Chapter Four

Stitching Hunger, Tearing Distress: Dressmakers and Milliners

As we move away from the sphere of governesses, companions, teachers, writers, journalists, and professionally qualified women like doctors, nurses, actresses, storytellers, painters and women manageresses, slowly and subtly we climb down the social ladder to look at the work options available to lower middle class women. It is true that actresses were not highly esteemed but there was a certain mystery and glamour attached to women who could appear on stage and hold the audience in their sway. Working class girls forced to fend for themselves could become dressmakers as the huge demand for women’s custom-made apparel created vacancies which these dressmakers could fill.

A dressmaker is generally defined as someone ‘who makes women’s clothes, especially as their job’ while a ‘seamstress’ as ‘a woman who can sew and make clothes or whose job is sewing and making clothes’. A milliner is regarded as ‘a person who designs, makes, or sells women’s hats’. A slop worker, used in the ‘manufacture of cheap and shoddy clothing’ is the most reduced needlewoman. Slop work also refers to ‘work that is poorly or carelessly done’. It is evident that the four terms refer to different kinds of needlework. While dressmakers and milliners refer to persons engaged in a specialized kind of sewing, seamstresses (or sempstresses) usually suggested women who were employed in plain sewing. The terms ‘dressmaker’, ‘seamstress/ sempstress’, and ‘needle woman’ refer to different kinds of sewing and generally employed women from diverse social classes.

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4 From Dictionary.com <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/slopwork>
needle trade, dressmakers were presumably placed at the top of the hierarchy, attracting the rich and powerful clientele, and being much in demand for the ‘season’ of ‘ball-room parties’. Their task would be more central and voluminous but even milliners would be expected to showcase their skill in designing fashionable headgear. The humbler seamstress could be asked to perform any kind of stitching errand and she would have to oblige. Traditionally the word ‘dress’ refers to all kinds of clothing, so a dressmaker was expected to make all types of garments for women. However, several writers have, at times, used the words ‘seamstress’ and ‘dressmaker’ interchangeably.

Henry Mayhew’s inspection of London Labour in the *Morning Chronicle* (1849 - 50) and H. W. Lord’s Report on dressmaking for the 1864 Children’s Employment Commission can be treated as documentary evidence of the dressmaker’s life. The 1841 Census confirmed the existence of 20,728 dressmakers and milliners in London. In 1850 Mayhew pointed out that, at least 10,000 dressmakers worked in the ‘dishonourable’ sector as opposed to ‘honourable’ dressmaking establishments.\(^5\) Henry Mayhew in his report on ‘London Labour and London Poor’ classified four kinds of ‘private’ or ‘residential’ dressmaking institutions: the first class establishments providing court dresses for the nobility, second class institutions for the middle classes, third and fourth class establishments serving womenfolk of the families of ‘tradesmen’ and ‘mechanics’ respectively. Mayhew pointed out how respectable dressmakers could be reduced to slop workers.

When the demand for cheap ready-made clothing grew, many women worked from home, sewing these cheap and shoddy articles for very low piece-rates. Slop workers were the lowest in the needle trade and had to endure frightening hardships. In a letter written to the *Morning Chronicle*, a journalist reports his visit and interview with slop workers. The

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report reveals the starvation wages paid to these slop workers who were forced to accept such work or waste away without food. Slop workers had to work for several slop-sellers, and they had to tailor varied articles as ordered, like shirts, trousers, blouses, drawers, duck-frocks, among others. An assiduous workwoman could only expect 2 shillings to 6 shillings for a dozen shirts. A slop worker, mentioned in the *Morning Chronicle* letter, said she could make three shirts a day or eighteen shirts a week. Though different clothing articles had different payments attached to it, diverse articles also took up varied amounts of time, so no matter how hard the female slop workers tried, they could only earn 4 to 5 shillings a week (about 12 pounds a year). Slop workers usually had to provide the ‘trimmings’ (cotton and thread) of a garment, and provide for their own food, washing, light and lodging. A slop worker reported that such workers had to pay a security, and those who could not afford to do so, had to rely on ‘sweaters’. A House of Commons Select Committee on ‘sweating’ termed such work in 1888-90 as ‘work carried on for inadequate wages and for excessive hours in insanitary conditions’.6 ‘Sweating’ was carried out mostly in homes and also in squalid workrooms. Women sweaters were initially not perceived as threatening by patriarchal norms, as they ‘sweated’ at home, without ignoring household chores and family responsibilities. As they began ‘sweating’ outside their homes, competing with men and ‘stealing’ the jobs of men, women sweaters became a nuisance to their male counterparts.

Similar to Maria Rye’s ‘Female Middle Class Emigration Society’ for governesses, Sidney Herbert, a government minister, founded an Emigration Society for dressmakers to help them go abroad to fulfill their quest for domesticity by finding life partners, if not, then at least, better work conditions. He argued that the needlewomen suffered as a result of

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6 In Joan Perkin, ‘Sewing Machines: Liberation or Drudgery for women?’ <http://www.historytoday.com/joan-perkin/sewing-machines-liberation-or-drudgery-women>
overstocking of labour market, and the supply of needlewomen far exceeding the demand. In its opposition, the Chartist Editor W. M. Reynolds, in one direct appeal to women, issued ‘A Warning to the Needlewomen and Slopworkers’ cautioning needlewomen against Herbert’s Emigration Society. Reynolds argues that this ‘pseudo-philanthropic’ proposal of Herbert’s made poor women vulnerable to emigration and its related horrors, and he strongly rejected Herbert’s ideas. Reynolds was perhaps proven right as few needlewomen could be persuaded to join the emigration scheme. It was later seen that needlewomen could seldom find jobs and flourish in colonies, which led eventually to the failure of Herbert’s enterprise.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, women could enter the dressmaking and millinery trades. The elaborate and detailed attire of fashionable Victorian women demanded different custom-made, perfectly fitted, innovative and gorgeous dresses with complementing hats. The emergence of dress departments in larger stores created an additional demand for ready-made clothing. Many large stores employed seamstresses and dressmakers to copy fashionable gowns brought from Paris, as well as to design and stitch new clothes. The demand for ready-made clothing also encouraged the existence of independent dressmakers in business. These dressmakers ranged from the posh and exclusive designer dressmaker in possession of an entire establishment with staff, to an individual dressmaker working single-handedly from her home. Like in many other trades, women gained entry as they agreed to work for long hours for very low wages.

