



Hidden Hands: Working-Class Women & Victorian Social-Problem Fiction

Patricia E. Johnson

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A revealing look at the representations of women in Victorian fiction Tracing the Victorian crisis over the representation of working-class women to the 1842 Parliamentary bluebook on mines with its controversial images of women at work, Hidden Hands argues that the female industrial worker became even more dangerous to represent than the prostitute or the male radical because it exposed crucial contradictions between the class and gender ideologies of the period and its economic realities. Drawing on the recent work of feminist historians, Patricia Johnson lays the groundwork for a reinterpretation of Victorian social-problem fiction that highlights its treatment of issues that particularly affected working-class women: sexual harassment; the interconnections between domestic ideology and domestic violence; their relationships to male-dominated working-class movements such as Luddism, Chartism, and unionism; and their troubled connection to middle-class feminism. Uncovering a series of images in Victorian fiction, ranging from hot-tempered servants and sexually-harassed factory girls to working-class homemakers pictured as beaten dogs, Hidden Hands demonstrates that representations of working-class women, however marginalized or incoherent, reveal the very contradictions they are constructed to hide and that the dynamics of these representations have broad implications both for other groups, such as middle-class women, and for the emergence of working-class women as writers themselves.

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