

Octavia Hill, Housing Reform, and the Metropolitan Urban Working Citizen

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HIS 332, "European Metropolis 1870-1914"

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In 1866, Octavia Hill, reflecting on her opportunity in 1864 to implement the first steps of her plan for urban housing reform, wrote that “[the poor] must be urged to rouse themselves from the lethargy and indolent habits into which they have fallen.”¹ This publication was Hill’s first written work specifically about housing, and it was followed by several more on the subject written between 1866 and 1871.² Hill’s interest in housing reform developed alongside movements in fin-de-siècle London working towards sanitation reform in the 1860s.³ With little empirical evidence available to verify the dirtiness of the city, reformers instead typically applied moral judgements in evaluating the filth amongst London’s poor.⁴ Although the language in this excerpt from Hill suggests that poverty is a moral issue, her words concurrently reflect hope that the poor can work towards helping themselves out of a “fallen” state in society. In this paper, I evaluate how Hill’s three articles published between 1866 and 1871 demonstrate both influence from traditional conceptions of poverty in fin-de-siècle London and a belief that the poor given the right tools and resources could become self-sufficient. I will argue that although her writings on housing management did contain language typical of fin-de-siècle London linking poverty with immorality, Hill’s vision simultaneously created an ideal for the self-sufficient, working-class citizen. She promoted this concept through supporting the formation of personal relationships with her tenants and encouraging economic independence.

Hill was exposed to metropolitan reform movements early in her childhood.⁵ She was born into a family that had supported radical social movements.⁶ Hill’s maternal grandfather was

¹ Octavia Hill, “Cottage Property in London,” in *Homes of the London Poor* (London: Macmillan and Co, 1875), 14.

² "Octavia Hill," *Women Writers of Great Britain and Europe*, ed. Katharina M. Wilson, Paul Schlueter, and June Schlueter, (New York: Garland Publishing, 1997).

³ Patricia Tilburg, “Race, Poverty, and Social Darwinism in Late Victorian London,” Lecture, Davidson College, Davidson, NC, September 14, 2018.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Robert Whelan, “Editor’s Introduction,” in *Octavia Hill and the Social Housing Debate: Essays and Letters by Octavia Hill* (London: Civitas, 1998), 1-3.

Dr. Thomas Southwood Smith, a man heavily involved in sanitation reform efforts in London.⁷ According to scholar Robert Whelan, Smith would go on to become a commissioner for the first Board of Health in London.⁸ In the 1850s, Hill was impacted by the sermons of the Rev. F.D. Maurice, the founder of Christian Socialism.⁹ Hill often attended Maurice's sermons, and according to Whelan, her relationship with God influenced her concern for the poor and desire to get involved in social reform efforts.¹⁰ John Ruskin, an influential art critic, was another figure who influenced Hill's ascendancy into housing reform.¹¹ Hill met Ruskin in 1858, and by 1864, he funded her first projects.¹² Hill's reflections on that initial 1864 plan served as the subject of her first letter on housing reform.

Many scholars analyzing fin-de-siècle London have focused on the new roles of women in the public sphere,¹³ emphasizing new opportunities available for working-class women.¹⁴ They evaluate new identities formed as women began to define themselves within their new environment in the metropolis.¹⁵ Dina M. Copelman notes that working-class women defined themselves by their obligations within new job openings in the city.¹⁶ Her analysis focuses on

⁶ Whelan, "Editor's Introduction," 1.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Whelan, "Editor's Introduction," 2.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Whelan notes Ruskin's perception for Hill's calling own ideas on social reform. Although Octavia took her artistic work very seriously, and saw a career for herself in the arts, Ruskin was more perceptive." Ruskin encouraged her to go help people through social reform. Whelan, "Editor's Introduction," 3.

¹² William Whyte, "Octavia Hill: The Practice of Sympathy and the Art of Housing," In *Octavia Hill, Social Activism and the Remaking of British Society*, ed. Elizabeth Baigent and Ben Cowell, (London: University of London, 2016), 47-64.

¹³ Dina M. Copelman, "The Gendered Metropolis: Fin de Siècle London," *Radical History Review* 1994 (1994): 39-56.

¹⁴ Judith Walkowitz, *City of a Dreadful Delight: The Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late Victorian London* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 41-80.

¹⁵ Stephen P. Walker, "Philanthropic Women and Accounting: Octavia Hill and the Exercise of the Quiet Power of Sympathy," *Accounting History Review* 16 (2006): 163-194.

