

## Chattel Slavery vs. Wage Slavery (Orestes A. Brownson, 1840)

*Orestes A. Brownson was many things throughout his life, including preacher, magazine editor, lecturer, reformer, socialist, Transcendentalist, and writer. In short, he was a bit unpredictable. In the excerpt below, he argues on behalf of American factory workers - and in the process gives Southern slave-owners more support than they probably deserved. Nevertheless, his arguments remain thought-provoking nearly two centuries later (if not entirely persuasive).*

(A) In regard to labor, two systems obtain: one that of slave labor, the other that of free labor. Of the two, the first is, in our judgment, except so far as the feelings are concerned, decidedly the least oppressive.

(B) If the slave has never been a free man, we think, as a general rule, his sufferings are less than those of the free laborer at wages. As to actual freedom, one has just about as much as the other. The laborer at wages has all the disadvantages of freedom and none of its blessings, while the slave, if denied the blessings, is freed from the disadvantages.

(C) We are no advocates of slavery. We are as heartily opposed to it as any modern abolitionist can be. But we say frankly that, if there must always be a laboring population distinct from proprietors and employers, we regard the slave system as decidedly preferable to the system at wages.

(D) It is no pleasant thing to go days without food; to lie idle for weeks, seeking work and finding none; to rise in the morning with a wife and children you love, and know not where to procure them a breakfast; and to see constantly before you no brighter prospect than the almshouse. Yet these are no infrequent incidents in the lives of our laboring population. Even in seasons of general prosperity... we have seen hundreds of people in a not very populous village, in a wealthy portion of our common country, suffering for the want of the necessities of life, willing to work and yet finding no work to do...

(E) These things are little thought of, for the applicants are poor; they fill no conspicuous place in society, and they have no biographers. But their wrongs are chronicled in heaven.

(F) It is said there is no want in this country. There may be less than in some other countries. But death by actual starvation in this country is, we apprehend, no uncommon occurrence. The sufferings of a quiet, unassuming... class of females in our cities... too proud to beg or to apply to the almshouse, are not easily told. They are industrious; they do all that they can find to do. But yet the little there is for them to do, and the miserable pittance they receive for it, is hardly sufficient to keep soul and body together.

(G) And yet there is a man who employs them to make shirts, trousers, etc., and grows rich on their labors. He is one of our respectable citizens, perhaps is praised in the newspapers for his liberal donations to some charitable institution. He passes among us as a pattern of morality and is honored as a worthy Christian. And why should he not be, since our Christian community is made up of such as he, and since our clergy would not dare question his piety lest they should incur the reproach of infidelity and lose their standing and their salaries? ...

(H) The average life - working life, we mean - of the girls that come to Lowell, for instance, from Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont, we have been assured, is only about three years. What becomes of them then? Few of them ever marry; fewer still ever return to their native places with reputations unimpaired. "She has worked in a factory" is almost enough to damn to infamy the most worthy and virtuous girl...

(I) The man who employs them, and for whom they are toiling as so many slaves, is one of our city nabobs, reveling in luxury; or he is a member of our legislature, enacting laws to put money in his own pocket; or he is a member of Congress, contending for a high tariff to tax the poor for the benefit of the rich; or in these times he is shedding crocodile tears over the deplorable condition of the poor laborer, while he docks his wages 25 percent...

(J) And this man too would fain pass for a Christian and a republican. He shouts for liberty, stickles for equality, and is horrified at a Southern planter who keeps slaves.

(K) One thing is certain: that, of the amount actually produced by the operative, he retains a less proportion than it costs the master to feed, clothe, and lodge his slave.

(L) Wages is a cunning device of the devil, for the benefit of tender consciences who would retain all the advantages of the slave system without the expense, trouble, and odium of being slaveholders.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Hour: \_\_\_\_\_

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In your own words, what are the two forms of labor Brownson is comparing?

1. \_\_\_\_\_

According to Brownson, what are 3 ways in which being a slave is better than working in a factory?

2. \_\_\_\_\_

3. \_\_\_\_\_

4. \_\_\_\_\_

Restate Paragraph (E) in modern, simple English - but do your best to keep the TONE of the passage:

5. \_\_\_\_\_

In plain, simple English, what is the primary point of Paragraph (G)?

6. \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

To whom is Brownson comparing factory owners in (G), even though he doesn't come out and say so?

7. \_\_\_\_\_

Who are the "girls who come to Lowell" mentioned in (H)? Explain.

8. \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Why can these girls never expect to marry or otherwise have a good life, according to Brownson?

9. \_\_\_\_\_

What does Brownson mean by "one of our city nabobs" in (I)?

10. \_\_\_\_\_

What does Brownson seem to think of state or federal legislators? How do you know?

11. \_\_\_\_\_

What does it mean to cry "crocodile tears," as in Paragraph (I)?

12. \_\_\_\_\_

In your own words, what's the primary point of Paragraph (J)? Who's being compared, and how?

13. \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Paragraph (K) switches focus to more of an economic argument. What is it?

14. \_\_\_\_\_

Paragraph (L) is the big finish and summarizes everything else. In plain, simple English, what does it say?

15. \_\_\_\_\_