Rebecca Harding Davis’s “Life in the Iron-Mills”

First published anonymously in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1861, Rebecca Harding Davis’s novella “Life in the Iron-Mills” largely disappeared from American literary history until it was republished in 1972 by the Feminist Press. In the decades since then, however, Davis’s short work has been appreciated as an important early description of the moral and social costs of industrialization, a key work bridging the sentimentalism of the mid-nineteenth century and the realism of the latter part of the century, as well as a significant meditation on art and the role of the artist in industrial capitalism. “Life in the Iron-Mills” was Davis’s first important publication, appearing as it did in one of the leading cultural journals of the era, and it enabled her to gain a foothold in the literary establishment, leading to her meeting Nathaniel Hawthorne and her eventual husband L. Clarke Davis. Following “Life in the Iron-Mills,” Davis published numerous short stories, sketches, and novels, but her career was largely overshadowed by that of her husband and, in time, her son Richard Harding Davis, who became a famous war correspondent and romance writer at the end of the century.

“Life in the Iron-Mills” focuses on Hugh Wolfe in an attempt to provide a picture of the lives of immigrant industrial workers for its assumed genteel readership. Unlike most American depictions of factory work and factory workers at the time, Davis’s narrative emphasizes the feelings of hopelessness and degradation through Hugh’s story of stifled artistic sensibility and his feeble and doomed attempt to escape his life in the mills. Like later realist and naturalist works, “Life in the Iron-Mills” strives to present an unflinching picture of lower-class existence within a society that cripples any attempt at something more, but like sentimentalist works it directly calls upon its readers to engage with the text through their feelings, providing, through the Quaker woman, an example of the good that simple Christian love can accomplish. Further complicating the text’s depiction of working-class life is its frequent reflections on the very problem of conveying the textures of a life so outside the experience of its readers, a problem made manifest in Hugh’s korl statues.

While most critics now focus on the story’s critique of industrial capitalism, many of the first scholars to analyze the work in the 1970s and 1980s emphasized reading it as a thinly veiled account of the problem of the woman artist in nineteenth-century society. Even as the story uses Hugh to represent the problems of the working-class, it emphasizes his difference from most working-class men by feminizing him. The other workers see him as “one of the girl men” and call him “‘Molly Wolfe’” because he has been to school, seldom gets drunk and fights, and spends his little spare time carving statues from the refuse of the mill. Like women during the time who attempted to express themselves or even make a living through art, Hugh is seen as violating gender norms through his art, and when his art is recognized, it is quickly dismissed. The story’s anonymous publication, the narrator’s ambiguous identity, and Deb’s role in the story further accentuate the centrality of gender to Davis’s novella. Given its subject matter—economic and social issues related to industrialization rather than the domestic lives of women—many readers would have assumed its anonymous author was a man, especially as the identity of the narrator remains unclear.
What is certain about the narrator is his or her distance from the lives of the workers in the mills and his or her special connection to Hugh’s story through the possession of the korl statue. The story foregrounds the narrator’s distance through the opening description of watching laborers going to work, but that distance becomes most central to the story through the narrator’s direct appeal to the assumed readers. Casting the reader as an “amateur psychologist” or “an “Egoist, or Pantheist, or Arminian” who “stud[i]es psychology in a lazy, dilettante way,” the narrator challenges him to leave his position of comfort and follow him or her down into the mills: “I want you to hide your disgust, take no heed to your clean clothes, and come right down with me.” Even as the narrator calls upon the reader to see the lives of the workers as clearly as possible, hoping to reveal “the vast machinery of system by which the bodies of workmen are governed,” she or he acknowledges the limits of her or his knowledge of their lives—“I know only the outline of a dull life”—and the “reality of soul-starvation, of living death,” they live—“I can paint nothing of this, only give you the outside outlines of a night.” Because of these limitations, the narrator can only gesture to the problem, “a secret down here, in this nightmare fog, that has lain dumb for centuries,” even as he or she attempts to make it “a real thing to you.”