¹⁶ As Dr. Copelman writes, "London offered significant numbers of middle-class women myriad opportunities as rent collectors, school managers, and volunteers in various other realms." She mentions Octavia Hill explicitly as a woman who built herself a professional life but places her position in the labor hierarchy in the minority among jobs women obtained in the metropolis. Copelman, "The Gendered Metropolis," 42.

different identities given to and created by working-class women, demonstrating how work in philanthropy and labor organization was a gendered phenomenon.¹⁷ Historian Judith Walkowitz takes a similar approach, documenting new roles that working-class women built for themselves as they transitioned into a more public role in the late nineteenth century.¹⁸ This context of a new gendered metropolis illuminates how opportunities for working-class women rapidly increased around the time Hill began to write about housing reform.

Other scholars have studied middle class interactions with the urban poor in fin-de-siècle London,¹⁹ evaluating social, political and cultural factors that explain the rise of philanthropic activities in fin-de-siècle London.²⁰ Within this metropolitan context of charity, middle-class conceptions of poverty and middle class responses to poverty are two important themes.²¹ Seth Koven focuses on the practice of slumming by the “comfortable classes” in London.²² Koven situates this concept as both an exotic form of entertainment for the upper classes and an empirical method for gaining knowledge about the conditions in which the poor lived.²³ Koven’s observations about middle-class fascination with the poor illustrate the popularity of

¹⁷ In her historiography, Copelman notes that “Jointly these scholars have mapped out complex urban worlds where working women were constrained but also able to fashion public identities that redefined their sexual, political, occupational, and economic roles.” The language of gender was central to how women defined themselves in the metropolis. Copelman, “The Gendered Metropolis,” 42.

¹⁸ Walkowitz takes a slightly different angle in that she points out the importance of heterosexual spaces in working-class women forming new identities. She cites historian Mary Ryan, who writes that these new roles “gave legitimacy and definition to gender difference.” Walkowitz, *City of a Dreadful Delight*, 45.

¹⁹ Andrew August, “A Culture of Consolation? Rethinking Working Class Politics in London, 1870-1914,” *Historical Research* 74 (February 2001): 193-219.

²⁰ Scholar Andrew August explores the political responses by the urban poor to philanthropic efforts in their communities. He argues that working-class people in London “participated actively in a pervasive politics of everyday life.” August, “A Culture of Consolation,” 193.

²¹ Seth Koven, *Slumming: Sexual and Social Politics in Victorian London* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

²² Koven defines slumming as “activities undertaken by people of wealth, social standing, or education in urban spaces inhabited by the poor.” Koven, *Slumming*, 9.

²³ Koven cites the Oxford-educated journalist Henry Wood Nevinson in his introduction, and he “astutely observed that slumming expressed both “shamed sympathy” with the poor and an irresistible “attraction of repulsion” for them. Nevinson’s paradoxical formulation points to the double optic through which elites viewed the slums of London.” This idea of “attraction of repulsion” represents a link between morality and poverty. Koven, *Slumming*, 4.

philanthropy in turn-of-the-century London. Thus, while Hill began her career as a housing manager, she was in a setting and socioeconomic situation that offered many different avenues for philanthropic work.

Some scholars focus on Hill's idea of promoting personal relationships with her tenants, while others highlight her insistence on timely rent payment. Historian Robert Bremner analyzes her business regulations in housing management,²⁴ focusing on her style of rent collection.²⁵ Daphne Spain combines an analysis of both the personal²⁶ and the business aspects of Hill's system in discussing its influence beyond London.²⁷ Other scholars have criticized Hill's work for being too reactionary.²⁸ Peter Malpass evaluates her inability to adapt to state interventions.²⁹ Wohl criticizes the "despotism" of Hill in her oversight of her properties.³⁰ Tarn critiques Hill for not thinking of housing reform as a long-term project.³¹ In my paper, I will avoid judging Hill's work,³² instead focusing on evaluating a concept within her writing neglected by scholars: the idea of a self-sufficient, working-class citizen.³³ My analysis will explain how this concept is defined by two approaches within Hill's system: encouraging personal relationships with tenants

²⁴ Robert H. Bremner, "An Iron Scepter Twined with Roses: The Octavia Hill System of Housing Management," *Social Service Review* 39 (1965): 222-231.

²⁵ Bremner makes a connection between morality and her rigid style for rent collection, noting that "She advocated an inexorable demand for rent and an inflexible insistence on obedience to rules, not for the convenience of landlords, but for strengthening the character of tenants." Bremner, "An Iron Scepter," 225.

²⁶ Daphne Spain, "Octavia Hill's Philosophy of Housing Reform: From British Roots to American Soil: The Octavia Hill System of Housing Management," *Journal of Planning History* 5 (May 2006): 106-125.

