A [Western] member of the United States Senate seems to be extremely pleased with cotton mills. He says in the Senate, “Who has not been delighted with the clockwork movements of a large cotton manufactory? He had visited them often, and always with increased delight.” He says the women work in large airy apartment, well warmed. They are neatly dressed, with ruddy complexions, and happy countenances. They mend the broken threads and replace the exhausted balls or broaches, and at stated periods they go to and return from their meals with light and cheerful step. (While on a visit to the pink of perfection, Waltham [Massachusetts], I remarked that the females moved with a very light step, and well they might, for the bell rang for them to return to the mill from their homes in nineteen minutes after it had rung for them to go to breakfast. Some of these females boarded the largest part of a half a mile from the mill.)

And the grand climax [says the western senator] is that at the end of the week, after working like slaves for thirteen or fourteen hours every day, “they enter the temples of God on the Sabbath, and thank him for all his benefits...” We remark that whatever girls or others may do west of the Allegheny Mountains, we do not believe there can be a single person found east of those mountains who ever thanked God for permission to work in a cotton mill... We would respectfully advise the honorable Senator to travel incognito when he visits cotton mills. If he wishes to come at the truth, he must not be known. Let him put on a short jacket and trousers, and join the “lower orders” for a short time.... In that case we could show him, in some of the prisons in New England called cotton mills, instead of rosy cheeks and pale, sickly, haggard countenance of the ragged child – haggard from the worse than slavish confinement in the cotton mill. He might see that child driven up to the “clockwork” by the cowskin, in some cases. He might see, in some instances the child taken from his bed at four in the morning, and plunged into cold water to drive away his slumbers and prepare him the labors of the mill. After all this he might see that child robbed, yes, robbed of a part of this time allowed for meals by moving the hands of the clock backwards, or forwards, as would best accomplish that purpose.... He might see in some, and not infrequent, instances, the child, and the female child too, driven up the “clockwork” with the cowhide, or well-seasoned strap of American manufacture. We could show him many females who have had corporeal punishment inflicted upon them; one girl eleven years of age who had her leg broken with a billet or wood; another who had a board split over her head by a heartless monster in the shape of an overseer of a cotton mill “paradise.”

We shall for want of time... omit entering more largely into detail for the present respecting the cruelties practiced in some of the American mills. Our wish is to show that education is neglected,... because if thirteen hours’ actual labor is required each day, it is impossible to attend to education among children, or to improvement among adults.

We have lately visited the cities of Lowell [Massachusetts] and Manchester [New Hampshire] and have had an opportunity of examining the factory system more closely than before. We had distrusted the accounts which we had heard from persons engaged in the labor reform now beginning to agitate New England. We went through many of the mills, talked particularly to a large number of the operatives, and ate at their boardinghouses, on purpose to ascertain by personal inspection the facts of the case. We assure our readers that very little information is possessed, and no correct judgments formed, by the public at large, of our factory system, which is the first germ of the industrial or commercial feudalism that is to spread over our land....

In Lowell live between seven and eight thousand young women who are generally daughters of farmers of the different states of New England. The operatives work thirteen hours a day in the summer time, and from daylight to dark in the winter. At half past four in the morning the factory bell rings, and at five the girls must be in the mills. A clerk, placed as a watch, observes those who are a few minutes behind the time, and effectual means are taken to stimulate to punctuality. This is the morning commencement of the industrial discipline (should we not rather say industrial tyranny?) which is established in these associations of this moral and Christian community.

When capital has got thirteen hours of labor daily out of a being, it can get nothing more. It would be a poor speculation in an industrial point of view to own the operative; for the trouble and expense of providing for times of sickness and old age would more than counterbalance the difference between the price of wages and the expense of board and clothing. The far greater number of fortunes accumulated by the North in comparison to the South shows that hireling labor is more profitable for capital than slave labor.
Document C: [Voice of Industry, 1846]

We were not aware, until within a few days, of the modus operandi of the factory powers in this village of forcing poor girls from their quiet homes to become their tools and, like the Southern slaves, to give up their life and liberty to the heartless tyrants and taskmasters.

Observing a singular-looking “long, low, black” wagon passing along the street, we made inquiries respecting it, and were informed that it was what we term a “slaver.” She makes regular trips to the north of the state [Massachusetts], cruising around in Vermont and New Hampshire, with a “commander” whose heart must be as black as his craft, who is paid a dollar a head for all he brings to the market, and more in proportion to the distance — if they bring them from such a distance that they cannot easily get back.

This is done by “hoisting false colors,” and representing to the girls that they can tend more machinery than is possible, and that the work is so very neat, and the wages such that they can dress in silks and spend half their time in reading. Now, is this true? Let those girls who have been thus deceived, answer.

Let us say a word in regard to the manner in which they are stowed in the wagon, which may find a similarity only in the manner in which slaves are fastened in the hold of a vessel. It is long, and the seats so close that it must be very inconvenient.

Is there any humanity in this? Philanthropists may talk of Negro slavery, but it would be well first to endeavor to emancipate the slaves at home. Let us not stretch our ears to catch the sound of the lash on the flesh of the oppressed black while the oppressed in our very midst are crying out in thunder tones, and calling upon us for assistance.

Document D: [The Diary of George Templeton Strong]

January 11, 1860. News today of a fearful tragedy at Lawrence, Massachusetts, one of the wholesale murders commonly known in newspaper literature as accident or catastrophe. A huge factory, long notoriously insecure and ill-built, requiring to be patched and bandaged up with iron plates and braces to stand the introduction of its machinery, suddenly collapsed into a heap of ruins yesterday afternoon without the smallest provocation. Some five or six hundred operatives went down with it — young girls and women mostly. An hour or two later, while people were working frantically to dig out some two hundred still under the ruins, many of them alive and calling for help, some quite unhurt, fire caught in the great pile of debris, and these prisoners were roasted. It is too atrocious and horrible to think of.

Of course, nobody will be hanged. Somebody has murdered about two hundred people, many of them in hideous torture, in order to save money, but society has no avenging gibbet for the respectable millionaire and homicide. Of course not. He did not want to or mean to do this massacre; on the whole he would have preferred to let these people live. His intent was not homicidal. He merely thought a great deal about making a large profit and very little about the security of human life. He did not compel these poor girls and children to enter his assured mantrap. They could judge and decide for themselves whether they would be employed there. It was a matter of contract between capital and labor; they were to receive cash payment for their services.

No doubt the legal representatives of those who have perished will be duly paid the fractional part of the week’s wages up to the date when they became incapacitated by crushing or combustion, as the case may be, from rendering further service. Very probably the wealthy and liberal proprietor will add (in deserving cases) a gratuity to defray funeral charges. It becomes us to prate about the horrors of slavery! What Southern capitalist trifles with the lives of his operatives as do our philanthropes of the North?

Questions:

1. Why would the western Senator in document A have a distorted view of factory life? According to the author, what was factory life really like?
2. Why was the claim of managers, that they provided an education, insincere according to the author?
3. The author of document B tries to establish his credibility in the opening paragraph. Do you believe him? Why or why not?
4. These authors reference slavery often. Summarize the comparisons that the authors make. What is the effect of this comparison and why would it have been effective?
5. Why are the owners not held accountable for the system they have created and the risks they have taken?
6. These passages are from the 1830s and beyond. What accounts for their arising at this time? Connect this to the Age of Jackson and to the evolution of industrialization.