruised hand of Marty South: ‘As with so many right hands born to manual labour, there was nothing in its fundamental shape to bear out the physiological conventionalism that gradations of birth, gentle or mean, show themselves primarily in the form of this member.’

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‘Wet Nurse with Child’, a portrait by Alexey Venetsianov, 1830

It was supposed that servant girls were prone to getting ‘in trouble’, that is, giving birth to babies out of wedlock. Though followers were discouraged, they often met young men who befriended them. It was seldom acknowledged in public, but known in private that many young men often entered into relationships with one of the servant girls of their household. If the girl got pregnant, she would abruptly be dismissed from service. As Leonore Davidoff observes, ‘The lonely monotonous life in service meant that the girls were vulnerable to the attentions of the master, the son, and visitors to the house, or other men who saw them in the street and offered them treats in return for sexual favours.’\textsuperscript{35} Victorian servants who doubled up as prostitutes or those who offered sexual favours in lieu of gifts, were commonly known as ‘dolly mops’. Abandoned babies by the bushes were always attributed to some unwed servant girl. Mrs. Spires, in \textit{Esther Waters}, comments on the frequent nature of cases where unwed mothers go out as wet nurses leaving their babies with her and she recounts to Esther the tale of a servant girl who had come to leave her third child with her, though the earlier two had already died presumably at that ‘baby farm’.

In the advanced stages of her pregnancy, Esther had to be ‘confined’ in a ‘Lying Hospital’. After the birth of her son, she enquires, at the Hospital, for a ‘situation’ as a wet nurse. Wet nursing was rampant in Victorian England where upper class and aristocratic families hired poor lower class women to breastfeed their child. In Dickens’ novel \textit{Dombey and Son} (1848), Mr. Dombey, a prosperous industrialist, hires a lower-class wet nurse, Polly, for his only son. He cautions her about becoming too attached to his child and reiterates that wet nursing was simply a matter of ‘bargain and sale’, a commercial ‘hiring and letting’, so it would be better for all concerned if the nurse chose to forget the child after the period of

\textsuperscript{35} Leonore Davidoff and Ruth Hawthorn, \textit{A Day in the Life of a Victorian Domestic Servant}, pp.86-88.
nursing is over. This highlights the economic nature of wet nursing and tries to erase all other aspects like the physical (the transmission of diseases from wet nurse to baby or vice versa), the mythical (it was believed that some characteristics of the wet nurse passed to the child through the milk) and the emotional (nursing the child for many months could make a woman love the infant as her own, especially if her baby had died, of neglect and ‘hand feeding’). Wet nurses had to be carefully observed and regulated so that the babies of high born women did not suffer. The cruel aspect of wet nursing lay in the fact that the wet nurse could not breast feed her own child, which had to be given over to some other woman who would bottle-feed the child. A high mortality rate was noted in these poor and neglected infants. Critics of wet nursing like Rev. Sydney Godolphin Osborne attacked the wet nurse system due to its propensity to devastate the life of the infants of the wet nurse.

Esther gets a situation as a wet nurse through the Hospital. She fulfils the criteria of being healthy and having a healthy baby. Her salary of fifteen shillings a week disappoints her as the usual remuneration was one pound a week. Being engaged on the doctor’s testimony, Esther puts her child ‘out to nurse’, to a Mrs. Spires, for six shillings a week. Esther is treated to sumptuous meals and given good in-between snacks like sandwiches and drinks but ‘something jarred’ and, to Esther, ‘such constant mealing did not seem natural, and her self-respect was wounded; she hated her position in the house’ but her only consolation was earning for the sake of her own child. She was constantly monitored and never allowed to go out alone except for a limited walk for the upkeep of her health. She is not allowed to go and visit her child even after a fortnight and her mind revolts against her employer, who was so excessively concerned about her own child, but failed to show any human sympathy for Esther’s child or even Esther’s needs as a mother. The housemaid informs Esther that before