²⁷ Spain writes that "The combination of personal contact and enforcement of timely payments resulted in a modest profit for Hill's first investor, the philosopher John Ruskin." Spain, "Philosophy of Housing Reform," 107.

²⁸ Marion Brion, "Octavia Hill" In *Women in the Housing Service* (London: Routledge 1995), 10-22.

²⁹ Brion, summarizing Malpass, writes that "Whereas she opposed state intervention and relied on women volunteers to work closely with tenants, it is council housing, run in bureaucratic fashion by a salaried professional group dominated by men, which has become the main setting for the management of rented housing." Brion, *Women in the Housing Service*, 16.

³⁰ Brion, *Women in the Housing Service*, 15.

³¹ Brion, *Women in the Housing Service*, 15.

³² Peter H. Mann, "Octavia Hill: An Appraisal," *The Town Planning Review* 23 (1952): 223-237.

³³ One of the few mentions of self-sufficiency in the work of scholars is from Peter Mann, when he writes that "With the tenants who wished to improve their living conditions Octavia Hill's management was very successful" He does not elaborate on this explanation, instead using it as a transition point to another topic. This paper will build on this idea of self-sufficiency that Mann glosses over. Mann, "Octavia Hill: An Appraisal," 228.

to improve their morals and promoting economic independence through regularity of work. Hill believed that her tenants could eventually identify themselves as metropolitan working citizens.

Hill's vision of self-sufficiency involved a balance between two approaches in her housing management system: the personal and the business.³⁴ Hill noted the equality of these two dimensions: "my endeavors in ruling these people should be to maintain perfect strictness in our business relations, perfect respectfulness in our personal relations."³⁵ Tenants were expected to uphold their duties on the business side, while landladies would respect their tenants as people with independent lives on the personal side. Hill believed that the personal system promoted relationships between tenants and landladies, focusing on facilitating healthy communal interactions.³⁶ For example, she wanted to uplift boys through encouraging healthy habits. She desired the playground to be a safe environment where children worked directly with lady managers to learn productive games and build up the community.³⁷ Hill wanted to reverse the typical playground violence between children that she had observed in other housing courts managed by her predecessors.³⁸ Writing on the importance of promoting good habits on the playground, Hill explained that "the [good] moral influence depends, however, on having ladies who will go to the playground, teach games, act as umpires, know and care for the children."³⁹ Hill suggested that if the children were interested in improving their values, the ladies could be mentors for them. She indicated that this approach would only help the children if the landladies spent extensive time with their tenants. If the youth followed guidance from the ladies when they were young, then logically those values would carry over to adulthood when the tenants became

³⁴ Octavia Hill, "Landlord and Tenants in London," in *Homes of the London Poor* (London: Macmillan and Co, 1875), 67-107.

³⁵ Hill, "Landlord and Tenants in London," 78.

³⁶ Octavia Hill, "Four Years' Management of a London Court," in *Homes of the London Poor* (London: Macmillan and Co, 1875), 33-66.

³⁷ Hill, "Four Years' Management of a London Court," 44.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

metropolitan workers. Hill's business system balanced her personal system by establishing strict rules that tenants were to follow.⁴⁰ Her main objective in this sphere was mandating the punctual payment of rent.⁴¹ Hill suggested that paying rent was a duty for tenants. She implied that rent collection was one avenue that would allow the poor to become more disciplined, writing that "the fulfillment of their duties was the best education for the tenants in every way."⁴² Hill suggested that by creating explicit obligations, tenants would learn what behavior is acceptable and what would not be tolerated.

With an understanding of the personal and the business sides of Hill's vision, this paper will now shift to defining self-sufficiency as a balance between these two approaches, drawing on two of her articles. Hill suggested that tenants initially suffer from degraded morals, demonstrating the influence of traditional fin-de-siècle London notions of poverty. She simultaneously acknowledged, however, that the poor could improve themselves by working with her.⁴³ Hill described the poor's current state of immorality and her hope for their eventual self-improvement: "my strongest endeavors were to be used to rouse habits of industry and effort, without which they must finally sink- with which they might render themselves independent of me except as a friend and leader."⁴⁴ Hill desired for the poor to live their own lives, but she additionally wanted the poor to see her as a role model and a friend. Diction like "industry" and "effort" imply that the new moral habits Hill wanted her tenants to form would be created through the work they completed. Although Hill suggested that these improved moral developments would allow the poor to rise out of their current states of immorality, her message contained a sinister tone. Hill believed she could help the poor to better themselves, but she

⁴⁰ Hill, "Cottage Property in London," 27.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Hill, "Cottage Property in London," 19.