In fiction, Mrs. Gaskell’s Mary Barton gets apprenticed to a dressmaker as her father disliked ‘a factory life for a girl’.7 Her father John Barton had to choose between Mary’s ‘going into service’ as a domestic help or dressmaking. He considered domestic servitude to be a form of slavery, so he preferred dressmaking to slavery. Mary had slightly different

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reasons for choosing dressmaking. She longed to become a lady and achieve a higher rank in society and was determined to rise up the social ladder with the help of her good looks. As a dressmaker, she presumed she could always dress ‘with a certain regard to appearances; … never soil her hands, and … never redden or dirty her face with hard labour’. On hearing Alice’s account of her years spent as a servant, and not being able to take leave for her mother’s illness due to her pressing duties, Mary Barton feels relieved that she did not opt for domestic service.

The investigation into the social background of fictional dressmakers reveals their poor socio-economic status, varied social class and the pressure of circumstances which drives them to dressmaking. Mary Barton was the daughter of a mill hand who did not wish to see his daughter slogging in a factory. Gaskell’s Ruth Hilton was the granddaughter of a poor curate. Her father had been a poor farmer, much older to her mother. In Cranford, Miss Betsy Barker and her sisters are the daughters of an old clerk who open a shop, with their savings, and begin to sell caps and ribbons. She and her sister had served as ladies’ maids earlier, and then built up their resources to set up their own shop. Kate Nickleby’s father died bankrupt, which obliged her to sustain herself by earning her bread. Jane Eyre, when forced to think of earning options (on leaving Mr. Rochester’s house), first had the intention of becoming a dressmaker, then a plain sewer, and finally she even thought of working as a servant. Young, unskilled girls, left to fend for themselves, could think of very few options and needlework appeared to be one of them as evidenced in the case of Maggie Tulliver, daughter of another unfortunate bankrupt father, who consoled herself with the idea that plain sewing was the only thing she could utilize to get a living by. Meg in The Chimes, the

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daughter of uneducated ‘ticket-porter’, finds her earning option similarly restricted to needlework, hence opts for embroidery.

Mary Barton decides to improve her lot and become a lady with the help of her good looks. When she receives the attention of a prosperous factory-owner’s son, Carson, she is only too happy to imagine herself as Mrs. Carson with luxury around her. Carson has initially no intention of marrying her. Later to win her, he proposes marriage but his proposal shows his acute consciousness of her social inferiority. He is wary of his father’s wrath if he marries someone so inferior in rank and in wealth to him. Class concerns flit across his mind as he tries to make concessions for proposing marriage to her, reasoning that even his mother had been a factory girl before her marriage. Claiming that he is ready to ‘sacrifice’ a great deal for her, in marrying a poor dressmaker, he presumes Mary would be flattered but she rejects him contemptuously.

Needlework was considered to be a feminine engagement which a woman, nestled in domesticity, could practise in her proper sphere, the private world of home. It was one of the acknowledged accomplishments of well brought up ladies which they could nurture even in their drawing room, while receiving visits from friends and acquaintances. A conventional way of passing the day included the sedentary and passive needlework (along with knitting, reading, painting, playing the piano and singing), which was supposed to suit the temperament of women. Beth Harris mentions that the ‘needle’, an ‘ultimate symbol of femininity, carried powerful associations of domestic bliss and maternal devotion’.9 Women forced to make a living could choose to utilize this domestic skill in the public sphere of work to become dressmakers and milliners. Beth Harris talks of the symbolic movement of

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9 Beth Harris, ‘Slaves of the Needle: the Seamstress in the 1840s’ pub in The Victorian Web: Literature, History and Culture in the Age of Victoria, <http://www.victorianweb.org/gender/ugoretz1.html>
the ‘needle’ from the private sphere of the home to the public sphere of work, which created deep ‘fissures’ as it seemed to strike a blow at the cherished ideals of womanhood, maternal care, domesticity and implied ideology of dependence on male breadwinners. Needlework was looked upon as being ‘respectable’ as it was a sanctioned womanly activity (in contrast to some ‘masculine’ activities, like that of writing) but making money out of this activity made it indecorous. Needlewomen overstepped the boundaries of their circumscribed domestic sphere as they accepted remuneration, and even moved outside the home to live in the sewing establishments. Working class women, lacking in educational empowerment, could opt to sell their services as seamstresses or even slop workers. Needlewomen thus became a cultural symbol of the suffering of working class women. However, Cynthia Amneus asserts that in the needle trades, women found autonomy, control, and female companionship.¹⁰ There was also the possibility of social recognition. For instance, in the highly class conscious society of Gaskell’s Cranford the milliner, Betty Barker, gets included in the honourable list of invitees to a social ‘luncheon’ which is indicative of the advantageous position that the dressmaker or milliner could occupy on account of her references and her contact with the privileged class.

Often, it was seen that good looks were preferred in the dressmaking profession. Loveliness helped dressmakers to later become ‘show women’. Unlike governesses, who were supposed to be plain, good looking girls were preferred in dressmaking. In Mrs. Gaskell’s Ruth, the proprietess Mrs. Mason sends favourably endowed apprentices to balls and parties so that they may create a good impression about the establishment. Mary Barton’s father was unaware of the demand for good looks in dressmaking, and so he tired himself

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trying to get his daughter apprenticed to an establishment without paying a high premium. The narratorial voice in *Mary Barton* comments that had he taken his lovely daughter along with him, many more establishments would have opened their doors to her. Almost all dressmaking establishments of repute demanded a high premium for apprenticing Mary Barton. Without such money, Mary Barton’s father could not get her apprenticed in any of the first-rate and second-rate establishments. Mary finally gets herself apprenticed, without the legal formalities of a contract, or a deed, or ‘indentures to the bond’, to Mrs. Simmonds, a milliner as well as a dressmaker. The understood terms were that Mary had to undergo training for two years there without any remuneration. After her internship of two years, Mary would be entitled to dine in the establishment and have tea there along with a small quarterly salary.