36 *Esther Waters*, p.135.
Esther, the infant had two wet nurses and both their babies had died. Esther realizes with a shock that this system demanded ‘a life for a life’ and sometimes even more, like in this case, where two children of poor wet nurses had been ‘sacrificed’ to save this rich woman’s child. Esther feels threatened by the implication that it is probably now Esther’s turn to give up the life of her lovely boy for her employer’s child. On hearing of her son’s illness, Esther walks out on her mistress in desperation. She is not given her salary and her mistress tries to intimidate her but she does not buckle under pressure. Her mistress views the child of the wet nurse as an unnecessary baggage and so she declares: ‘Next time I engage a nurse I’ll try to get one who has lost her baby, and then there’ll be no bother.’ The confrontation between Esther and her mistress shows both Esther’s outspoken defiance as well as her extreme anxiety. When her mistress calls Esther’s son a ‘drag’ on the mother, whom Esther would never be able to bring up on account of her poverty and its illegitimacy, Esther retaliates by exposing the flaws of the rich mother, her mistress, who has refused to nurse her own child, and is indifferent to the plight of the separated child of the wet nurse. She accuses her mistress, not wholly unjustly, of engaging in a sort of conspiracy to kill the child of the wet nurse: ‘fine folks like you pays the money, and Mrs. Spires and her like gets rid of the poor little things. Change the milk a few times, a little neglect, and the poor servant-girl is spared the trouble of bringing up her baby and can make a handsome child of the rich woman’s little starveling.’ Esther’s angry remonstration is an indictment of the system of wet nursing which often caused the poor wet nurse to lose her own child. Post this wet nursing experience, Esther has to go to the workhouse, and then she mostly gets employment as a general servant. Her pay of sixteen pounds a year is barely enough to make ends meet but Mrs. Jones, a lonely

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37 Ibid, p.140.
38 Ibid, p.141.
widow, takes care of her son, for five shillings a week, which enables both the mother and son to survive.

When Tess’ mother sends her to Mrs. d’Urberville, hoping that Tess’s fortune would be made there, Tess is given the responsibility of the management of the poultry farm. Her childhood wish of becoming a teacher gets aborted in carrying out her familial duties. At Trantridge poultry farm, she gets appointed as ‘supervisor, purveyor, nurse, surgeon and friend’ to the ‘community of fowls’. Her mistress, Mrs. d’Urberville, expected her to whistle to her bullfinches, so Tess is obliged to practice whistling. Tess finds the work at that poultry farm a little monotonous.

Later, overcoming her personal tragedy (her seduction, pregnancy followed by the death of her child), Tess accepts work as a dairy maid in the large Talbothays dairy farm. The master, Dairyman Crick, had a hundred ‘milchers’ or dairy animals under his management. Both men and women, employed as milkers, operated different animals with the men opting for the difficult animals which it was feared the women could not handle for ‘lack of finger-grip’. If not milked properly, supply would decline and ultimately cease, so Crick took upon himself the most difficult animals. The dairymen and dairymaids talk and sing while at work. Tess stays at Talbothays, sleeping with three other ‘indoor’ dairy maids (most of the other ‘outdoor’ dairy maids were not residents of Talbothays farm but would go back to their own homes). Mrs. Crick tried to show her superiority to the other dairy maids first by not milking, as she was too ‘respectable’ for the job, and then by her dress: dairy maids wore print gowns so she wore a ‘hot stuff’ gown even in summer.

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40 Ibid, p.129.
In the eighteenth century rural idyll, dairying was considered to be woman’s work, the manufacture of butter and cheese was a means of generating income for poor working class women and was a pastime for gentlewomen. It was viewed as an extension of the kitchen and was at times situated in a manner to enable supervision and attendance. Slowly the women-dominated dairy involved men of skill and commerce, till it became a contested arena and women became only a part of the extensive dairy farming process. In the nineteenth century, dairy farming became a lucrative business. Dairy maids were employed to perform certain tasks like milking, cheese making and butter making. Life as a dairy maid was comparatively comfortable, with the outdoor setting, the better wages, men and women working together, having the potential of a romance which Hardy exploits in the novel. As cheese was much sought after, dairy maids enjoyed some social status and were respected. Engaging in dairy farming in a place comparatively distant from her home helps Tess escape from her tainted past and the shame that it casts on her. It appears to give her another chance in life. Tess’s most contented years are spent as a dairy maid. Work begins early at the Talbothays farm. Tess was given the responsibility of waking up the others at three in the morning. Skimming was done before milking began. The soft dawn and the open meadows create a picturesque setting for Clare and Tess to meet regularly and fall in love. For a dairy maid to marry a gentleman was a social advance, as the other dairy maids’ reaction clearly reveal; hence it is not surprising that Clare’s family bemoans the ‘ill-considered marriage’.