⁴³ Hill, "Cottage Property in London," 14

⁴⁴ Hill, "Cottage Property in London," 15.

implied that if the poor failed to listen to her friendly advice, they would sink lower than even their current social position.

Hill also promoted self-improvement from a degraded moral state through a concept called “appliance delay.”⁴⁵ Hill summarized this approach as follows: “the repairs required were... vital as to health and comfort... but no new appliances of any kind were added, as we had determined that our tenants should wait for these until they had proved themselves capable of taking care of them.”⁴⁶ Hill required tenants to maintain good reputations for a few years before she would add anything to the home beyond improving its structural integrity. Hill did condemn the immorality of her tenants after she began managing them, which showed the influence of typical fin-de-siècle London notions of poverty. Her narrative, however, contained hope that the poor could fix themselves through working with her to improve their habits. Such a theme continued in her promotion of economic independence.

Hill encouraged her tenants to develop a regular work schedule to help them break immoral habits and become economically self-sufficient. Hill indicated her role in promoting employment, explaining, “I have done what I could to employ my tenants in slack seasons. I carefully set aside any work they can do for times of scarcity, and I try so to equalize in this small circle the irregularity of work.”⁴⁷ Hill suggested that a consistent working schedule was crucial for improving the temperament of these poor tenants in “the lazy season.” She specifically focused on creating work for them during the times of the year where jobs are scarce and when the tenants appeared to be the least productive.⁴⁸ A routine for work reflected Hill’s goal of an urban, working citizen. In Hill’s view, for the poor to become self-sufficient, they

⁴⁵ Hill “Cottage Property in London,” 17.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Hill, “Cottage Property in London,” 28.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

must first establish a permanent work schedule. To sketch this approach in more detail, Hill provided a true story of a man, who through applying himself in new work opportunities, became successfully self-sufficient.⁴⁹ She explained that examples like him showed the importance of her houses as a test-place.⁵⁰ The man started out in a sunken place with immoral habits, and then after working with Hill, he became a self-sufficient worker who proudly provided for his family. Hill described the extent of his problems when she first met him, writing that “when I made his acquaintance he was earning a miserable pittance for his wife and seven unhealthy children, and all the nine souls were suffering and sinking.”⁵¹ Hill’s language indicated a moral judgement on his poverty because the habits of this man exacerbated his bad situation. She noted that the man was out of work, which eliminated the possibility for him to set up a schedule with consistent tasks. Hill supervised the man’s progress for three years to assess if he deserved a more lucrative working opportunity.⁵² While working with him, Hill evaluated his progress on self-improvement, observing whether his advances warranted a possibility for a better situation.⁵³ Hill recorded that the man progressed well: “after watching and proving him for three years I was able to recommend him to a gentleman in the country, where now the whole family are profiting by having... regular wages.”⁵⁴ Hill emphasized that his improvement came through his ability to adapt to a regular work schedule with the tasks he completed in her housing court, and that consistent wages in his new job improved his social situation. Regular wages implied that the man was economically self-sufficient, because he was not relying on aid from the government or from Hill. Hill suggested that in his new situation, the man defined himself by the quality of his

⁴⁹ Hill, “Four Years’ Management of a London Court,” 54.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Hill, “Four Years’ Management of a London Court,” 55.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

work and the increased space in his house instead of his status in poverty.⁵⁵ Her system of housing management provided a trajectory that improved his life. Hill's role here was as a mentor, guiding and supervising the man's progress on his path towards self-improvement.

Hill also encouraged her tenants to become economically self-sufficient by focusing on saving their own money and completing their own household repairs.⁵⁶ Hill noted that "it is therefore to their [the poor's] interest... in finding economical methods of restoring what is broken or worn out, often doing little repairs of their own accord."⁵⁷ This method of encouraging the poor to complete their own repairs gave the poor a regular work schedule, which Hill emphasized as crucial to promoting economic self-sufficiency. Household items wore out within a certain time interval, so these "economical methods" could involve having money saved for regularly scheduled repairs and emergencies. If the poor maintained their own living quarters, Hill would not need to supervise the tenants as closely. This self-sufficiency in work and repairs according to Hill would only occur if the poor have good habits, such as cleanliness.⁵⁸

Hill consolidated these approaches of promoting personal relationships and encouraging economic independence to suggest a three-step reform process for tenants in a third article on housing management written in 1871.⁵⁹ According to Hill, the first step for landladies in encouraging this shift was to "work a change in these [degraded habits] before they would make any proper use of the improved surrounding we were prepared to give them."⁶⁰ As Hill mentioned previously, this approach spoke to the importance of personal relationships for mending the immorality of tenants. Through working directly with the poor, the landladies could

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Hill, "Cottage Property in London," 28.