Dressmaking and millinery required no special educational qualification or fancy ‘accomplishments’ (like those expected in a governess or actress). Apparently what was required was the ability to hold a needle and stitch well and stitch skillfully but in order to do so, frequently, girls had to undergo intensive training. However, it was not easy to learn these trades. Van Kleeck’s research findings indicate that it took about five years of training to establish oneself as an accomplished dressmaker or milliner. ¹¹ Training or vocational education could come in one or a combination of the several available formats. Home sewing was utilized by most young girls as the basic training with which they were equipped. Sewing was a part of daily life. It was encouraged by parents to meet the family sewing needs and to teach the girl to run her own family in later life. In all-women social visits and assemblies, women could form a ‘quilting’ party and sew together, making sewing an

engaging community activity, instead of a tedious chore. They could talk, listen to music or be the audience to a reading, while sewing. All articles of personal clothing and household linen like bed sheets, bed covers, pillow cases, mattress covers, towels, napkins, handkerchiefs, curtains, and covers for furniture, crockery and cutlery were stitched at home by women. Drafting systems guided sewers through a chain of directions and steps, so that cutting became a learned skill as opposed to an inherent talent. These systems used various materials like wood, paper, metal, cardboard and devices like circumferential dimensions to aid sewers in learning how to cut out patterns. Every girl grew up with knowledge and practise of sewing. It provided a creative outlet to her talents as well as helped to keep the lady of leisure occupied. Her frugality was exercised as she first used scraps to make dolls and later, guided by the same instinct, she re-used old curtains to make pillow covers. Stitching could be of two kinds: first, plain sewing like making loose garments and sheets; second, fancy sewing like embroidery and tapestry. This sewing expertise empowered some girls to take up sewing as a profession even without attending trade schools or undergoing an apprentice system. Those who were literate also benefitted from the guidance available in women’s magazines, instruction booklets and guides, and correspondence schools. Fashion magazines and trade journals focused exclusively on women’s clothing and stitching techniques which kept women abreast of the latest styles and even advised young women, in detail, on how to make outfits, the type of materials that should be used for different outfits and even the colour palette. Home sewers, aspiring tradeswomen, and professional milliners and dressmakers purchased and read the available printed material for information on

13 Ibid, p.98.
women’s clothing styles and how to sew them. Home education in sewing and self-study literature trained girls in the privacy and comfort of their homes.

A formal apprenticeship system existed for those who were serious about their career as dressmakers. Three distinct types of apprenticeships were in existence. In the first type, an apprenticeship with tuition, a trainee lived in the establishment for the entire duration of training and paid a fee to the owner. Potential dressmakers could usually get admittance into these establishments if their guardians chose or could afford to pay for such on-the-job-training. A contract was made and either party could be held responsible for breach of contract. This type was the most formal one among the three and could offer a thorough training for several years. A second type of apprenticeship existed where there was no monetary transaction. A trainee worked for the establishment in lieu of boarding facility and training received. It suggests a less formal, shorter term of mutual agreement. The third type of apprenticeship was the ‘small weekly wage apprenticeship’ where the trainee ran errands, helped in management and daily chores of the establishment to contribute towards her training cost in that establishment. The institutions offering apprenticeship taught their pupils different aspects of dressmaking like sewing, pinning, draping, fitting and cutting. Millinery aspirants were taught cutting, shaping and trimming which were essential in making well-designed hats, bonnets and caps. Advanced apprentices were also tutored in reading, writing, keeping accounts and handling bills. This apprenticeship system was plagued by several problems which led to its decline by the mid nineteenth century. One of the prominent setbacks emerged when experienced tradeswomen became unwilling to teach novices how to cut. The technique of cutting was crucial to dressmaking, and without mastering this art trainees could not ensure proper fitting of a dress. Increase in business brought in
competition, competition led to specialization (instead of working on a dress from start to finish, sewers could specialize on sleeves, collars, or cutting), which in turn decreased the importance of general training in the apprenticeship system. The new divisions of labour and differing demands for sewing, embroidery and related activities made it very demanding to simultaneously teach aspirants and manage a busy shop. The appearance of trade schools dealt a blow to the decadent apprentice system.

To deal with the problem posed by semi-trained and untrained working class girls entering the needle trade, a new kind of school emerged known as the trade school. For admittance to trade schools, graduation from grammar schools was generally required, with the ability to read and write and a knowledge of basic mathematics. These schools aimed to train and enable pupils to demand a better pay in the marketplace. Trade schools tried to supply the demand for skilled workers. Trade school products were theoretically ahead of apprentices, but to gain practical knowledge, trade schools sent their pupils to benefit from apprenticeship establishments. Trade schools present a later development to dressmaking and millinery as they emerged in the beginning of the twentieth century, and mainly in the large metropolitan areas. Such schools had a shorter duration of training as they generally offered two year programmes. In this comparatively short time, trade schools sought to equip girls with basic skills before they entered the trade. Not only did these schools teach sewing skills but they also simulated workshop conditions to familiarize students with their future work environment. These schools maintained a long day, from 8.30 a.m. to 5.00 p.m., with a break for an hour for lunch. To generate revenue, these schools took orders from the public for goods and services. This process, called ‘order work’, enabled students to practise filling

orders (though students did not receive payment for these orders) and gain a better understanding of customer handling coupled with business transaction. Trade schools promoted the idea of women being professionally trained for something besides domesticity. Affording financial independence to women, trade schools threatened to disturb the economic necessity of marriage. Perhaps to avert accusations of pushing women into the public sphere and away from their ‘proper’ private sphere of home, trade school curriculum also included homemaking courses. Examples of some courses offered by trade schools were dressmaking, millinery, power sewing, cooking, serving, dieting, hygiene, physical training, general academics, household arts, and keeping accounts. The success and popularity of trade schools was transitory, as they could not keep up with the constant changes in the trade market.

Another opportunity of gaining sewing skills for aspiring seamstresses rested with community education including clubs, conventions, fairs, local assemblies, and youth groups. Girls and women participated in sewing clubs, societies and associations. Women also took up sewing for charitable purposes, highlighting the importance and popularity of sewing. They also showed their enthusiasm for sewing through country and state fairs, and regional exhibits. It enabled women to display their needle skills, take part in competitions and educate one another.15 Community education brought together girls and women from the professional needle industry as well as home sewers. Community needle culture encouraged interaction and bonding among sewers, healthy competition to better themselves, and also a platform to help others. Such education enlightened them about changing clothing styles and the latest trends in fashion.

Girls could utilize one or a combination of a few of these training opportunities to learn the trade and they usually sought more than one way to acquire necessary practice and skills. Each avenue of training presented its own set of hindrances but successful tradeswomen could overcome these challenges on the basis of their talent, hard work and dedication; but the training opportunities were subject to their location, availability of resources, family support and most importantly economic standing. The role of their natural aptitude, confidence, and risk taking ability in withstanding hardships and working in unfavourable conditions cannot be underestimated. In dressmaking, a girl climbed the ladder carefully from an apprentice, to helper, to finisher, to waist draper, to cutter; similarly in millinery, a girl gradually ascended from apprentice, to improver, to milliner, to copyist, to trimmer and then finally to fulfilling the dream of being an owner. As Susan S. Mack concludes: ‘Being a proprietress, owning a shop and employing seamstresses, was the final and most coveted position in both trades. It was also the person whom the apprentice ultimately reported to and needed to please.’

