

A Brief Episode in the History of Dusting

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DOI: 10.15763/jou.ts.2018.08.20.02

Cleaning kicks up dust, and dust takes its time to settle. In the early twentieth century, as business boomed and corporations clogged the sky, skyscraper managers scheduled a gap of hours between cleaning and dusting. They wrote about it in trade journals like *Buildings and Building Management*. It was definitely the best system.

The women who did the cleaning were often called charwomen. Where did they go during the hours in between? We don't exactly know, but by the beginning of the 1920s and definitely by the end of the decade, they declined to go there anymore. A group of fairly unskilled, mostly immigrant women dictated new work hours that ran counter to dusting management theory, and management caved. How did they do it? We don't really know.

The charwoman long predated the skyscraper. The word was first used to denote temporary or part-time workers hired in place of, or to supplement, domestic servants in private homes. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines a charwoman as “[a] woman hired by the day to do odd jobs of household work” and traces the term back to a quote from 1596: “All such yonge Wemen and others called Charr Wemen in this towne as are in noe service.” By the nineteenth century the word referred to many types of work under a cluster of related conditions that distinguished charwomen from domestic servants. They did not live in the homes of their employers and probably did not receive many meals from them. They generally worked part time for different employers over the course of each week, either on a regular schedule or an ad-hoc basis. If a wealthy family shut up its city house for the summer, it might dismiss the servants and hire a

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charwoman to come in and dust. When families threw dinner parties or balls they hired charwomen as extra help to clean before and after. Masters and mistresses probably found charwomen through the same classified ads, labor agencies, and word-of-mouth networks that they used to find live-in domestics.¹

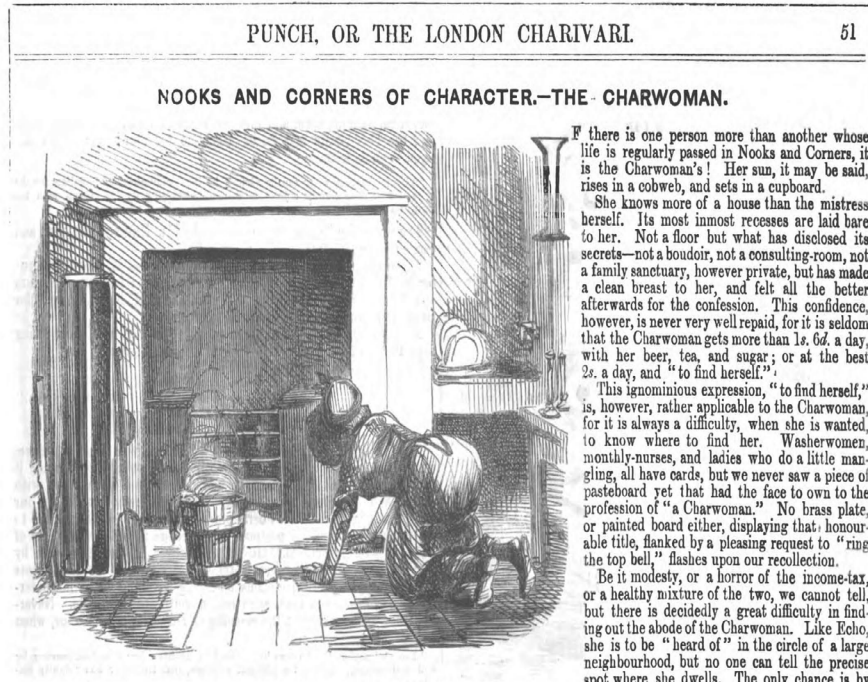


Figure 1. "Nooks and Corners of Character – the Charwoman." (Source: Punch 18 [London: 1850], 51, hathitrust.org [accessed 28 March 2018].)

In the late nineteenth century, the growing number of apartment and office buildings began to hire women from the same labor pool. Although the employment arrangement changed—instead of working as temporary maids in private homes, these women regularly cleaned semi-public lobbies and hallways—the name “charwoman” stuck. Some were the wives of the buildings’ janitors. Some continued to pick up traditional short-term jobs on the side. Probably the same women moved back and forth between the old and new configurations of the job. William Dean Howells used the variation “chore-women” in describing the women who washed the marble halls and stairs of a great office building; perhaps this bastardization is a clue to its etymology, or maybe an invention borne of Howells’ misunderstanding. The common thread among

¹ *Oxford English Dictionary*, oed.com; *Godey’s Lady’s Book* 66 (March 1863): 256; Tim Meldrum, *Domestic Service and Gender, 1660-1750* (London: Longman, 2000), 29.

