

LOOM & SPINDLE, OR LIFE AMONG THE EARLY MILL GIRLS

**A first-hand account of life in the early cotton mills by Harriet Hanson Robinson
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Introduction to the Document

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The new factories of the Industrial Revolution were often dangerous, dirty, and noisy. By today's standards, the work hours were long – normally fourteen hours a day, six days a week. And by today's standards the pay was pitifully low, barely enough to survive on, and often not even that. The leading economists of the nineteenth century claimed that the “Iron Law of Wages” required that all prudent businesspeople keep wages low, hours long, and conditions dismal. Yet thousands of men, women, and children gladly accepted these jobs.

Among them was eleven-year-old Harriet J. Hanson (1825-1911) of Lowell, Massachusetts. Harriet was born in 1825 in Boston, the daughter of a poor carpenter. Her father died in 1831, when she was only six years old, leaving Harriet, her mother, and Harriet's three young brothers destitute. For a while, Harriet's mother (also named Harriet) tried running “a little shop,” but she was unable to make a go of it. Harriet's widowed aunt advised the family to move to Lowell, a new factory city recently sprung up just a few miles north of Boston, where she worked for one of the big, new mills as a boardinghouse keeper. Nicknamed the “City of Spindles,” by 1835 Lowell had become the center of textile manufacturing in the United States. Rows of large brick-and-stone factories lined the banks of the Merrimack River, which provided the power that drove hundreds of spinning frames, carding machines, and power looms. Hundreds of modest brick row houses provided homes for thousands of workers. Most of the younger, single workers lived in large boardinghouses owned by the mills, which routinely hired widows like Harriet's mother and aunt to work as housekeepers. Harriet's mother secured a job as a housekeeper, and in 1832 moved the family to Lowell. Four years later in 1836, Harriet went to work in the mills. She was only eleven years old. She remained in the mills for twelve years, until 1848, when at the age of 23, she left to marry William Stevens Robinson (1818-76), a poorly paid abolitionist newspaper reporter.

While at the mills, Harriet wrote for *The Lowell Offering*, a literary magazine managed by the “mill girls” themselves. She wrote poetry, short stories, and essays favoring the abolition of slavery and women's rights. It was through her writing that she met her husband. After marriage, she continued to write, acting as William's “silent partner.” They had several children. When William died in 1876, leaving Harriet a 51-year-old widow, she

supported herself by writing, mostly children's stories, eking out a modest existence. In 1898, aged 73, she wrote *Loom and Spindle*, a memoir of her years at the factory. She was possibly inspired by the recent publication in 1889 of another mill girl memoir, *A New England Girlhood* by Lucy Larcom (b. 1824), her coworker at the Lowell mills and fellow contributor to *The Lowell Offering*.

In *Loom and Spindle* Harriet not only described the working conditions at the mill, she also explained why she and so many other women and girls gladly took jobs there. Contrary to what we might expect, she viewed her experience in the factory positively. As a child, she pestered her mother to be allowed to work there, and was proud to be able to contribute to the family economy. The hours were too long for her liking, but the pay and amount of work was acceptable, especially when compared to the few other jobs available to women at the time. She believed that she was participating in something important, making a major contribution to modernization, economic growth, democratization, and the expansion of women's rights.

Memoirs like *Loom and Spindle* present certain problems to historians using them as evidence. Since Harriet wrote many years after the events she described, her memory might have been faulty. Then, too, she could only tell of her own experiences, and those of people she knew – and Harriet may or may not have been a typical mill girl. She also clearly had an agenda. She pushed two main arguments – that American industrial workers had been treated much better in the early 1800s than they were later, at the end of the century, when she believed that reform was needed; and that industrialization had been itself a major spur to reform, promoting the abolition of slavery and the emancipation of women. Were conditions actually as rosy as she suggests? Can we cut through her argumentation and uncover the facts lying beneath? In what ways does Harriet seem typical? In what ways does she seem atypical? And when we assess working conditions in the early mills, to what should we compare the? European mills at the same time? Life on the farm? Urban poverty in Boston? Slavery in the South? Working conditions later in the 19th century? Working conditions today? Who took those jobs in the mills, and why? Did they have other choices? Was life in the mills similar to slavery, or significantly better? What facts can we tease out of *Loom and Spindle* that would allow us to answer these questions? What further facts, not mentioned by Harriet, would we also need or want?