Documents show that girls left grammar school before the legal age for work (sixteen years) and entered the trade illegally in their eagerness to earn wages. The lack of interest generated by the school curriculum, as well as the need to earn, pressurized many to become school drop-outs. The majority of dressmakers and milliners were unmarried or divorced or widowed. Once married, women would generally not return to the trade. The financial security offered by the trade could be one of the reasons why women chose independence to marriage but the fact that most women did not get suitable offers of marriage might be equally responsible for the predominance of single women in dressmaking.

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Apart from the skilled training, girls also required a robust constitution and high stamina to withstand the exacting nature of the job. In the ‘season’ sixteen to seventeen hour work day could be expected. Poor eyesight, flat feet, weak pelvises, and stressed nerves were considered impediments for the trade.\(^{17}\) Ill effects of trade work could be seen in the physical decay as well as emotional complications of the workers. The long hours spent crouching in crowded, unsanitary workrooms led to headaches, digestive disorders, neuralgia, and nervous prostration.\(^{18}\) Advice books cautioned girls about their health and recommended brisk walks at night and in the morning, proper ventilation in the workroom, regular hours for meals, and relaxation, and amusement after work.\(^{19}\) To stay on in the trade, women had to be blessed with a healthy constitution and be clever at maintaining it.

The seamstresses and dressmakers of the Victorian age usually had to work for very long hours. The *Children’s Employment Commission* report of 1834 notes the shift timing of one seamstress: in winter it was from 8:00 a.m. to 11:00 p.m., while in summer it began earlier at 6:30 a.m. and continued till midnight.\(^{20}\) During the fashionable season, the work shift could last upto 20 hours or even more.\(^{21}\) These long hours indoors took a heavy toll on the seamstress’s health. Wages were notoriously low, and noticeably less than those of men in comparable trades. In 1864, a second hand could earn 15-20 pounds a year in an ‘ordinary’ dressmaking establishment or 25 pounds in court business. One poverty stricken old woman


\(^{19}\) Ibid, p.66.


who was a slop worker reportedly worked from four in the morning to ten at night in summer. Her year round schedule of work was five in the morning to nine at night. On a yearly average, she could only earn 4 shillings a week, but still had to invest in candles and cotton from that meagre amount. The ‘Association for the Aid and Benefit of Dressmakers and Milliners’ aimed to convince the principal dressmaking establishments to observe twelve hour work days and to cease work on Sunday.

In fiction, Mrs. Gaskell’s *Ruth* begins with a scene in a dressmaker’s establishment where the seamstresses, including Ruth Hilton, are seen working past two in the morning. They were ‘stitching away as if for very life, not daring to gape or show any outward manifestation of sleepiness’. The apprenticed workers knew that next day they would have to begin work from eight in the morning, no matter how late they went to bed. It shows how the starting hour was fixed but the ending hour was flexible; the hours put in by the exhausted seamstresses did not matter to the employers, what was of consequence to them was the end result of work. Dinner was given to them at two a.m., a break of half an hour, and they were instructed to have their dinner standing in the workroom but away from the dresses they were working on. They eventually go to bed at five in the morning and were supposed to restart work in three hours’ time. They work so late because an ‘annual hunt-ball’ was to take place the following night. Competition from a rival dressmaker on the same street had driven the proprietress of Ruth’s establishment, Mrs. Mason, to make hasty promises of delivering all the dresses on time the next morning. Mrs. Mason kept a strict watch over her apprentices going out on errands on work days. She did not allow them to loiter around and waste time. Mrs. Mason, herself, was a widow with six or seven children dependent on her, so she had to practise strict economy in running her household. No dinner

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was cooked on Sundays and no fire was lit in the rooms, as she would keep her workroom closed on that day. She assumed that all her workwomen would go visiting friends on that day, but there were quite a few who, like Ruth, had neither friends nor family, in the neighbourhood, so they stayed back hungry and cold in the establishment.

The long hours of a dressmakers work schedule are repeated detailed in fiction: Dickens’s Meg strains her eyes till it becomes too dark to see the threads, then she lights a candle and keeps working late into the night, past midnight, and begins early the next morning. The terms of apprenticeship of fictional dressmakers are also stated: Ruth Hilton was apprenticed for five years. Little Emily, was bound to Omer and Joram for three years. Her masters were kind enough to include a clause stating that her articles could be cancelled when she wished to get married. Mary Barton worked as an outdoor apprentice, that is, she worked from her home. Gaskell’s Mary Barton, when working as an unpaid apprentice, is asked to report at six in the morning in summer and bring her meals from home. In winter, she was asked to report after breakfast. Though the reporting time was specified, the releasing time depended on the completion of the task in hand. Such terms reveal the duration of apprenticeship which could range from three to five years, the nature of the contract, and that special clauses were inserted to suit the individual needs of the employers and their bound trainees.

The lives of some noted real-life dressmakers and their social position help us to gauge the standing and potentiality of dressmakers. Mary A. Molloy (1862 – 1924), the real life celebrated dressmaker of St. Paul in Minnesota, was a talented and liberated woman, who gained social respectability and who was settled in cushioned domesticity, by way of her marriage to Herbert N. Molloy. Before marriage, Mary had acquired proficiency in
dressmaking and had achieved success and won accolades for her dressmaking business. She continued to work after her marriage, till her retirement in 1912. Mary Molloy excelled in stitches, in handwork detail, and in her finishing technique especially with her intuitive understanding of contour or silhouette. The success of her business venture is indicated in her employment of twenty seamstresses under her. She had an impressive clientele comprising most of the rich and powerful women in Minnesota. She created a great variety of clothing, ranging from ordinary daily wear to formal, elaborate gowns. Her works, on display in the Minnesota Historical Society’s collection, are distinguished by their exquisite detailing and embroidery. She was enriched by her travels to Paris and many of her gowns show the influence of talented French designers like Charles Fredrick Worth, Paul Poiret, Jacques Doucet, and Paquin. Her gowns reflect the changing fashion scenario of the period. The employment of her skills of beading, appliqué, lace, and tucking was done by hand. She blended satin stitches, French knots and encasements to produce layered and richly finished garments. She refrained from using bold and jarring colours and patterns; instead her work is distinguished by her superlative good taste, soft colour palette and graceful designs. The reasons for her retirement in 1912 could be drastic change in clothing fashion or a fading out of her craft which got overpowered by the ready-to-wear industry. The last known garment designed by her is believed to be her daughter Cornelia’s satin wedding gown embellished with overlays and panels of handmade lace, made in 1916. Mary Molloy is truly remarkable not just for her dressmaking talent, but because her example proves how marriage, children and domesticity do not prove a hindrance to a successful career. She lived her life as an independent woman, travelling every year to Paris, many a times unescorted, and despite it, she rose to prominence in a highly conservative society which was unwilling to accept
women in the public sphere. Her husband and she were ‘listed in the Blue Book of the Twin Cities beginning in 1907’. It speaks of the respect accorded to a strong woman for her excellent dressmaking skills and, interestingly, points out how a working woman gains respectability through her talent and dedication. It could, however, be attributed to her position as a married woman who interacted with the rich and powerful, and on whom the ‘crème de la crème’ of the society depended.