these variations was that the woman was not a servant to any particular household, but moved among them, cleaning.²

These women did not have good reputations. Popular media usually offered impatient sketches, but sometimes a writer took the time to paint a portrait of subtle malevolence. The first moment of conflict in Edith Wharton's 1905 novel *The House of Mirth* takes place on the stairs of the Benedick, an apartment house off Madison Avenue with a marble porch and faux-Georgian facade. Selden rents a top-floor bachelor apartment with a fireplace and a little balcony, and invites Miss Lily Bart up, unescorted, to discuss the propriety and conveniences of apartment house life. Coming out at the end of the visit, Miss Bart pauses on the landing to confirm that no one will witness her departure:

There was no one in sight, however, but a char-woman who was scrubbing the stairs. Her own stout person and its surrounding implements took up so much room that Lily, to pass her, had to gather up her skirts and brush against the wall. As she did so, the woman paused in her work and looked up curiously, resting her clenched red fists on the wet cloth she had just drawn from her pail. She had a broad sallow face, slightly pitted with small-pox, and thin straw-coloured hair through which her scalp shone unpleasantly.

"I beg your pardon," said Lily, intending by her politeness to convey a criticism of the other's manner. The woman, without answering, pushed her pail aside, and continued to stare as Miss Bart swept by with a murmur of silken linings. Lily felt herself flushing under the look. What did the creature suppose? Could one never do the simplest, the most harmless thing, without subjecting one's self to some odious conjecture? Half way down the next flight, she smiled to think that a char-woman's stare should so perturb her. The poor thing was probably dazzled by

² Elton Burroughs, "Machine Replace Human Hand in Floor Maintenance," *Real Estate Magazine* (February 1932): 52–55; Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1905), 20–21, 91; William Dean Howells, *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (New York: The New American Library, 1965 [1890]), 12.

such an unwonted apparition. But were such apparitions unwonted in Selden's stairs? Miss Bart was not familiar with the moral code of bachelors' flat-houses, and her colour rose again as it occurred to her that the woman's persistent gaze implied a groping among past associations. But she put aside the thought with a smile at her own fears, and hastened downward, wondering if she should find a cab short of Fifth Avenue.³

This passage departs from Wharton's traditional focus on class relations between old wealth and *nouveaux riches* to describe a clash between rich and poor. In these early pages, a reader might be fooled into thinking that Wharton means this portrait as a figment of Lily Bart's prejudices. When Lily subsequently meets the charwoman on the staircase in her own home—Lily's aunt has hired her to help with fall cleaning—she brushes the woman aside in a commanding tone. Lily does not know that her name is Mrs. Haffen, that she works at the direction of Mr. Haffen, the janitor of Selden's building, who in turn works for Mr. Rosedale, the landlord, who is not physically present to supervise their work. Lily does not know that Mrs. Haffen cleans Selden's rooms, and peeks in his wastebasket, and that she will use what she finds there to blackmail Lily and begin the downward spiral that Wharton plots through the second half of the novel. Privy to the secrets of many households but under the dominion of none of them, Mrs. Haffen represented a challenge to the traditional household's privacy and mastery over cleaning labor. The seeming ill-health of the charwoman, her rudeness, and the suggestion of contagion all conform to common nineteenth-century descriptions of servants, but her place in the interstices of the real estate industry's growing economies of scale gave her new and dangerous powers.⁴

Wharton was not alone. Comic profiles and sketches of charwomen dotted the landscape of popular culture; in these pages, they were thieves, gossips, nomads, “carry[ing] their stories of family doings from basement to basement as they carry off

³ Wharton, *The House of Mirth* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1905) 20–21.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 20–21, 163–71; Daniel E. Sutherland, “The Servant Problem: An Index of Antebellum Americanism,” *Southern Studies* 18, no. 4 (1980): 488–503.

their perquisites.”⁵ They were old and ugly; a blush-rose held in the gnarled hand of a charwoman offered a nice aesthetic contrast.⁶ By 1905, when Wharton published *The House of Mirth*, the charwoman was a cultural type: poor and luckless, unattractive, hard-worked, humble, rude of manner, a widow or the wife of a sick man or a drunk, suggestive of disease and infection, skulking in in-between spaces, free from the civilizing constraints of a master and mistress.



Figure 2. “Gracie Fields [British comic actress] as a charwoman in music-hall sketch,” front (left) and back (right), cigarette card. (Source: George Arents Collection, New York Public Library Digital Archives, digitalcollections.nypl.org [accessed 28 March 2018].)