Chapter II

Child-Life in the Lowell Cotton-Mills

In attempting to describe the life and times of the early mill-girls, it has seemed best for me to write my story in the first person; not so much because my own experience is of importance, as that it is, in some respects, typical of that of many other who lived and worked with me.

Our home was in Boston, in Leverett Court, now Cotting Street, where I was born [in 1825].... We lived there until I was nearly seven years of age, and, although so young, I can remember very vividly scenes and incidents which took place at that time. We lived under the shadow of the old jail (near where Wall Street now runs), and we children used to hear conversation, not meant for small ears, between the prisoners and the persons in the court who came there to see them.

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In 1831, under the shadow of a great sorrow, which had made her four children fatherless, — the oldest but seven years of age, — my mother was left to struggle alone; and although she tried hard to earn bread enough to fill our hungry mouths, she could not do it, even with the help of kind friends. And so it happened that one of her more wealthy neighbors, who had looked with longing eyes on the one little daughter of the family, offered to adopt me. But my mother, who had had a hard experience in her youth against strangers, said, “No; while I have one meal of victuals a day, I will not part with my children.” ...

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That was a hard, cold winter; and for warmth’s sake my mother and her four children all slept in one bed, two at the foot and three at the head....

Shortly after this my mother’s widowed sister, Mrs. Angeline Cudworth, who kept a factory boarding-house in Lowell, advised her to come to that city. She secured a house for her, and my mother, with her little brood and her few household belongings, started for the new factory town.

We went by canal-boat, ..., and a long and tiresome day it was to the weary mother and her four active children, though the children often varied the scene by walking on the tow-path under the Lombardy poplars, riding on the gates when the locks were swung open, or buying glasses of water at the stopping-places along the route.

When we reached Lowell, we were carried at once to my aunt’s house ... ; and we children were led into her kitchen, where, on the longest and whitest of tables, lay, oh, so many loaves of bread!

After our feast of loaves we walked with our mother to the Tremont Corporation, where we were to live, and at the old No. 5 (which imprint is still legible over the door), in the first block of tenements then built, I began my life among the factory people. My mother kept forty boarders, most of them men, mill-hands, and she did all her housework, with what help her children could give her between schools; for we, even the baby three years old,

were kept in school. My part in the housework was to wash the dishes, and I was obliged to stand on a cricket in order to reach the sink!

My mother's boarders were many of them young men, and usually farmers' sons. They were almost invariably of good character and behavior, and it was a continual pleasure for me and my brothers to associate with them. I was treated like a little sister, never hearing a word or seeing a look to remind me that I was not of the same sex as my brothers. I played checkers with them, sometimes "beating," and took part in their conversation, and it never came to my mind that they were not the same as so many "girls." A good object-lesson for one who was in the future to maintain, by voice and pen, her belief in the equality of the sexes!

I had been in school constantly until I was about ten years of age, when my mother, feeling obliged to have help in her work besides what I could give, and also needing the money which I could earn, allowed me, at my urgent request (for I wanted to earn money like the other little girls), to go to work in the mill. I worked first in the spinning-room as a "doffer." The doffers were the very youngest girls, whose work was to doff, or take off, the full bobbins, and replace them with the empty ones.

I can see myself now, racing down the alley, between the spinning-frames, carrying in front of me a bobbin-box bigger than I was. These mites had to be very swift in their movements, so as not to keep the spinning-frames stopped long, and they worked only about fifteen minutes in every hour. The rest of the time was their own, and when the overseer was kind they were allowed to read, knit, or even to go outside the mill-yard to play.

... When not doffing, we were allowed to go home, for a time, and thus we were able to help our mothers in their housework. We were paid two dollars a week; and how proud I was when my turn came to stand up on the bobbin-box, and write my name in the paymaster's book, and how indignant I was when he asked me if I could "write." "Of course I can," said I, and he smiled as he looked down on me.

