**Working Class Families and The Role of Women**

The Industrial Revolution completely transformed the role of the family. In traditional, agricultural society, families worked together as a unit of production, tending to fields, knitting sweaters, or tending to the fire. Women could parent and also play a role in producing food or goods needed for the household. Work and play time were flexible and interwoven. Industrialization changed all that. The same specialization of labor that occurred in factories occurred in the lives of working-class families, and this broke up the family economy. Work and home life became sharply separated. Men earned money for their families. Women took care of the home and saw their economic role decline. While many factory workers were initially women, most of them were young women who would quit working when they married. In stark contrast to the various changing tasks that a farmer performed in pre-industrial society, factory workers typically completed repetitive and monotonous tasks for 10 to 14 hours each day.

Industrial working-class families, though not working together, did serve an economic purpose of raising money to support each other. As we have seen, children often worked to earn some income for the family. In difficult circumstances, mothers struggled to make ends meet and keep the family out of the poorhouses. Jane Goode, a working-class mother, testified before the British Factory Commission in 1833. The history of her family shows the worries and stresses of a mother struggling to survive. Her life shows the unfortunately common death rate of infants. Jane Goode had twelve children, but five died before the age of two:

I have had five children that have all worked at the factory. I have only one that works there now. She is sixteen. She works in the card-room. She minds the drawing-head. She gets 5 shillings 9 pence. She pays it all to me. She has worked there nine years. She has been at the drawing-head all the while. She got 2 shilling when she first went. She was just turned seven. . . . Mary did not work here [at the factory] long. She went in about fourteen or fifteen. She was married last summer. She is thirty next June. She went on working at Elliot and Mill’s and other factories till she married. Anne was just turned seven; she worked here four years, then she went to Mr Elliot’s, and worked there till she was married, two years ago. She is nineteen next June. John was not eight when he went in; he is now twenty-two. . . . I have had twelve children altogether. I thought you were asking only of those who worked at the mill. There were five that died before they were a quarter of a year old. . . . Mr Samuel Wilson (now dead) came to Derby to get my hand, and I engaged with him with my family. I did it to keep my children off the parish [welfare]. (Frader 87-88)

Betty Wardle, interviewed by the parliamentary commission on women in mines in 1842, illustrates the incredible challenges of being a mother and a worker in coal mines:

Q: Have you ever worked in a coal pit?  
Wardle: Ay, I have worked in a pit since I was six years old  
Q: Have you any children?  
Wardle: Yes. I have had four children; two of them were born while I worked in the pits.  
Q: Did you work in the pits while you were in the family way [pregnant]?  
Wardle: Ay, to be sure. I had a child born in the pits, and I brought it up the pitshaft in my skirt. (Frader 88)

## ****The Emerging Middle Class****

Gradually, very gradually, a middle class, or “middling sort”, did emerge in industrial cities, mostly toward the end of the 19th century. Until then, there had been only two major classes in society: aristocrats born into their lives of wealth and privilege, and low-income commoners born in the working classes. However new urban industries gradually required more of what we call today “white collar” jobs, such as business people, shopkeepers, bank clerks, insurance agents, merchants, accountants, managers, doctors, lawyers, and teachers. [Middle-class people tended to have monthly or yearly salaries rather than hourly wages.] One piece of evidence of this emerging middle class was the rise of retail shops in England that increased from 300 in 1875 to 2,600 by 1890 (Ashton page #?). Another mark of distinction of the middle class was their ability to hire servants to cook and clean the house from time to time. Not surprisingly, from 1851 to 1871, the number of domestic servants increased from 900,000 to 1.4 million. (Ashton \*\*\* need to find page #) This is proof of a small but rising middle class that prided themselves on taking responsibility for themselves and their families. They viewed professional success as the result of a person’s energy, perseverance, and hard work.

In this new middle class, families became a sanctuary from stressful industrial life. Home remained separate from work and took on the role of emotional support, where women of the house created a moral and spiritual safe harbor away from the rough-and-tumble industrial world outside. Most middle-class adult women were discouraged from working outside the home. They could afford to send their children to school. As children became more of an economic burden, and better health care decreased infant mortality, middle-class women gave birth to fewer children.