⁵ “Charades in Action,” *Godey’s Lady’s Book* 58 (1859): 239; “Social Ferrets,” *Harper’s Weekly*, 18 March 1871, 246 [quote].

⁶ Verse three of four:

The hand was swart with toil;
 The flower could know no stain.
 The hand was seamed and scarred;
 The flower could know no pain.
 And the hand strained close the flower
 That rained back in ecstasy,
 The bliss of its crimson lips.
 These were lovers strange to see!

Sarah P. McLean Greene, “The Flower,” *Harper’s Weekly*, 10 December 1904, p. 1915.

Two years after Charles Scribner's Sons published *The House of Mirth*, Ethyl Barrymore appeared on Broadway in "The Silver Box," playing a sympathetic charwoman wrongly accused of theft, and bumped up against critics' expectations. A reviewer in *Harper's* found Barrymore ill-cast because she did not portray the charwoman as sufficiently pathetic: "Why in the world did she select the play? . . . Never once is she the charwoman. There is even a noticeable effort in her subdued voice and repression of movement. It is as if she were constantly reminding herself to be the charwoman."⁷

Play, poem, novel, essay—few revealed that if a scrubwoman was pathetic, it was largely her boss's fault.⁸ Landlords and building managers hired "the maimed, the halt and almost blind and the aged" to clean houses, and then office buildings. They treated them pitifully. In 1919, the Minimum Wage Commission of Massachusetts conducted a survey of scrubwomen (as charwomen were more and more called) in 201 buildings and found 94 percent making less than nine dollars a week, much less than the \$11.65 a week the commission deemed a necessity to live "in any kind of comfort." When the Massachusetts state legislature mandated a nine-hour day for women, in accordance with the Supreme Court's 1908 ruling in *Muller v. Oregon* that the government could intervene in labor contracts made between bosses and female workers because women were frail and needed protection, many buildings fired their charwomen and replaced them with men.⁹ A hotel chambermaid made a good plaintiff in *Muller*, but the plight of a charwoman could have pulled on the justices' heartstrings even more effectively.

Another indignity was the split shift, from five to eight pm, say, and back again from six to eight am. This followed the industry's best practice of waiting hours after

⁷ I, "The Season's Plays," *Harper's Weekly*, 6 April 1907, 512.

⁸ There are exceptions. An 1850 essay in the British magazine *Punch* exposes the oppression that charwomen face at the hands of masters, mistresses, and fellow servants, and notes the emotional labor of controlling one's anger—"she must bear every little turn of fortune with cool equanimity, even if it be the fate of her pail to be violently kicked down stairs by coming in contact with master's indignant boot." "Nooks and Corners of Character.—the Charwoman." *Punch* 18 (London: 1850), 51.

⁹ William B. Baker, "Employment of Women in Office Buildings," *Buildings and Building Management (BBM)*, 6 October 1919, 33; *Muller v. Oregon* 208 US 412 (1908).

cleaning to dust away the day's particles from desks, lamps, chairs, filing cabinets, radiator covers, the leaves of potted plants, framed photos and degrees, mantelpieces in fancy offices, and windowsills. This high standard of cleanliness was of a piece with other standards in office buildings that have since slipped—a hat on every head, a mail chute on each floor, no more than thirty or thirty-four seconds' wait for an elevator.¹⁰ Was a well-dusted office, fully functioning mail chute, or on-time elevator generally achieved in practice? That is a good question.

Nor are there statistics on the prevalence of the two-shift scrubwoman model. The only extant evidence is a series of articles from *Buildings and Building Management* that cluster first around World War I, when all kinds of bosses struggled to keep workers because of high demand for labor, and then a month or two after the market crash of 1929, with another tight labor market about to crumble. The articles debate the hours a scrubwoman should work each night: five to midnight, six to midnight, seven to midnight, ten pm to seven am, two to nine am, three-thirty to eight-thirty. Managers make various claims for the superiority of cleaning before or after midnight—in winter, the heat is turned off at night and it is warmer to clean before midnight; a night shift overlaps with late workers, whose elevating needs overlap, allowing the elevator operator shift also to end at midnight; theft is lower before midnight. After midnight, there are fewer tenants to interrupt, lights can be turned off at dawn to save electricity; and dust will not settle until after tenants arrive, so maybe they won't notice it slowly accumulate. These managers acknowledge the decline of the split shift, and look back wistfully.¹¹

Why did the split shift end? Not, it should be stressed, through advances in cleaning technology. Technology did have lots of other effects on the work. By the 1920s, new materials like linoleum and tools like vacuum cleaners decreased the

¹⁰ C. T. Coley, "A Method of Checking the Economical Height of an Office Building," *BBM*, 1 July 1913, 41–45; "Selecting and Training Elevator Operators," *BBM*, 19 November 1928, 44–45; "Safeguarding Tenants and their Property," *BBM*, 1 December 1933, 50–52.