The working-hours of all the girls extended from five o'clock in the morning until seven in the evening, with one-half hour for breakfast and for dinner. Even the doffers were forced to be on duty nearly fourteen hours a day, and this was the greatest hardship in the lives of these children. For it was not until 1842 that the hours of labor for children under twelve years of age were limited [by the Massachusetts legislature] to ten per day....

I do not recall any particular hardship connected with this life, except getting up in the morning.... But in every other respect it was a pleasant life. We were not hurried any more than was for our good, and no more work was required of us than we were able easily to do.

Most of us children lived at home, and we were well fed, drinking both tea and coffee, and eating substantial meals (besides luncheons) three times a day. We had very happy hours with the older girls, many of whom treated us like babies, or talked in a motherly way, and so had a good influence over us. And in the long winter evenings, when we could not run home between the doffing, we gathered in groups and told each other stories, and sung the old-time songs our mothers had sung, such as “Barbara Allen,” “Lord Lovell,” “Captain Kid,” “Hull’s Victory,” and sometimes a hymn.

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And we told each other of our little hopes and desires, and what we meant to do when we grew up. For we had our aspirations; and one of us, who danced the “shawl dance,” as she called it, in the spinning-room alley, for the amusement of her admiring companions, discussed seriously with another little girl the scheme of their running away together, and joining the circus....

There was another little girl, whose mother was suffering with consumption [i.e., tuberculosis], and who went out of the mill almost every forenoon, to buy and cook oysters, which she brought in hot, for her mother’s luncheon. The mother soon went to her rest, and the little daughter, after tasting the first bitter experience of life, followed her.... Many pathetic stories might be told of these little fatherless mill-children, who worked near their mothers, and who went hand in hand with them to and from the mill.

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Holidays came when repairs to the great mill-wheel were going on, or some late spring freshet caused the shutting down of the mill; these were well improved. With what freedom we enjoyed those happy times! My summer playhouse was the woodshed, which my mother always had well filled; how orderly and with what precision the logs were sawed and piled with the sooth ends outwards! The catacombs of Paris reminded me of my old playhouse. And here, in my castle of sawed wood, was my vacation retreat, where, with my only and beloved wooden doll, I lunched on slices of apple cut in shape so as to represent what I called “German half-moon cakes.” I piled up my bits of crockery with sticks of cinnamon to represent candy, and many other semblances of things, drawn from my mother’s housekeeping stores.

The yard which led to the shed was always green, and here half-holiday duties were performed. We children were expected to scour all the knives and forks used by the forty men-boarders, and my brothers often bought themselves off by giving me some trifle, and I was left alone to do the whole. And what a pile of knives and forks it was! But it was no task, for did I not have the open yard to work in, with the sky over me, and the green grass to stand on, as I scrubbed away at my “stent”? I don’t know why I did not think such long tasks a burden, nor of my work in the mill as drudgery. Perhaps it was because I expected

to do my part towards helping my mother to get our living, and had never heard her complain of the hardships of her life.

On other afternoons I went to walk with a playmate, who, like myself, was full of romantic dreams, along the banks of the Merrimack River, where the Indians had still their tents, or on Sundays, to see the “new converts” baptized. These baptizing in the river were very common, as the tanks in the churches were not considered apostolic by the early Baptists of Lowell.

Sometimes we rambled by the “race-way” or mill-race, which carried the water into the flume of the mill, along whose inclining sides grew wild roses, and the “rock-loving columbine;” and we used to listen to see if we could hear the blue-bells ring, — this was long before either of us had read a line of poetry.

The North Grammar school building stood at the base of a hilly ridge of rocks, down which we coasted in winter, and where in summer, after school-hours, we had a little cave, where we sometimes hid, and played that we were robbers....

Our home amusements were very original. We had no toys, except for a few homemade articles or devices of our own. I had but a single doll, a wooden-jointed thing, with red cheeks and staring black eyes. Playing cards were tabooed, but my elder brother..., who had somehow learned the game of high-low jack, set about making a pack....

