

Life in the iron mills

Sociology



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Rebecca Harding Davis admirably wrote "Life in the Iron-Mills" to show the unrelenting fact that there is no such thing as social mobility and the only way for social stratification is placing one self outside the system. Davis' introduction with landscape is more than just a picturesque walk for the reader to embark upon. The landscape of "Life in the Iron Mills" reveals the lack of any type of mobility, from the foggy sky to the sluggish river and everything in-between. Davis takes the readers on a tour through a "town of iron-works" and the first thing one notice is the evasive smoke that taints everything, especially the working poor class. Davis repetition of the word "smoke" gives a sense of how common this evasiveness in the iron mills "smoke on the wharves, smoke on the dingy boats... Smoke everywhere!" (2548). The scene that justly reflects every social status stratifying to elevate from their present status is in the meeting of the Mitchell, Kirby, Doctor May, and Hugh. The obvious person who desperately wants to leave his status is Hugh Wolfe. Wolfe represents the working class that supports the old adage "man cannot live by work alone" because when they do they have to use ale to escape their harsh reality. Even Wolfe, who couldn't easily be pacified, but still needed to be pacified "drank but seldom; when he did, desperately" (Davis 2554). Hugh looks at Mitchell nothing short of adoration, instinctively knowing that he is part of "thoroughbred gentlemen" and when seeing himself "in a mirror his filthy body, his more stained soul" (Davis 2556). Hugh knows that Mitchell's status is too high for even the idealistic attainability and settles with the conclusion "that between them there was a great gulf never to be passed" (Davis 2557). On the other hand, Kirby, the mill owner, believes that there is no great divide between himself and Mitchell. Kirby represents the middle class who reaps the profits of the poor

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working class but continues to also be taken advantage by the upper class. When asked if Kirby had any control of the mill owners, he responded "Control? No... only a speech or two, a hint to form themselves into a society, and a bit of red and blue bunting to make them a flag", this statement shows that he plays a vital role in appeasing the poor class (Davis 2556). Kirby does not have any real control over the mill workers and the comment shows that he is not as superior as he would like to portray himself to be. Kirby still must use trickery and persuasion to gain power over the mill workers and this reveals that every class has their part and his is to appease the mill workers so there will not be an up rise. Rebecca Davis first introduces the Welsh emigrants, or the poor working class, as " these men, going by with drunken faces and brains full of un-wakened power..." and the middle class, which is Kirby, subdues the un-wakened power of the poor class by the effects of alcohol and repetitive work (Davis 2549). Readers can see that Kirby is not at the top of the social ladder. Kirby, or the middle class, also wants to move up in class, keeping up with arts by smartly responding, " Yes. Yonder is Farinata himself in the burning tomb" but still is trapped in his slightly ignorant class, as well, because he " looked curiously around, as if seeing the faces of his hands for the first time" (Davis 2554). The comment also reveals that the visitors see more keenly on the situations of the iron mill situation because they are only observers or only viewing a painting, in reference to Dante's Inferno, while Kirby is part of the painting. The upper class, which is represented by Mitchell, is always referred as the cool observers. A reader at times feels that Mitchell desperately wants to be touched by something rather than just boringly gazing down at the rest of the classes. The description of the elite class that was " accepting all, despiting nothing...until <https://assignbuster.com/life-in-the-iron-mills/>

his self was touched, when it was ice" shows Mitchell as a detached, icy observer who wants to be unfrozen and thus always in the search of a source of heat (Davis 2556).