Tess attracts much male attention due to her good looks. Later, as an abandoned wife, she deliberately tries to camouflage her beauty and even impair it by nipping off her eyebrows. Forced to work again, she again seeks employment on dairy and poultry farms, but being unable to get such work, she is compelled to look out for rough work on arable land,
work which she liked the least. Reaching the ‘stubborn soil’ of Flintcomb-Ash, she realizes that the labour demanded there would be of the ‘roughest kind’. Her fellow dairy maid from Talbothay’s, Marian, works there and calls it a ‘starve-acre place’ where only corn and swedees are grown. Tess, like Marian, works as a swede-hacker: ‘it was the business of the two women to grub up the lower or earthy half of the root with a hooked fork called a hacker, that it might be eaten also.’ The hard manual labour exacted from them included swede-trimming, ‘in which process they sliced off the earth and the fibres with a bill-hook before storing the roots for future use’.

When weather conditions turn hostile, and swede work is no longer possible in the harsh winter, they have to engage in reed-drawing in the barn, which Marian warns Tess is ‘worse than swede-hacking’ but which she can withstand as she is stout. Tess cannot match the practised weed drawers’ output and wants to work for longer hours to compensate for her lack of skill in weed drawing but the extremely exhausting nature of the work tires her out and she is obliged to take rest. Such work caused considerable strain upon the back and arms. Her fellow worker Marian comments that the demanding labour ‘wants harder flesh’ than Tess’s. Marian can withstand such labour due to her ‘bottle of liquor’ and her ‘stoutness of build’.

As a field labourer, Tess had to perform several manual tasks, and work at varied machines like the ‘turnip-slicing machine’. She works for hours with the ‘pensive contour’ of a field woman in the ‘joyless monotony’ of her environment. Tess has to work at a ‘despotic’ threshing-machine from dawn to dinner time. Tess was placed on the platform of the machine, and had to untie every sheaf of corn handed to her, before feeding the machine. Her employer, Farmer Groby, chose Tess for this work as ‘she was one of those who best combined strength

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41 Ibid, p.322.
42 Ibid, p.324.
43 Ibid, p.327.
and quickness in untying, and both with staying power’. The monstrous thresher was stopped for half an hour at breakfast and again only at dinner time. The labourers snatched a ‘hasty lunch’ without moving from their positions. The sound made by the thresher seemed to penetrate to the ‘very marrow’ of the operators, making it difficult for them to talk and lighten their burden. Tess, perspiring in the heat, gets overwhelmed by the ‘ceaselessness of the work’ and begins to wish that she had never come to Flintcomb-Ash. At dinnertime when the machine stopped, Tess was in a pathetic condition, ‘her knees trembling so wretchedly with the shaking of the machine that she could scarcely walk’. The machine works all afternoon and even in the evening and the labourers are expected to work in the light of the moon. When the work is finally over, Alec d’Urberville observes the effects of work on the ‘utterly exhausted’ Tess saying, ‘you are as weak as a bled calf.’ He lectures the farmer on the unsuitability of employing women at ‘steam threshing’. Farmer Groby used women in threshing for economic reasons as he could pay women less than what he would have to pay their male counterparts. The Candlemas Fair is of great importance to agriculturists as new contracts for the next twelve months were made on that day. Almost all the overburdened labourers of Flintcomb-Ash attend the fair, hoping to gain release in the form of new work elsewhere.

