

# Life in the iron mills



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## Life in the Iron Mills

American literature of the 19th century is represented by a variety of genres, reflecting tendencies and cultural processes in the American society. Short story *Life in the Iron Mills* (1861) by Rebecca Harding Davis takes a particular place among other samples of American literature because it is a realistic description of the social conflicts changing the face of American society. *Life in the Iron Mills* takes readers down, into the thickest of the fog and mud and foul effluvia to describe the social unrest in American society. The author managed to demonstrate American history through the prism of the history of one family (Gabler-Hover & Sattelmeyer 1-20). As the social unrest was like a smolder, this situation could not last for a long time. Thus, *Life in the Iron Mills* could serve as the manifestation of social changes that were to stir up the history.

The narrator conveys this novel to the reader. It is the life story of the Wolfes family - ironworker Hugh Wolfe, his old father, and his cousin Deborah. Narrator stressed that he lived in a house that thirty years ago belonged to the Wolfe family. This moment is important for further understanding of this short story.

The first stage of the novel - Deborah comes home after her twelve-hour shift at the cotton mill. She prepares a supper of the products that are common among the inhabitants of the South of America cold boiled potatoes. Understanding that her cousin was still working, she made a supper to feed him. She gathers pork and bread and takes this meal to him.

The author pays a particular attention to the description of the territory her cousin works in. To see him she has to pass by smoke and flame.

Much attention is paid to the functioning of the iron mill. This mechanism is an embodiment of social injustice and oppression of the lower class of American citizens. David wrote that not many of even the inhabitants of a manufacturing town know the vast machinery of the system by which the bodies of workmen are governed, that goes on unceasingly from year to year. The hands of each mill are divided into watches that relieve each other as regularly as the sentinels of an army. By night and day the work goes on, the unsleeping engines groan and shriek, the fiery pools of the metal boil and surge. Readers understand that these people had no perspectives in this life. Due to lack of education, they had to work in such hell generation by generation.

Despite not being hungry, Hugh eats food to please his sister. This man treated Deborah very kind. In some sense, he took pity on her. On the contrary, Deborah's feelings towards her cousin were much stronger. She loved him but realized that her hunchback was the barrier that did not Hugh to consider her as a woman.

The personality of Hugh is also not trivial. His man had a significant creative potential but could not know how to realize it because working realities he faced at the factory did not give him an opportunity to express his creativity. He wanted to sculpt statues and convey the beauty of the human bodies and other forms to people. As other workers understood that Hugh had

something that made him different from them, he was an outsider among them.

The story has a significant religious background. It makes readers ponder on such social issues as economic equality in a human society and equality in Gods eyes. As it was mentioned above, Hugh was a creative person.

Nevertheless, he failed to realize his potential had led a life of a worker. One day a company of respectful men - Clarke, the son of Kirby, physician, and another two gentlemen visited the mill. One of the visitors notices a human figure that did not move. Workers said it was a statue made by Hugh. As men expressed their interest, they wanted Hugh to describe his artwork. The poor man could just spell that she wanted to eat. It was a cry from the depth of his soul. Having compared his economic situation with that of these respectful men, Hugh felt pity to himself. He understood he worked no less than they, but could not afford himself even a 1 per cent of what these people could afford themselves to possess. Davis stressed that between them there was a great gulf never to be passed. Was it a just situation? It is hard to recognize but it was. Hugh did not understand that physical labor was not and would never be the key to financial success. Only people of non-working professions can afford themselves a better life. Maybe, Hugh latently understood it but did not want to realize.

This story clearly demonstrates that so-called American dream has almost nothing in common with real life. As men of the upper class said to each other that The Lord will take care of his own; or else they can work out their salvation. Moreover, they believed that American ladder gave everybody

equal opportunities but did not want to notice the torment of American class structure. They were wrong.

Deborah was a witness to the conversation between respectful men and Hugh. She wanted to help the man whom she loved most. Thus, the woman decided to steal a wallet from the pocket of one of the visitors. At home, she gave the money to her cousin. Poor woman wanted him to spend this money as she considered it to deserve it. This situation could serve as the best illustration both to the religious perception of reality and manifestation of feminism. Deborah understood that she could be punished for committing such a crime. Nevertheless, she was not afraid to lose her freedom because it would be her gift to the beloved person. As to Hugh, he could not resist spending this money. He believed God created all people equal. Thus, if these people could possess such sums, she could also do it.

The next scene of the novel is dedicated to imprisonment of Hugh and Deborah. Stolen money did not bring them joy. Unable to cope with the awful conditions in prison, Hugh committed suicide. The story ends with a dialogue between Deborah and a Quaker woman who promises to bury Hughs corpse.

To summarize all the above , *Life in the Iron Mills* is a perfect description of the class inequality that is the basis of every society. The author does not want her readers to be blinded by sweet stories of social equality. This story persuades us that social equality is the myth. The idea of soul salvation via hard work can serve just a folding screen for a social conflict that is to burst.

Passage

Deborah did not doubt her. As the evening wore on, she leaned against the iron bars, looking at the hills that rose far off through the thick sodden clouds, like a bright, unattainable calm. As she looked, a shadow of their solemn repose fell on her face: its fierce discontent faded into a pitiful, humble quiet. Slow, solemn tears gathered in her eyes: the poor weak eyes turned so hopelessly to the place where Hugh was to rest, the grave heights looking higher and brighter and more solemn than ever before. The Quaker watched her keenly. She came to her at last, and touched her arm. (Davis).

We find this passage from the second part of the *Life in the Iron Mills* as the core of the novella. The author managed to convey to the readers both the feelings of a woman who lost her beloved man and the hope for the better. When Deborah seemed to have lost everything that linked her to the world outside, God sent her hope the Quaker woman who found the necessary words to calm her down and help her find a new way in her life.

#### Additional Information

1. Some words should be said about the author. Rebecca Harding Davis was the writer who revealed the notion of literary realism to American readers. Her works are also considered as feminist because she often centered the personality of a woman and proved her inner strength and independence. We read her works *Life in the Iron Mills* and *Margaret Howth* to have an idea about her literature heritage. To our mind, it is necessary to read the narratives of this authors that describe the life of black women, women of the working class, American Natives and others who did not even have a chance to pursue a so-called American dream.

2. Deborah is Hughs cousin. This woman is a cotton mill worker. Deborah is described as a " weak, flaccid wretch," but this description seems out of keeping with her description by others (Amper 1-4). She has a congenital physical defect a hunchback that deprived her of the sweets of life. Thus, love to her cousin was her only truth, her only pride. Trying to help her cousin cope with poverty, she stole a purse from the pocket of a wealthy man. Then she was imprisoned. Released from the prison, she decided to join the Quakers.

3. Janey is a little girl of Irish ancestry. Her father was imprisoned. His little creature seemed to be always hungry and sleepy. She is also in love with Hugh because of his kindness and tenderness,

4. Hugh Wolfe is a young iron mill furnace tender. He was born in a working family so his further life was predestined since his childhood. His fellow workers considered him as effeminate because he devoted his free time to carving instead of vicious pastimes. Having agreed to take the stolen money, he was convinced to imprisonment. Nevertheless, he was going to change the situation. Hugh maintained his Christian faith, as he initially planned to return the stolen wallet but decided not to do it (Fukumoto). In prison, he lost his mind and committed suicide.

#### Secondary Sources

1. Quote: Deborah is described as a " weak, flaccid wretch," but this description seems out of keeping with her description by others.







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