¹¹ "Have the Cleaners Do Their Work in the Morning," *Buildings and Building Management (BBM)*, 20 October 1919, 30; Baker, "Employment of Women in Office Buildings," 33; "What Are the Best Cleaning Hours?" *BBM*, 4 November 1929, 31–34; "Adapting Hotel Training Methods to Office Building Workers," *BBM*, 13 January 1930, 51–57.

amount of necessary labor, so fewer women cleaned more offices. Sometimes the addition of new technologies led managers to flip a cleaning workforce from female to male. In Boston in 1919, a building that used a newfangled vacuum cleaner hired men to clean their floors. Elsewhere, charwomen pushed rug sweepers, a laborious and time-consuming task. “Marble women” carried water from the basement to wash marble floors and wainscoting in the halls, stairwells, and toilets.¹² In one office building in 1930, women cleaned offices, toilet rooms, and corridors, and men cleaned “ceiling light fixtures, partition glass, bronze, elevator doors, revolving doors, sidewalks, ‘high’ dusting, waxing linoleum and rubber tile.”¹³ But these gendered choices in floor-cleaning technologies did not affect the speed at which kicked-up dust settled back on surfaces. They did not change managers’ calculus about waiting for dust to fall.

Buildings and Building Management does not come right out and say it, but articles in the journal suggest that the split shift ended because scrubwomen kept fighting it. Absenteeism. Outright demands for better hours. Pleas that they needed time for their responsibilities at home, cooking, cleaning, and raising children. One building manager told a *BBM* reporter, “here in New York we cannot get women to work those hours. They are an independent lot.” Another wrote that scrubwomen “have pretty definite ideas of what hours they want to work.” None acknowledged that from the perspective of both the worker and the boss, the split shift was a remarkably inefficient use of labor.¹⁴

¹² Baker, “Employment of Women in Office Buildings,” 33.

¹³ “Adapting Hotel Training Methods to Office Building Workers,” 51–57.

¹⁴ “What Are the Best Cleaning Hours,” 31–34.



Figure 3. Gordon Parks was a government-employed FSA photographer when he shot this photo. On the Library of Congress webpage where it is housed, it is called “Washington, D.C. Government Charwoman,” but Parks and everyone else always called it “American Gothic, Washington D.C.” (Source: Photograph, 1942, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, www.loc.gov/item/2016646280/ [accessed 29 March 2018].) Parks’s boss, Roy Stryker, said it would get them all fired. He sent Parks back to document the life of the photo’s subject, Ella Watson, a cleaner at the FSA building. The first photo is revolutionary for the dignity it gives a charwoman on the job—visible, strong, American, posed in response to Grant Wood’s famous American Gothic. The other photos are revolutionary for really seeing the charwoman at work and, finally, at home.

Perhaps the charwomen learned militancy from their heritage outside and among many households and offices, crossing from one to another with information to strategize, scheme, and blackmail. Historian Elizabeth Clark-Lewis has shown how laundresses picked up and delivered the wash at many homes, and learned much more than the critics of charwomen ever considered: information about employers and potential employers, the secrets and scandals of the community (which they learned from and spread to each household’s servants), a better sense of wages and other market conditions in the city’s domestic economy. All this information would put them in a better bargaining position *vis-a-vis* potential employers. Eventually, in the 1920s, laundresses used

this knowledge to help domestic servants move out of their masters' and mistresses' homes and find work that did not require living in.¹⁵

Like the end of the split shift among office charwomen, the vast decline of live-in servants was largely accomplished by workers' demands. Did charwomen also benefit because they were nodes in networks of working-class information, the people who brought knowledge across thresholds? It's just a theory. Picture yourself in midtown Manhattan, land of office towers, thousands of windows looking out at you from every direction. Each windowsill must be wiped clean, and today's sills are not as well-wiped as they used to be. We don't notice, of course, and maybe that's because we don't care anymore. We don't wear hats, we rarely lick stamps, we wait a minute or two, cursing the elevator under our breath, and that's okay. What an enormous amount of labor it takes to maintain the old standards, and we work hard enough already.

¹⁵ Elizabeth Clark-Lewis, *Living In, Living Out: African American Domesticity in Washington, D.C., 1910-1940* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), 140–45.