



Graduation Project

Final draft

Title: Social Realism in Rebecca Harding Davis's novella "*Life in the Iron Mills*".

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Abstract:

Although women writers are so many and have a significant influence on English literature and its development for centuries, some of them still unknown or forgotten! Rebecca Harding Davis was an American essayist, journalist, and a great novelist. Her novella “Life in the Iron Mills” considered to be a truthful representation of the life in the 19th century in America. In this research, I seek to make the reader aware of the fundamental role of this story and how it became a starting point for realism in American literature.

Introduction:

It is not a secret that the place reached by America today that made it one of the largest countries economically and industrially, could not have been reached without the sacrifices of many immigrant workers. Rebecca Harding Davis addressed those sacrifices and wrote about not only economical and social issues but also class prejudice, labor, and poverty that had been prevailing in America throughout the 19 century in her short story *Life in the Iron Mills*. She first published it anonymously in the Atlantic journal in 1861. However, her story received great acceptance by many famous writers and caught the attention of readers from the upper middle-class. Afterwards, she revealed her real name.

Although the story precedes the emergence of realism in American literature, It has the characteristics and the elements of a realistic literary work. This fictional story tells the tragic life and the suffering of European immigrants who worked at the Iron Mills, namely Hugh Wolfe, the protagonist, whose a nineteen years old and Deborah, his cousin. The story sets in the 1830s in unnamed city based on the author's hometown of Wheeling, in Virginia. Factory workers lifes did not catch the fiction writers attention in the early 19 century. In other words, writers did not consider the life of immigrants a suitable subject for fictional works!

At first, the omniscient narrator, whose gender is unknown, describes vividly the appearance of the workers and the atmosphere of the city as he or she looks out the window. Immigrants who came to America searching for a better life, their dreams scattered after they ended up having a hardship at the mills

where they worked for excessive hours in a dark and dreadful city that covered in smog. Hugh who was an educated and an artist Welsh man, one day he forgot to take his lunch and his cousin Deborah, a hard-working woman, takes his food to him at the factories where he worked. She walks on a rainy day for a long distance feeling the steam and the fire that comes from the mills and that unbearable place but she keeps going towards him. He recognized her then he states that he has no time for eating and went back to complete his job. Deborah who is very fond of Hugh was extremely tired so she stayed until he finished his shift. Unfortunately, Hugh does not feel the same about her despite his sympathy for her.

Meanwhile, Hugh sees a group of rich gentlemen who do not seem to be ironworkers. These men were Kirby, the mill owner's son, Dr. May, the town physician and Mitchell, the son-in-law of the mill owner also few other men. While inspecting the mills and checking on the workers, they notice a strange looking statue that Hugh made from korl. The statue looks like a woman, a woman with no feminine features and no signs of beauty. They observe Hugh's statue and one of them tells him that he has a talent and someday will have a chance to be in a higher class but they all refuse to help him nor give him the money. Deborah sneaks out and steals money from Mitchell's wallet. When Hugh and Deborah go back home she confesses to him that she stole the money to help him out but she is ashamed of that so she gives it to him. Hugh keeps the money to himself. Finally, they both ended up in jail, Hugh gives up life and kills himself and Deborah seeks happiness by repenting her sins and living with a religious woman.

To conclude, the narrator states that "the only thing that gives proof that that talented yet poor ironworker ever existed, is this korl woman that he sculptured".

Literature review:

Literary texts have played a major role in documenting the history and stages of the development of ERAs and civilizations. *Life in the Iron Mills*, some call it *The Korl Woman*, was a remarkable example of that. Even though this story disappeared for decades, the feminist press re-published it in the 1970s and it was a realistic illustration of the social life of immigrants and the hard work and poverty they experienced as mill workers during the 19 century in America.

One of the most important studies written about the role of this novel in realism was the one done by Sharon M. Harris (1989) she notes that "Rebecca H. Davis has shed light on the ordinary life of the working class in spite of the dominance of romanticism over American literature at that time" (p.4).

John Pistelli (2014) stated that Davis's story has deserved to be equal to Leo Tolstoy and Emile Zola's literary work in its gloomy nature and detailed picture of the working class.

Richard Braxton (2014) acknowledges that the Narrator tries to reach a sense of reality when he tells the reader to pay attention as he or she is about to tell something important. When this style used well, the reader becomes convinced that the story has already occurred.

Significance of research:

The significance of this research lies in clarifying and explaining the importance of this story in documenting the reality of a society that is today considered to be one of the most sophisticated nations. Many English students at KFU are unaware of RH Davis's extraordinary works even though she preceded Mark Twain and other famous literary figures in realism.

Research Question:

What is social realism?

Who is Rebecca Harding Davis? And how she contributed to the early American realism?

Research Methodology:

The goal of this research is to reach and explain the fundamental and powerful role for this story in conveying and representing the reality of the American society during the civil war and the industrial revolution. This goal will be reached through historical document analysis.

The primary source will be the Atlantic Journal where the author first published the story, dating back to the 1860s, the whole story is put together on a one-page website.

I will be analyzing the themes of *Life in the Iron Mills*. Some of the literary devices that the author employed in the story is one way to find and analyze the themes.

In fact, this novella has several important themes that do not occur clearly in the text. So I will extract them from the symbols. Each of these symbols adds a profound meaning to the story.

A major theme of *Life in the Iron Mills* is Poverty. Davis intentionally symbolized the poverty of the immigrants and the hard daily life of the working class at that time in describing a city surrounded by factories using the symbols fire and smoke and consequently draws the readers into the poverty situation of industrial workers.

Another Important theme is Gender, the author used the the korl woman, the statue that Hugh made from the factory waste products, which symbolizes and present the physical appearance of the workers who are deprived of the decent life essentials as well as freedom, mainly Hugh who lost some of his masculine features and also the korl woman presents his sensitivity. Another symbol of poverty is the money that Deborah stole from Mitchell's wallet.

On the surface, the theme of Christianity in this story appears to be the only way of hope and salvation. Davis addresses that when she present at the end the Quaker woman who promised to give Hugh a proper burial funeral and to take Deborah to live with her after her release from prison.

Ethical Consideration:

In this research, I listed all the sources that I used accurately. I avoided any misleading information and adhered to the ethical consideration of scientific studies so the results of this study will be harmless and will enrich scientific knowledge in a way that does not contradict the ethics and values of Saudi society.

Limitation of the study:

There are many different editions of this story, which made its analysis difficult. Therefore, I used the Atlantic journal, which has a website, as the main source of the text. Also, I gathered the information and findings independently because of lack of availability of previous studies on this subject.

Expected Results:

The expected results of this research are realizing the importance of this short story in portraying the exact life in the industrial revolution era and expressing the struggles that faced laborers, both men, and women as they sacrificed their dreams and lives to build and establish a civilized nation that is considered one of the greatest nations today.

Davis's story was well written and, moreover, it has an influence on social realism movement in the American literature. The story is told by an omniscient narrator who has no identity to allow the readers to experience the events without bias.

For example, in the words of the narrator, " This is what I want you to do. I want you to hide your disgust, take no heed to your clean clothes, and come right down with me, here, into the thickest of the fog and mud and foul effluvia. I want you to hear this story. There is a secret down here, in this nightmare fog, that has lain dumb for centuries: I want to make it a real thing to you."

The author describes the setting and the characters in details to create empathy towards immigrants and factories workers.

Davis's novella, *Life in The Iron Mills* demonstrates the social reality and deals with the cruelty that immigrants faced and the sacrifices that caused the remarkable industrial prosperity in the United States of America.

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