

The Victorian Gospel of Work

- ▶ Derives from both religious and economic life
 - ▶ Work was viewed as a means of preventing idleness, promoting discipline, developing character—earnestness. Biblical, moral injunction to work—Evangelical/Puritan doctrine. Work promoted social order and progress. Relationship between work and play: Sabbatarian movement—Lawful, respectable play (or more generally recreation) on Sunday promoted health and happiness—and refreshed one for work.
 - ▶ Carlyle, *Past and Present*—work promotes individual happiness through security, order, and social progress. Work as sacred/labor as God-given. Ultimate wages paid in Heaven. (NA, pg 1075)
 - ▶ Work was also the aim of an industrial society—development of individual talent and material/social progress: Utilitarian doctrine. Idleness drains individual and societal potential. Work is a means of competition to out-produce—energy that drives society. Progress through work promoted material wealth but also signaled a larger, noble mission—advancement of civilization. But competition in a capitalist system also produces conflict and the exploitation of working classes. Who determines the value of their labor? Economic competition as a zero-sum game?
 - ▶ Contradiction in the Victorian middle-class gospel of work—both a curse (Bible—Genesis) and a virtue (duty, earnestness, progress). This contradiction masks—by claiming humility—a materialism linked to middle-class advancement and success. For the working class, work or labor often kept them from or impeded advancement and made them a disposable workforce.
 - ▶ In *David Copperfield* (Ch 52), Uriah Heep exposes this divided ideology: “Or as certain as they used to teach at school (the same school where I picked up so much umbleness), from nine o’clock to eleven, that labor was a curse; and from eleven o’clock to one, that it was a blessing and a cheerfulness, and a dignity [. . .].”