The story literalizes the narrator’s call to the readers to come down into the mills through the visit by Kirby, May, and Mitchell. Representing the genteel readers of the story and particular perspectives or attitudes towards the factory and its workers, the three men convey both the limits of those perspectives and the abyss between even the most sympathetic readers and the workers themselves. Kirby, the son of a mill owner, is most easily dismissed, as he takes on a laissez-faire attitude where he rejects having any responsibility to the workers beyond paying them. May provides a more ambivalent and ambiguous point of view, as he readily seizes on Hugh’s potential as an artist, insisting, in condescending tones, that Hugh has the “right” to make himself whatever he chooses. Yet when Kirby challenges him and his vision of the “American system [as] a ladder which any man can scale,” asking him if he wants to “banish all social ladders, and put us all on a flat table-land,” all May can do is repeat the idea that Hugh has a right to something more even as he refuses to do anything to help him succeed. The emptiness of May’s sympathy—and perhaps of any mere expression of sympathy—is stressed later in the story when after Hugh’s arrest for pilfering Mitchell’s wallet we get a short glimpse of May at breakfast with his wife and he attacks Hugh as a “scoundrel” for his behavior “after all our kindness that night.” Mitchell is an even more complicated figure, and several critics have argued that the narrator might, in fact, be Mitchell. Mitchell refuses to help Hugh, but treats him as an equal, recognizing him as the creator of the sculpture that starts the men as they leave the factory. He attacks May’s blind inability to see the spiritual desperation that the statue expresses, and he even visits Hugh in prison (although we know not what occurs during the visit).

Mitchell’s aesthetic detachment allows him to appreciate Hugh’s sculpture better than the other visitors, and his stance further enables him to avoid the self-interest of Kirby or the empty sympathy of May. In the end of the visit to the mill, he waves off the workers’ problem by stating that he is “not one of them” and that “Reform is born of need, not pity. . . . Some day, out of their bitter need will be thrown up their own light-bringer.” While May immediately dismisses Mitchell’s prognosis, the story remains quite
ambivalent about his idea that the solution to class disparity and working-class degradation will have to come from the workers themselves, most likely in the form of some sort of revolution. On the one hand, the failure of the “Christian reformer” to reach Hugh on the night that follows—“His words passed far over the furnace-tender’s grasp, toned to suit another class of culture. . . . He meant to cure this world-cancer with a steady eye that had never glared with hunger”—seems to indicate the story agrees with Mitchell. Sympathetic reform cannot cross the great gap in experience between workers and those who would help them. On the other hand, the Quaker’s success in transforming Deb’s life, through “long year of sunshine, and fresh air, and slow, patient Christ-love,” seems to suggest that with the right kind of action, the right kind of sympathy put into action rather than words, true reform of a non-violent sort can be accomplished. The novella’s conclusion reiterates this idea with its image of “the promise of the Dawn.” These two strands can be equated with the two literary modes “Life in the Iron-Mills” is most often associated with—naturalism and sentimentalism. While Mitchell’s diagnosis and Hugh’s story fit with the deterministic worldview of naturalism, Deb’s spiritual rejuvenation through Christian love, a Christian love the story is supposed to encourage in its readers, echoes the key plot devices and tenets of sentimentalism.

The statue itself—and its function as a synecdoche for the story—yields yet another angle on Davis’s understanding of the relationship between her subject matter and her audience. The statue, when rightly viewed, as exemplified by Mitchell, can speak to the truth of the workers’ existence in a way that neither Hugh (whose speech becomes halting and subliterate when asked about the statue) nor the narrator seems capable of doing. As Mitchell reads the statue, lashing out against May’s literal understanding of it, it “asks questions of God,” just as the narrator hopes she or he will reveal how the very lives of the workers “ask” the “terrible dumb question” he or she cannot fully articulate. Mitchell and his reaction to the statue, a reaction reiterated by the statue’s reappearance in the narrator’s home in the concluding scene, manifest a more aesthetic hope that art itself can help to connect the working classes and Davis’s readership in a way that mere appeals to sympathy cannot. As such, Davis’s work stands as an important work of mid-nineteenth-century American literature and of the literature of industrialization in general, a work that demonstrates the potential and limitation of different kinds of literary approaches to one of the major social issues of their time and ours.