⁵⁷ Hill, "Four Years' Management of a London Court," 41.

⁵⁸ Hill, "Four Years' Management of a London Court," 40.

⁵⁹ Octavia Hill, "Landlord and Tenants in London," in *Homes of the London Poor* (London: Macmillan and Co, 1875), 84-104.

⁶⁰ Octavia Hill, "Landlord and Tenants in London," 84-85.

give advice to help them to improve their values. Hill demonstrated the influence of fin-de-siècle London moral judgements on poverty, but she simultaneously suggested that their degradation did not have to be permanent. Improving habits through establishing personal relationships with tenants was the first step in the process of reforming them into self-sufficient, working citizens. The second step was through mandating work within the housing unit itself and promoting economic independence.⁶¹ She suggested one way that tenants could improve themselves within their own housing court: basic maintenance and repairs.⁶² Hill encouraged landladies to “watch the right moment for furnishing these [new] appliances... and to get the people by degrees to work with us for their preservation.”⁶³ This practice indicated the requirement for the landladies to monitor a tenant’s progress on how well they maintained and repaired their house. Hill additionally encouraged landladies to mandate work for tenants who were unemployed: “we simply, whenever the funds at our disposal allow it, employ him [a tenant] in restoring and purifying the houses.”⁶⁴ Hill explained that this practice brought a new life to the home while at the same time uplifting the tenants who lived there by encouraging self-improvement.⁶⁵ These two steps reflect a consolidation of her personal and business systems of housing management.

Hill’s third step was for tenants to transform themselves into working citizens in the metropolis, where they applied their self-sufficiency skills to new opportunities in the city.⁶⁶ This identity shift occurred through interest in the type of work and the quality of its execution rather than working simply for the wage.⁶⁷ Instead of simply promoting economic independence through regularity of work, Hill suggested that the poor should feel proud of the work they

⁶¹ Octavia Hill, “Landlord and Tenants in London,” 85.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ Hill, “Landlord and Tenants in London,” 87.

⁶⁵ Hill, “Landlord and Tenants in London,” 88.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

accomplished. Hill demonstrated this idea through “the scrubbing crew,” a group of girls employed twice a week to keep the stairs clean.⁶⁸ The consistent wages provided the initial incentive to work, but eventually the girls arrived every week excited about their tasks.⁶⁹ They worked hard because they enjoyed the quality of the work they completed.⁷⁰ Hill emphasized the example of “one little girl [who] was so proud of her first cleaning that she stood two hours watching her passage lest the boys.”⁷¹ Hill suggested that the girl’s emotional response of satisfaction was primarily because of her success in her work rather than her earnings. She had consistent employment and became a working citizen in the metropolis by successfully completing the third step in Hill’s process for tenant self-sufficiency. Her habits improved through a personal relationship with Hill, her work in the housing court made her economically self-sufficient, and she identified herself not just as a wage earner but as a proud working citizen in the city.

This analysis traced housing reformer Octavia Hill’s creation of a three-step process for tenant self-improvement in London. In this paper, I analyzed three articles written by Octavia Hill from 1866 to 1871 on her system of housing management. I argued that although her articles reflected traditional conceptions of poverty in fin-de-siècle London, Hill simultaneously promoted the ideal of a self-sufficient, urban working citizen through emphasizing personal relationships with tenants and encouraging economic independence. Hill’s system appeared overly idealistic and strict at the same time. Hill assumed that tenants would unanimously support her system, which never happened. She required the payment of rents punctually, and she implied that tenants who could not pay would not be tolerated, regardless of their

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Hill, “Landlord and Tenants in London,” 89.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

circumstances. Despite having flaws, Hill's work was revolutionary. She created her own system of housing reform and implemented it successfully in London almost entirely independently. Hill was a woman who took advantage of new opportunities granted to women in the blossoming fin-de-siècle metropolis. Her system of housing reform respected her poor tenants more than the government did in urban sanitation reform efforts. Rather than forcing social segregation onto the poor, Hill's system attempted to integrate the poor into society as self-sufficient working citizens. Considering how impactful Hill's system was in fin-de-siècle London, I am curious how future scholarship can address the question of how much influence Hill had on projects within other European cities in this time period. I was interested in exploring this question, but as I began my research on Hill and her work, I quickly realized that a topic of that magnitude was beyond the scope of what I could answer in a paper of this length.

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