I was a “little doffer” until I became old enough to earn more money; then I tended a spinning-frame for a little while; and after that I learned, on the Merrimack corporation, to be a drawing-in girl, which was considered one of the most desirable employments, as about only a dozen girls were needed in each mill. We drew in, one by one, the threads of the warp, through the harness and the reed, and so made the beams ready for the weaver’s loom. I still have the two hooks I used so long, companions of many a dreaming hour, and preserve them as the “badge of all my tribe” of drawing-in girls.

It may be well to add that, although so many changes have been made in mill-work, during the last fifty years, by the introduction of machinery, this part of it still continues to be done by hand, and the drawing-in girl – I saw her last winter, as in my time – still sits on her high stool, and with her little hook patiently draws in the thousands of threads, one by one.

Chapter III

The Little Mill-Girl’s Alma Mater

The education of a child in an all-around process, and he or she owes only a part of it to school or college training. The child to whom neither college nor school is open must find

his whole education in his surroundings, and in the life he is forced to lead. As the cotton-factory was the means of the early schooling of so large a number of men and women, who, without the opportunity thus afforded, could not have been mentally so well developed, I love to call it their Alma Mater. For, without this incentive to labor, this chance to earn extra money and to use it in their own way, their influence on the times, and also, to a certain extent, on modern civilization, would certainly have been lost.

I had been to school quite constantly until I was nearly eleven years of age, and then, after going into the mill, I went to some of the evening schools that had been established, and which were always well filled with those who desired to improve their scant education, or to supplement what they had learned in the village school or academy....

Some of these schools were devoted to special studies. I went to a geography school, where the lessons were repeated in unison in a monotonous sing-song tone ..., and also to a school where those who fancied they had thoughts were taught ... to express them in writing....

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... I also went to singing-school, and became a member of the church choir, and in this way learned many beautiful hymns that made a lasting impression on the serious part of my nature.

The discipline our work brought us was of great value. We were obliged to be in the mill at just such a minute, in every hour, in order to doff our full bobbins and replace them with empty ones. We went to our meals and returned at the same hour every day. We worked and played at regular intervals, and thus our hands became deft, our fingers nimble, our feet swift, and we were taught daily habits of regularity and of industry; it was, in fact, a sort of manual training or industrial school.

Some of us were fond of reading, and we read all the books we could borrow. One of my mother's boarders, a farmer's daughter from "the State of Maine," had come to Lowell to work, for the express purpose of getting books, usually novels, to read, that she could not find in her native place. She read from two to four volumes a week; and we children used to get them from the circulating library, and return them, for her. In exchange for this, she allowed us to read her books, while she was at work in the mill; and what a scurrying there used to be home from school, to get the first chance at the new book!

It was as good as a fortune to us, and all for six and a quarter cents a week! ...

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And so the process of education went on, and I, with many another “little doffer,” had more than one chance to nibble at the root of knowledge. I had been to school for three months in each year, until I was about thirteen years old, when my mother, who was now a little better able to do without my earnings, sent me to the Lowell High School regularly for two years, adding her constant injunction, “Improve your mind, try to be somebody.” There I was taught a little of everything, including French and Latin....

The Lowell high school, in about 1840, was kept in a wooden building over a butcher’s shop, but soon afterwards the new high school, still in use, was provided, and it was co-educational....

I left the high school when fifteen years of age, my school education completed; though after that I took private lessons in German, drawing, and dancing! About this time my elder brother and I made up our minds that our mother had worked hard long enough, and we prevailed on her to give up keeping boarders. This she did, and while she remained in Lowell we supported the home by our earnings. I was obliged to have my breakfast before daylight in the winter. My mother prepared it over night, and while I was cooking and eating it I read.... My elder brother was the clerk in the counting-room of the Tremont Corporation, and the agent ... allowed him to carry home at night, or over Sunday, a book that might be left on his (the agent’s) desk; by this means I read many a beloved volume of poetry, late into the night and on Sunday....

I read and studied also at my work; and as this was done by the job, or beam, if I chose to have a book in my lap, and glance at it at intervals, or even write a bit, nothing was lost to the “corporation.”