Another eminent real life dressmaker was Elizabeth Hobbs Keckley, who rose from the position of being a slave to achieve her freedom (in 1855) based on her deftness with the needle. She paid $1,200, partly with the proceeds of her needlework and partly with some contribution from gratified customers. She came to Washington and set herself up as a free Black woman with her own dressmaking establishment. Soon affluent and arrogant women of Washington queued up before Keckley’s establishment to be outfitted by her. Keckley, like Mrs. Mary Molly of St Paul’s, had an appreciative clientele. One of her elite clients recommended her to Mrs. Lincoln. Interestingly, one of the reasons Mrs. Lincoln chose Keckley was that Keckley was considered to be a ‘high society’ seamstress among the established fashionable circles of Washington, and Mrs. Lincoln, as a newcomer, wished to be dressed impressively and be included in those select circles. In turn, this association with the First Lady furthered Keckley’s cause, adding to her social standing, respectability and prestige as the dressmaker of the President’s wife, Mary Todd Lincoln. Keckley’s dedication and expertise won her the friendship of the First Lady. Several books and articles have been written about the white Mary Todd Lincoln and her mulatto dressmaker. The interest generated by their interracial relationship can partially be explained by the curiosity around

the enigmatic and, as some said, eccentric First Lady and the desire to gather gossip about the privileged couple in the White House. Becky Rutberg’s book, *Mary Lincoln's Dressmaker: Elizabeth Keckley's Remarkable Rise from Slave to White House Confidante* (1995), is interesting both as a slave narrative and a historical tale. Some believe that Keckley’s horrific experiences as a slave influenced the President’s contempt for slavery.

From the title of Lynda Jones book, *Mrs. Lincoln's Dressmaker: the Unlikely Friendship of Elizabeth Keckley and Mary Todd Lincoln*, it is evident that this friendship between a rich, powerful mistress and her dressmaker is ‘unlikely’ and unusual. A dressmaker might have been privy to personal family episodes but to treat her with frankness and warmth shows the magnanimity of the mistress. The social distance between the two influenced the title of another book by Jennifer Fleischner, *Mrs. Lincoln and Mrs. Keckly: the Remarkable story of the Friendship between a First Lady and a Former Slave*. Fleischner dwells on the biographical history of both women and her tale comes alive only when the two women meet and engage in an ‘improbable’ and complex relationship. Mary Todd Lincoln was the daughter of a slave holder, while Elizabeth Keckley was the daughter of a slave. The former was meant to be a mistress, the latter a slave.

In her book *Mrs. Lincoln’s Dressmaker*, Jennifer Chiaverini explores the fascinating friendship between the First Lady and her seamstress. As a dressmaker, Keckley had access to the private sphere of the Lincoln family. Not only did Keckley design the gowns of Mrs. Lincoln, she witnessed many personal moments between the President and his wife. As her intimacy with Mrs. Lincoln grew, she almost became a trusted friend, who even had the privilege of comforting the First Lady, first, in the loss of her son, then after the assassination of her husband. This private friendship was scarred and damaged when Keckley chose to
publish her personal interactions with the celebrated family in a book entitled *Behind the Scenes: Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House*. This book was also published under another name, *Behind the Scenes in the Lincoln White House: Memoirs of an African-American Seamstress*. The Congress considered the book important enough as a primary source to publish it in 1868. In this book, Keckley supposedly pens down her autobiography. Thirty years of her slavery are abridged into three chapters, touching her ‘school of slavery’ which taught her to be strong and independent. She talks about her place of birth, her girlhood and how she gained her freedom. Almost the rest of the book, a wholesome eleven chapters, are about her interactions with the Lincoln family with the focus on Mrs. Lincoln and the First Lady’s nature, reactions, character and deeds. In her Preface, Keckley claims to justify the ‘good intentions’ behind some of Mrs. Lincoln’s controversial deeds, and thus even publishes excerpts from the letters written to her by the President’s wife. From the attention given to Keckley’s White House days, it is evident that she wished to reveal more of the Lincolns than herself in her ‘memoir’. Some critics have been skeptical of the formal and polished narrative style from a former slave denied proper educational training. The value of the book also lies in the fact that in this account, the pen is in the hand of a significant dressmaker who talks, sadly, more about Mrs. Lincoln than herself in the book.

These two glittering examples of American dressmakers who rose in power and position on the basis of their work, suggests that such a rise through the dressmaking profession may have been possible even in England and that dressmaking may have provided English dressmakers with an opportunity to better their social position.
For many Victorian analysts, the city was viewed as a place of corruption which weakened the morality of female workers who entered the city aspiring for a comfortable and better life. As women moved away from the purifying and protective domestic sphere, surrounded by friends and family in their well-established country homes, amidst natural bliss, they got trapped in the mechanized, isolating, and contaminating urban environment. The potentially corrupting effects of the workplace lay in its exposure of workers to opulence and enlivened cravings with could not be satisfied by the miserable wages of the needle. The same ambition of upward social mobility which was lauded in male workers was severely censured in female ones as vanity. The Secretary of the London Early Closing Association, Joseph Pitter, told the 1864 Commission that ‘[t]he love of liberty and the idea of gentility lie at the root of the mania among young women to become dress-makers and milliners’ (Lord, interview no. 81, 117-18).24 Another persistent anxiety was about the blurring of class divisions in dressmaking institutions. As needle trades incorporated women from different social backgrounds, the lot of ‘distressed gentlewomen’ seemed to be threatened by their interaction and close proximity with low class women of ‘bad character’ in such establishments. Some believed that the day-workers were more exposed to the ‘temptation of the streets’ than resident needlewomen. Parliamentary investigations suggested that needlewomen of lower classes had inferior morals and so they had a corrupting influence on their fellow workers. These suggestions of inferior morals was disputed by Mayhew in his survey of ‘London Labour and London Poor’, serialized between 1849 and 1850 in the *Morning Chronicle*. He illustrated how, in the case of ‘sweated labour’, women from all social classes could be forced into prostitution from sheer poverty and want, and not due to

lower morals. Slop workers were the worst paid and hence most pressurized to give in to prostitution. To prevent their families from entering the workhouse and facing its horrors, many women accepted the starvation wages given to slop workers and then got sucked into prostitution to meet the minimum needs of sustenance. Slop workers were also found to cohabit with fellow lodgers. Slop workers attributed their low wages to sub-indenture, sweating and competition.