It is interesting to note that work brings about the major turning points in Tess’s life. Trantridge poultry farm got her in contact with her seducer Alec, which ruined her character and much of her life. Talbothays dairy brought her close to her love Angel Clare, who married her only to abandon her on learning of her past. Flintcomb Ash showed her how tiring and exhausting field labour could be. It brought her accidently in contact with Alec again who

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46 Ibid, p.376.
followed her, first offering marriage, then money, then comfort for her family, till she was compelled to succumb, for a second time, to his schemes.
A Woodcutter’s Daughter (similar to Hardy’s Marty South) in the 1890s

Donald D. Stone concludes that

for Tess herself there is no hope for an earthly home, as there was for Jane Eyre, just as there is no consolation in the mental image of a loved one, as there was for Marty South. All the supports that traditionally come to the aid of troubled, home-seeking Victorian characters – community, family, love, nature, history, and (on occasion) religion – are of no avail in Tess’s case; in fact they become burdens to her. ⁴⁷

Abandoned by her husband Angel Clare, Tess not only has to fend for herself but also take responsibility for her full family; she has to provide shelter and food for her widowed mother and her siblings. Tess finds her only real home in the tombs of her family ancestors. Tess’s work at Talbothays Dairy and Flintcomb-Ash show the best and the worst of field labour.

Marty South in Hardy’s Woodlanders is first spotted in the novel in the act of making spars ‘such as are used by thatchers’. ⁴⁸ Her deftness at the work is a sign of her skill and her practice. Like Tess, Marty works with a bill-hook. Marty keeps one hand protected with an oversized leather glove (belonging to her father) but the uncovered hand, ‘red and blistering’, revealed the effect of this strenuous work. She works quietly on behalf of her ailing father and she does not want him to know of it. She earns eighteen pence for a thousand spars. She can make a thousand and half spars in one entire day and half the night, implying that she works for more than eighteen hours a day. Marty finishes her ‘wood-splintering’ at three in the morning. The nature of her work obliges Marty to keep her door ajar, or the room becomes too full of smoke. When she works at night, she places a thick cloth curtain on the

⁴⁷ Donald D. Stone, ‘House and Home in Thomas Hardy’, p.301.
door so that her work can be done in secrecy; she does not wish the neighbourhood to know of her labour. She is apprehensive that if it gets known that the work is done by her, Mr. Melbury, her father’s employer, may refuse her work or pay her a measly amount. Giles Winterborne is baffled by Marty’s talent and demands to know how she could learn that trade without professional training. Marty’s reply – ‘I’d be bound to learn it in two hours’ – highlights her innate aptitude. Giles, with ‘dry admiration’, commends her work saying: ‘your father with his forty years of practice never made a spar better than that. They are too good for the thatching of houses, they are good enough for the furniture.’ Marty is seen as an uncomplaining and patient worker when she helps Giles in planting trees. Among the woodlanders, Marty performs any work that needs to be undertaken. In the ‘barking’ season, Marty is seen assisting the workmen, as the ‘ripping-tool’ moves through ‘the sticky parting between the trunk and the rind’. Marty ‘peels’ the upper parts of the trunk with more expertise and persistence than the workmen. In her modesty, she states that the men have ‘less patience with the twigs, because their time is worth more than mine’ – an indirect commentary on the disparity of wages between male and female labourers undertaking the same task.

In ‘Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown’ Virginia Woolf distinguishes between the Georgian cook and her predecessor, the Victorian cook, by stating:

In life one can see the change, if I may use a homely illustration in the character of one’s cook. The Victorian cook lived like a leviathan in the lower depths, formidable, silent, obscure, inscrutable; the Georgian cook is a creature

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49 Ibid, p.18.
50 Ibid, p.18.
51 Ibid, p.102.
52 Ibid, p.103.
of sunshine and fresh air; in and out of the drawing room, now to borrow the Daily Herald, now to ask advice about a hat. Do you ask for more solemn instances of the power of the human race to change than that?\textsuperscript{53}

From the Victorian to the modern age, a great deal of change was perceived in domestic servants, their role, their importance and the below-stairs hierarchy. Manual labourers, both indoor and outdoor, were patient and hard working women whose hands bore witness to their toil. Domestic servants were more cushioned than field labourers, especially those labourers who had to work on arid lands. In the next chapter, we leave the domestics, the dairy maids, the field labourers and the woodlanders behind to analyze another class of women, the prostitutes.