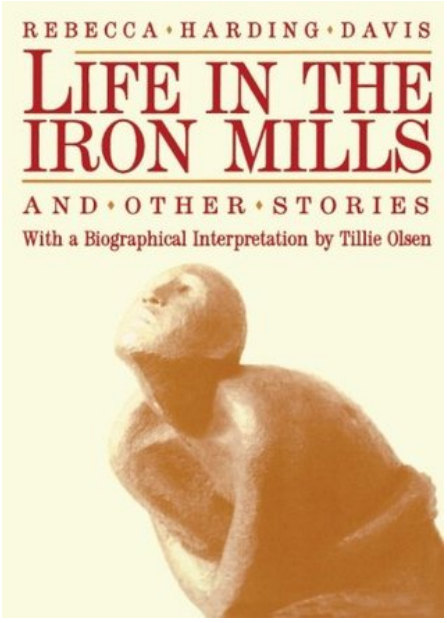

Life in the Iron Mills and Other Stories

Rebecca Harding Davis , Tillie Olsen (Editor)

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You must read this book and let your heart be broken—*New York Times Book Review*

"One of the earliest recognitions in American literature of the existence of the very poor."—Michele Murray, *National Observer*

Suggested for course use in:
19th-century U.S. literature
Working-class studies

Rebecca Harding Davis (1831-1910) published 12 books and many serialized novels, stories, and essays.

Life in the Iron Mills and Other Stories Details

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From Reader Review Life in the Iron Mills and Other Stories for online ebook

Geoffrey says

I read this book in my Writing 1010 class, and my teacher was not the best lecturer on the book. That being said, I did enjoy the story of Life, just not the time we spent in class talking about it. I would have given this book a 5/5 if I had read it on my own, but ya, I didn't.

Anyway, I strongly recommend this book. Rebecca Harding Davis is considered the first author to use realism, and what better way to learn what realism is than by seeing the original definition...?

So all in all, great story, not so great class experience.

Maria says

I read "Life in the Iron Mills" from an anthology (i.e. not this edition) and quite enjoyed it. Glad that Rebecca Harding Davis was rediscovered and brought back into syllabi.

Maddy says

Life in the Iron Mills is wonderful but the other two stories are weighed down by their happy endings (which Olsen addresses). The biographical interpretation is interesting in concept (as much as art reflecting life reflecting art can be) but was mostly tedious.

Christian Schwoerke says

A working class woman escapes her class by becoming a writer with the excellent title novella. The other stories are less accomplished but professional, which the introduction explains is the result of having to depend on her pen as the family's means of support.

Well worth reading as access to an era of exploitation that seems distant but which continues to carry echoes into the present.

Ellen says

Ellen I found this difficult to read, but was amazed at the emotional reactions I had to it. Not a book I will forget.

Janel C. says

Difficult but beautiful novella about life in industrialized America in 1861.

Stormy says

I had to read this for my American Literature class, and it's probably my favorite book I've ever been assigned. Powerful and poignant the entire way through. I loved everything from the heartbreaking story to the way Davis wrote. It's now one of my all-time favorite books.

Bibliomama says

Very strong and moving story. I read some parts of it aloud because I had trouble focusing at times. Some of the language is quaint or in dialect. But Davis illuminates the horrors and impotence of being trapped in poverty when your whole soul wants to take flight, but can't. She exposes graphically how factory workers are only part of the machinery in the eyes of the owners. A wrencher.

I read most of the biographical chapter by Tillie Olsen, which was quite interesting. Davis was so famous for such a brief brilliant period in the 1860s, but then faded away completely until she was revived by this volume in 1984. I did not read the other two stories included in the book. Maybe later.

Linda Stewart says

With the recent mine disasters, this book is worth reading or teaching. How many books imagine or describe the life of iron workers? Reading it well can transform a student's perspective on poverty and oppression.

Brian says

The title story is a classic but the others in the collection are fairly dull, as is the biographical essay by Tillie Olsen.