A piece of dry, coarse bread and half a cup of coffee would be considered a decent meal for the impoverished seamstresses. Ruth Hilton and her fellow workers are given a ‘frugal supper’ comprising bread, cheese and beer. Most of the weary seamstresses prefer to rest or look outside the window or just engage in a change of posture rather than have their unappetizing dinner. They, like Ruth, return ‘supperless’ to their work. On Sundays, Ruth would have a bun or a biscuit which would have to suffice for the entire day as she could not afford more expensive meals. Mary Barton, faced with dire poverty, stands assured of two meals a day at her dressmaking establishment. Her proprietress, Miss Simmonds, had stopped the practice of giving tea to her subordinates out of considerations of economy and like her counterpart in Ruth, Mrs. Mason, she served the last meal only after the work for the night had been completed, no matter how late it was.

Dressmakers and milliners had to bend over their work through the day and most part of the night. Usually they were cramped indoors in claustrophobic rooms with little ventilation and dim lighting. Even the comparatively well-off dressmakers and milliners, who had their own shop, had to be subject to the orders, whims and insolence of their affluent clients. Upper class ladies would come and place orders expecting to replicate latest styles or rich ladies would even order gowns and caps like some fashionable ladies of their
neighbourhood. In *Cranford*, the milliners, Betsy Barker and her sister, had been encouraged and supported in their endeavours by the ladies of the neighbourhood. Gentlewomen like Lady Arley facilitated them by lending an old cap whose design the Barker sisters copied and then sold those newly made caps in Cranford. To establish and maintain the tag of being exclusive in millinery, the Barkers sold their wares only to the elite of the town, rebuffing those without a ‘pedigree’ like the wives and daughters of a farmer’s family. Catching a sight of commoners wearing similarly designed caps would cause bruised egos in the haughty clients of the Barkers. It showed that dressmakers and milliners were supposed to abide by the class distinctions and not offend their elite clients by dealing with those below their rank. Dressmakers and milliners were also entrusted with the responsibility of guiding their clients on the latest in fashion. Some, like Miss Matty in *Cranford*, who could not afford new gowns for every special occasion, would try to wear a new designer cap. She claims that she is too old to care about her dress but insists on a new, and what she considers fashionable, turban.

Dressmakers and milliners usually worked in groups and this group identity sheltered them from feelings of isolation and social ostracism which other single wage earners, like the governess, or even doctor, had to face.

Dressmakers usually worked in closed, confined rooms, bending over their stitching for very long hours. They were offered poor diet and their work conditions induced several health problems like respiratory, digestive, and rheumatic complaints. The most frequent and persistent trouble they faced was with something very integral to their work, i.e. their eyesight. The dim lighting and awkward posture strained the eyes and prompted a series of vision related troubles, often leading to partial or total blindness. In fiction, Ruth Hilton
strains her ‘aching eyes’ to look outside the window and gain relief from the view of a winter night outside. Her limbs get weary from her tiring work. Her fellow worker Jenny suffers from cough and pain in her sides. The pain could be a result of the cramped posture required to sew in a dressmaker’s workroom for long hours. When her side pain becomes severe, Jenny thinks of writing home about it but then refrains as she recalls the premium her father had paid to get her apprenticed to the establishment. She had younger siblings, so she could not trouble her father more with her complaints. She trusts that the change of season, from winter to summer, would help her recover from her cough and her pain. Jenny’s respiratory troubles become worse and a doctor has to be called in. Ruth, who is close to Jenny and quite fond of her, is not allowed to nurse her because Ruth’s skilful hands cannot be spared. Jenny’s mother is sent for to attend and to nurse her daughter. Jenny’s mother, Mrs. Wood, comes, nurses her daughter, and then takes her daughter away as her illness would take long to heal. Dressmaker’s apprentices could fall ill as a result of their work but they would have to bear the consequences of their illness alone, no one would take responsibility for the damage caused to their health. Worn out by late night work, Ruth wonders how she would be able to survive the hostile and difficult work conditions for five long years (the duration of her apprenticeship) in the ‘close room’ with the ‘oppressive stillness’. Under Mrs. Mason’s watchful eyes, no workwoman could yawn, talk, whisper, giggle, or even let her eyes move away from her work. Ruth moans that the overwhelming silence probably enabled them to hear the sound of the thread as it moved in and out of the garment. Her fellow workers, who are more experienced than Ruth, console her with the fact that the work hours are not always as long as it was that particular night. Sometimes the seamstresses could go to bed at ten at night. Another effect of the tiring work was seen in the ‘deadened sense of life’ in most of
the seamstresses.\textsuperscript{25} They did not seem to care about their food, the workplace discrimination, their looks, their entertainment or even admire the beauty of nature.

Meg in Dickens’ \textit{The Chimes} is seen to work on her embroidery in a ‘poor, mean room’. Her eyes appear dimmed and she looks faded, with the bloom diminished from her cheeks. She also appears to have lost the hope which had characterized her earlier. Meg’s friend Lilian remarks that Meg has changed considerably from the cheerful person she used to be although Lilian admits that there is ‘little cause for smiling in this hard and toilsome life’.\textsuperscript{26} Later, in another vision, Meg’s father, Trotty Veck, sees his daughter in a reduced state, working in a ‘poorer, meaner garrett’ but Lilian is conspicuous by her absence. Meg faints between her work and her fasting but she does not complain of tiredness, being very resilient and patient by nature. Lilian begins to complain of their hard life as she enumerates the reasons for her protest:

\begin{quote}
Such work, such work! So many hours, so many days, so many long, long nights of hopeless, cheerless, never-ending work—not to heap up riches, not to live grandly or gaily, not to live upon enough, however coarse; but to earn bare bread; to scrape together just enough to toil upon, and want upon, and keep alive in us the consciousness of our hard fate!\textsuperscript{27}
\end{quote}

Her agonized cry is symptomatic of the needlewoman’s plight, whose utmost effort could not protect her from the toils of life but simply keep her from starving to death. Young needlewomen had no cause to hope for a better future or even respite from that drudgery, day after day, till they became incapacitated for work.