Lucy Larcom, in her “New England Girlhood,” speaks of the windows in the mill on whose sides were pasted newspaper clippings, which she calls “window gems.” It was also very common for the spinners and weavers to do this, as they were not allowed to read books openly in the mill....

A year or two after this I attempted poetry, and my verses began to appear in the newspapers, in one or two Annuals, and later in The Lowell Offering.

In 1846 I wrote some verses which were published in the Lowell Journal, and these caused me to make the acquaintance of the sub-editor of that paper, who afterwards became my life companion....

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[Lowell had several different churches. At first, Harriet joined the Congregationalist Church, but she had a falling out with its leaders, who excommunicated her. After that she

seems have become a nominal Universalist who, by her own decision, rarely attended services.] Several years after my excommunication, when I had come to observe that religion and “mere morality” do not always go together, I had a final interview with one of the deacons who had labored with me. He was an overseer in the room where I worked, and I had noticed his familiar manner with some of the girls, who did not like it any better than I did; and one day, when his behavior was unusually offensive, I determined to speak to him about it.

I called him to my drawing-in frame, where I was sitting at work, and said to him something like this: “I have hard work to believe that you are one of those deacons who came to labor with a young girl about belonging to your church. I don’t think you set the example of good works you then preached to me.” He gave me a look, but did not answer; and shortly after, as I might have expected, I received an “honorable discharge” from his room.

Chapter IV

The Characteristics of the Early Factory Girls

At the time the Lowell cotton-mills were started, the factory girl was the lowest among women. In England, and in France particularly, great injustice had been done to her real character; she was represented as subjected to influences that could not fail to destroy her purity and self-respect. In the eyes of her overseer she was but a brute, a slave, to be beaten, pinched, and pushed about. It was to overcome this prejudice that such high wages had been offered to women that they might be induced to become mill-girls, in spite of the opprobrium that still clung to this “degrading occupation.” At first only a few came; for, though tempted by the high wages to be regularly paid in “cash,” there were many who still preferred to go on working at some more genteel employment at seventy-five cents a week and their board.

But in a short time the prejudice against factory labor wore away, and the Lowell mills became filled with blooming and energetic New England women. They were naturally intelligent, had mother-wit, and fell easily into the ways of their new life. They soon began to associate with those who formed the community in which they had come to live, and were invited to their houses. They went to the same church, and sometimes married into some of the best families. Or if they returned to their secluded homes again, instead of being looked down upon as “factory girls” by the squire’s or the lawyer’s family, they were more often welcomed as coming from the metropolis, bringing new fashions, new books, and new ideas with them.

In 1831 Lowell was little more than a factory village. Several corporations were started, and the cotton-mills belonging to them were building. Help was in great demand; and stories were told all over the country of the new factory town, and the high wages that were offered to all classes of work-people, — stories that reached the ears of mechanics’ and

farmers' sons, and gave new life to lonely and dependent women in distant towns and farmhouses. Into this Yankee El Dorado, these needy people began to pour by the various modes of travel known to those slow old days. The stage-coach and the canal-boat came every day, always filled with new recruits for this army of useful people. The mechanic and machinist came, each with his home-made chest of tools, and often-times his wife and little ones. The widow came with her little flock and her scanty housekeeping goods to open a boarding-house or variety store, and so provided a home for her fatherless children. Many farmers' daughters came to earn money to complete their wedding outfit, or buy the bride's share of housekeeping articles.

Women with past histories came, to hide their griefs and their identity, and to learn an honest living in the "sweat of their brow." Single young men came, full of hope and life, to get money for an education, or to lift the mortgage from the home-farm. Troops of young girls came by stages and baggage-wagons, men often being employed to go to other States and to Canada, to collect them at so much a head, and deliver them at the factories.

A very curious sight these country girls presented.... When the large covered baggage-wagon arrived..., they would descend from it, dressed in various and outlandish fashions, and with their arms brimful of bandboxes containing all their worldly goods. On each of these was sewed a card, on which one could read the old-fashioned New England name of the owner. And sorrowful enough they looked...; for they had all left their pleasant country homes to try their fortunes in a great manufacturing town, and they were homesick even before they landed at the doors of their boarding-houses....