\textsuperscript{25} Mrs. Gaskell, \textit{Ruth}, p.10.
\textsuperscript{26} Dickens, \textit{The Chimes}, etext <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/653/653-h/653-h.htm>
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid, etext, chapter III
Margaret in Gaskell’s *Mary Barton* gets worn out by her long working hours and keeping awake at nights. When she has to stitch an entire family’s clothes in an emergency, for a funeral, she knows she will not be paid for her labour, as the widow is nearly bankrupt. Her eyes hurt from stitching black but she does not refuse to stitch the mourning clothes. The strain her work puts on her eyes, leads to her partial blindness. She manages to earn her bread through her singing, when she becomes blind. Margaret looks ‘sallow, unhealthy,’ with a ‘careworn’ appearance, attired in a ‘humble’ and ‘simple’ dress made of some ‘dark stuff gown’ and covered by a shawl. This impoverished look denoted a needlewoman who worked in the ‘honourable’ sector of sewing and was not one of the flashily attired needlewoman exposed to, and lured by, the ‘wages of sin’.

One of the modes of entertainment available to the stifling lifestyles of the dressmakers was the allowance to view a ballroom dance from the ante chamber. Three or four dressmakers were given this permission, as their services were required in case of sudden emergencies where a tiny bit of stitching might be required for repairing a gown. They would carry a crisis kit of thread, needles, sandal ribbons, pins and such things. Mrs. Mason, in *Ruth*, claimed to choose the most diligent but she actually chose the best looking among her trainees, as she thought that they would look appealing and create a favourable impression about her establishment. The seamstresses were allowed to stand at a side door and watch the beautiful sight of splendidly attired ladies and gentlemen dancing in the grandeur of halls. Ruth is enraptured by the scene, she is happy and content with her lot, she finds it ‘enough to gaze’ at the flowers, jewels, colours, music and beauty.

Good looking dressmakers managed to attract the attention of men, sometimes wealthy men, and they were tempted into illicit relationships, to satisfy the human need for
love and company and as a refreshing change from their stifling and monotonous life. Mr. Carson, in *Mary Barton*, makes use of another needlewoman, Sally Leadbitter, to carry his letters and messages to Mary. Sally is happy to oblige as she herself would have liked to be drawn into such a clandestine affair for some excitement. She did not get wooers as she was a ‘plain, red-haired and freckled girl’. She loved gossip and entertained others in the close monotonous workroom with her animated retelling of scandalous tales and local rumours.

On the whole, dressmakers presented a rather pitiable picture. Thus, Helen Rogers argues that dressmakers were:

overwhelmingly represented as vulnerable and powerless, both as individuals and as a class of workers. The figure of the distressed sempstress presented to many a more appealing and sympathetic object of reform than the feisty, independent, relatively well-paid factory woman who had embodied the working woman in the 1830s. The very helplessness of the sempstress demanded and sanctioned the attention and action of reformers of all social classes.  

Richard Dugard Grainger’s Report for the Children’s Employment Commission of 1843 proved that the plight of the dressmaker and her detrimental working conditions was worse than most other working women’s predicament. The metaphor of slavery was repeatedly applied to the dressmaker’s toil with its long hours, low wages, and ill ventilated, dimly lit, claustrophobic rooms. Grainger was also alarmed by what he termed the ‘proverbial’ immorality among the dressmakers.

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28 Gaskell, *Mary Barton*, p.84.
29 Helen Rogers, ‘“The Good Are Not Always Powerful, not the Powerful Always Good’: the Politics of Women’s Needlework in Mid-Victorian London’, p.590.
‘The Seamstress – A Song of the Shirt’ 1854

By Anna Elizabeth Blunden

Source: <http://www.artothek.de/artothek/images/incDetailView>
Seamstresses

By Frank Holl. 1875.

Courtesy of the Royal Albert Memorial Museum, Exeter. Catalogue no. 8 in the 2013 Watts Gallery exhibition,

*Frank Holl: Emerging from the Shadows.*

Source: <http://www.victorianweb.org/painting/holl/paintings/4.jpg>
Images of the miserable needlewoman abound in nineteenth century fiction, drama and even poetry, as she embodied feminine fragility and martyrdom. Reynold’s story ‘The Semptress’ (1850) gained huge popularity as a portraiture of a slave of England. Pictured as a victim, the needlewoman became a cultural icon as represented visually in various paintings of the era like those by Anna Blunden, John Thomas Peele, Charles Rossiter, Richard Redgrave, Edward Radford, most of them generically titled ‘The Song of the Shirt’, and J.E. Millais’s painting entitled ‘Stitch! Stitch! Stitch!’(1876). Most of the paintings focus on a solitary, exhausted, pale looking needlewoman in poverty-stricken surroundings. In Blunden’s portraiture the seamstress is a pitiable creature looking skywards with folded hands, eloquently praying for peace and rest, her position by the window highlighting the light and freedom outside while the dressmaker remains trapped inside. Thomas Hood’s poem ‘The Song of the Shirt’, published in December 1843, in Punch, also highlights the plight of the needlewoman. From the physical effects of her work, to her mental and psychological condition, her shabby surroundings, her starvation diet, her paltry earnings, her drudgery, her longing for respite, her loneliness, her gloom, her dismal poverty – all are cited in the poem. It popularized the wrongs dealt to needlewomen and became a sacred song for reformers. This typical representation of the Victorian seamstress deserves to be quoted at length:

With fingers weary and worn,
With eyelids heavy and red,
A woman sat, in unwomanly rags,
Plying her needle and thread —
Stitch! stitch! stitch!
In poverty, hunger, and dirt,
And still with a voice of dolorous pitch
She sang the "Song of the Shirt."
"Work! work! work!
While the cock is crowing aloof!
And work — work — work,
Till the stars shine through the roof!
It's Oh! to be a slave
Along with the barbarous Turk,
Where woman has never a soul to save,
If this is Christian work!
"Work — work — work,
Till the brain begins to swim;
Work — work — work,
Till the eyes are heavy and dim!
Seam, and gusset, and band,
Band, and gusset, and seam,
Till over the buttons I fall asleep,
And sew them on in a dream!
"Oh, Men, with Sisters dear!
Oh, men, with Mothers and Wives!
It is not linen you're wearing out,
But human creatures' lives!
Stitch — stitch — stitch,
In poverty, hunger and dirt,
Sewing at once, with a double thread,
A Shroud as well as a Shirt.
"But why do I talk of Death?
That Phantom of grisly bone,
I hardly fear its terrible shape,
It seems so like my own —
It seems so like my own,
Because of the fasts I keep;
Oh, God! that bread should be so dear
And flesh and blood so cheap!
"Work — work — work!
My labour never flags;
And what are its wages? A bed of straw,
A crust of bread — and rags.
That shattered roof — this naked floor —
A table — a broken chair —
And a wall so blank, my shadow I thank
For sometimes falling there!
"Work — work — work!
From weary chime to chime,
Work — work — work,
As prisoners work for crime!
Band, and gusset, and seam,
Seam, and gusset, and band,
Till the heart is sick, and the brain benumbed,
As well as the weary hand.
"Work — work — work,
In the dull December light,
And work — work — work,
When the weather is warm and bright —
While underneath the eaves
The brooding swallows cling
As if to show me their sunny backs
And twit me with the spring.
"Oh! but to breathe the breath
Of the cowslip and primrose sweet —
With the sky above my head,
And the grass beneath my feet;
For only one short hour
To feel as I used to feel,
Before I knew the woes of want
And the walk that costs a meal!
"Oh! but for one short hour!
A respite however brief!
No blessed leisure for Love or Hope,
But only time for Grief!
A little weeping would ease my heart,
But in their briny bed
My tears must stop, for every drop
Hinders needle and thread!"
With fingers weary and worn,
With eyelids heavy and red,
A woman sat in unwomanly rags,
Plying her needle and thread —
Stitch! stitch! stitch!
In poverty, hunger, and dirt,
And still with a voice of dolorous pitch, —
Would that its tone could reach the Rich! —
She sang this "Song of the Shirt!"30

The fragile needlewoman was typified as a victim of the corrupting city, male greed, cruel employer, and apathetic, arrogant and prosperous clients. Her vulnerability to temptation and to earning the ‘wages of sin’ made her an intriguing figure in the Victorian mind. It also fused the image of the dressmaker with that of the prostitute. In 1863, the *English Woman’s Journal*, concerned about the dreadful employment conditions of all women, published a series entitled ‘A Season with Dressmakers, or the Experience of a First Hand’ by Jane Le Plaistrier. With her first hand experience, Le Plaistrier termed dressmaking as a form of slavery and noted that no man or beast – like horses and oxen – could work under similar conditions for sixteen or eighteen hours every day as women were ordered to do. The arguments of Le Plaistrier and Bessie Parkes helped in the formation of women’s unions like the ‘Society of Dressmakers, Milliners and Mantlemakers’ which was established in 1875.

Impecunious needlewomen were usually thrown on their own resources with indifferent guardians. They seldom had protective families or caring employers. As apprentices they might be expected to return home late at night with no male escort or to even run errands like going out to buy matching thread or other accessories all by themselves. Even residential apprentices like Ruth had to spend Sundays alone, in a cold workroom, and often stay hungry with no friends or relatives to visit. Ruth Hilton’s

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30 The source of this text is R. B. Inglis (ed.), *Adventures in English Literature* (Toronto: W. J. Gage, 1952), pp. 436 -37.
employer, Mrs. Mason, catches her on the streets, late one Sunday night, hand-in-hand with a man (Mr. Bellingham). Mrs. Mason reprimands the frightened Ruth excessively, telling her: ‘Don't attempt to show your face at my house again after this conduct. I saw you, and your spark, too. I'll have no slurs on the character of my apprentices. Don't say a word. I saw enough. I shall write and tell your guardian to-morrow.’\textsuperscript{31} This shows how an apprentice might be thrown off or sacked at the first mistake without any warning, even though Ruth’s guardian had paid for her apprenticeship for the next five years. Mrs. Mason would probably inform Ruth’s guardian that she had been sacked on grounds of immorality and indecorous behavior. In her fright and inexperience, Ruth is led to believe that Mrs. Mason’s words are absolute. Mr. Bellingham convinces her of his ‘love’ and persuades her to accompany him to London. Mary Barton, similarly, is too scared and embarrassed to show up again at Miss Simmonds establishment after her appearance at James Wilson’s trial becomes public. Miss Simmonds sends word through Sally Leadbitter that Mary might be accepted again if she learns to behave herself. Sally had already informed Mary earlier that this public notice accorded to Mary would do the shop good, and ladies from far would come to look at Mary. The excitement of knowing or seeing someone who had borne witness in a trial would induce customers to queue up before Miss Simmonds’ shop to interrogate or just to gaze at Mary. In this case, paradoxically, notoriety generates business.

Signs of the abject poverty of the dressmaker’s life are evidenced in Mary Barton’s home, where Mary is forced to sell household items like utensils, and even blankets, apart from ornaments to buy food for her father. Many a day her father would go without food. Dickens’ Lilian (in \textit{The Chimes}) gives up her needlework altogether, to become one of the

\textsuperscript{31} Mrs. Gaskell, \textit{Ruth}, pp. 54-55.
‘fallen women’, but some needlewomen worked during the day and took to the streets at night to earn wages for survival. Esther, Mary Barton’s aunt, having herself ‘fallen’ due to pressure of circumstances, is apprehensive of Mary’s future when she sees Mary’s beauty and her attraction towards Carson, a rich mill-owner’s son. In examining the causes that led dressmakers to become ‘fallen women’, the first and foremost would be poverty. Catherine Judd in her article analyses the predicament of Gaskell’s needlewomen who confront ‘four basic dangers’ that needlework opened up for young seamstresses: ‘the working conditions of “sweated labour”, the work’s excitation of treacherous female vanity, the sexual exploitation of seamstresses by their employers, and the opportunities presented by dressmaking for working class women and wealthy men to meet.’ Judd also profiles sewing as a ‘craft’ similar to other crafts like ‘writing’ and ‘painting’, which can transcend the mortal life of its creator. This balances out her argument, the negative implications of sewing-as-corrupting are matched by the tradition of positive images related to sewing, the needle becoming the symbol of domesticity, and sewing as a metaphor for female art. Deborah D Morse’s article examines how in Gaskell’s narrative and moral strategy, the seamstress is usually placed outside the home, beyond domesticity but apparently still within respectability while the ‘fallen woman’, the streetwalker, rightfully belongs to the street. Due to their adverse circumstances, dressmakers and milliners were vulnerable to prostitution.

Dressmakers and milliners had to face hostile workplace environment which could be seriously damaging for their health. Their sympathetic literary representation usually focuses

on their plight, making the dressmaker an icon of the working woman’s misery and it glosses over the issue of the needlewoman driven to double up as a prostitute. This was probably done on two accounts: first, to highlight the plight of the honourable dressmaker and second, to subtly bust the myth that all dressmakers carried on prostitution surreptitiously. The next chapter shifts the focus from the dainty occupation of sewing to the robust arena of manual labour.