Some of these girls brought diminutive hair trunks covered with the skin of calves, spotted in dun and white....

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These country girls had queer names....

Their dialect was also very peculiar. On the spoken English and Scotch of their ancestors was in-grafted the nasal Yankee twang; so that many of them, when they had just come down, spoke a language almost unintelligible. But the severe discipline and ridicule which met them was as good as a school education, and they were soon taught the "city way of speaking."

Their dress was also peculiar, and was of the plainest of homespun, cut in such an old-fashioned style that each young girl looked as if she had borrowed her grandmother's gown. Their only head-covering was a shawl, which was pinned under the chin; but after the first payday, a "shaker" (or "scooter") sunbonnet usually replaced this primitive head-gear of their rural life.

But the early factory girls were not all country girls.... There were some who came to Lowell solely on account of the social or literary advantages to be found there....

And the fame of the circulating libraries, that were soon opened, drew them and kept them there....

The laws relating to women were such, that a husband could claim his wife wherever he found her, and also the children she was trying to shield from his influence; and I have seen more than one poor woman skulk behind her loom or her frame when visitors were approaching the end of the aisle where she worked. Some of these were known under assumed names, to prevent their husbands from trusteeing their wages. It was a very common thing for a male person of a certain kind to do this, thus depriving his wife of all her wages, perhaps, month after month. The wages of minor children could be trusteeed, unless the children (being fourteen years of age) were given their time. Women's wages were also trusteeed for the debts of their husbands, and children's for the debts of their parents.

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It must be remembered that at this date woman had no property rights. A widow could be left without her share of her husband's (or the family) property, a legal "incumbrance" to his estate....

The law took no cognizance of a woman as a money-spender. She was a ward, an appendage, a relict. Thus it happened, that if a woman did not choose to marry, or, when left a widow, to re-marry, she had no choice but to enter one of the few employments open to her, or to become a burden on the charity of some relative.

In almost every New England home could be found one or more of these women, sometimes welcome, more often unwelcome, and leading joyless, and in many instances unsatisfactory lives. The cotton-factory was a great opening to these lonely and dependent women. From a condition approaching pauperism they were at once placed above want; they could earn money, and spend it as they pleased; and could gratify their tastes and desires without restraint, and without rendering an account to anybody. At last they had found a place in the universe; they were no longer obliged to finish out their faded lives mere burdens to male relatives. Even the time of these women was their own, on Sundays and in the evening after the day's work was done. For the first time in this country woman's labor had a money value. She had become not only an earner and a producer, but also a spender of money, a recognized factor in the political economy of her time. And thus a long upward step in our material civilization was taken; woman had begun to earn and hold her own money, and through its aid had learned to think and to act for herself.

Among the older women who sought this new employment were very many lonely and dependent ones ... to whom a chance of earning money was indeed a new revelation. How well I remember some of these solitary ones! ... I can see them now, even after sixty years, just as they looked, — depressed, modest, mincing, hardly daring to look one in the face, so shy and sylvan had been their lives. But after the first pay-day came, and they felt the jingle of silver in their pockets, and had begun to feel its mercurial influence, their bowed heads were lifted, their necks seemed braced with steel, they looked you in the face, sang blithely among their looms or frames, and walked with elastic step to and from their work. And when Sunday came, homespun was no longer their only wear; and how sedately gay in their new attire they walked to church, and how proudly they dropped their silver four-pences into the contribution-box! It seemed as if a great hope impelled them, — the harbinger of the new era that was about to dawn for them and for all women-kind.

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Except in rare instances, the rights of the early mill-girls were secure. They were subject to no extortion, if they did extra work they were always paid in full, and their own account of labor done by the piece was always accepted. They kept the figures, and were paid accordingly. This was notably the case with the weavers and drawing-in girls. Though the hours of labor were long, they were not over-worked; they were obliged to tend no more looms and frames than they could easily take care of, and they had plenty of time to sit and rest. I have known a girl to sit idle twenty or thirty minutes at a time. They were not driven, and their work-a-day life was made easy. They were treated with consideration by their employers, and there was a feeling of respectful equality between them.