Lana says

In cleaning through my apartment I have found an old treasure-trove of book related papers, including my “books read” list from 1999-2000. In addition to listing the books, I wrote about 2-3 sentences to myself – sometimes they were plot reminders, sometimes commentary on the books. They were not intended to be read by anyone other than myself. I don’t imagine these will be very helpful to anyone else, but I’m posting them here for two reasons: first, to keep my reviews/comments in one place now and, second, because they’re kind of a fascinating look at my younger brain.

Displays the atrocities of early industrial life in America. Tragic.

John Pistelli says

This debut novella by Rebecca Harding Davis, first published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1861, is now a classic after its rescue from oblivion by Tillie Olsen and the Feminist Press in the 1970s. An early example of realism in American fiction, which had been in the mid-19th century dominated by variations of romance (e.g., Hawthorne) and sentimentalism (e.g., Stowe), Harding's story has since earned comparison with Zola, Tolstoy, and Dreiser for its grim, detailed portrayal of laboring life. It is the tale of Wolfe, resident and worker in a milltown based on Davis's native Wheeling. While Wolfe is subject to all the deprivations of his co-workers, who live in foul hovels and medicate their wounded souls with alcohol, he nevertheless stands out for being more educated and refined, an artistic soul in a hellish world, judged to be disablingly feminine by his peers as he devotes all of his free time to art:

> In the mill he was known as one of the girl-men: "Molly Wolfe" was his sobriquet.…
>
> For other reasons, too, he was not popular. Not one of themselves, they felt that, though outwardly as filthy and ash-covered; silent, with foreign thoughts and longings breaking out through his quietness in innumerable curious ways: this one, for instance. In the neighboring furnace-buildings lay great heaps of the refuse from the ore after the pig-metal is run. Korl we call it here: a light, porous substance, of a delicate, waxen, flesh-colored tinge. Out of the blocks of this korl, Wolfe, in his off-hours from the furnace, had a habit of chipping and moulding figures,—hideous, fantastic enough, but sometimes strangely beautiful: even the mill-men saw that, while they jeered at him. It was a curious fancy in the man, almost a passion. The few hours for rest he spent hewing and hacking with his blunt knife, never speaking, until his watch came again,—working at one figure for months, and, when it was finished, breaking it to pieces perhaps, in a fit of disappointment. A morbid, gloomy man, untaught, unled, left to feed his soul in grossness and crime, and hard, grinding labor.

One night, the mill-worker's son brings an entourage through the iron-works, and they discover one of Wolfe's sculptures. This leads them to a philosophical discussion of what should be done given that industrial society needs laborers—mere "hands"—even though said laborers have talents and abilities that could lift them above their impoverished life. One of those touring the factory is Mitchell, the "man of culture," in whom Wolfe recognizes his kin in aesthetic sensibility. Mitchell, a reader of "Kant, Novalis, Humboldt," recognizes the genius in Wolfe's sculpture—the "Korl Woman" of the novella's alternate title—because he sees the spiritual aspiration and soul-hunger in the represented woman's features. Following the German Romantic ideas Mitchell is familiar with, Davis demonstrates through a brilliant allegory how aesthetics may be the common ground of humanity, manifesting across differences of class and culture the universal spirit of reason, a spirit insulted when men and women are immured in poverty and labor. The story is at its best in the scene in the factory, where the interplay of powerful physical description, philosophical dialogue, and aesthetic beauty is indeed reminiscent of Dante's *Inferno*, which Davis perhaps inevitably alludes to.

The second half is less original and compelling: it traces Wolfe's downfall after Deborah, his hunchbacked

cousin who loves him unrequitedly, steals some of Mitchell's money in the hopes that it will allow Wolfe to escape the town; the blame for the theft falls mostly on him, and he commits suicide in prison after realizing that he will never have the opportunity to develop the spiritual powers revealed in his art. This chronicle of doom foreshadows, in its pessimism, the naturalist novels that will dominate the end of the nineteenth century, even if Davis sugars the pill by introducing late in the story a Quaker woman who bears all the values of Christian charity excluded from the mill-town.

Ideologically, the story is somewhat confused, pushed and pulled among Dickensian sentimentalism (shown by the portrayal of the indefatigably loyal Deborah and the Quaker woman, as well as the narrator's persistent Christian allusions); proto-naturalism (as when Davis depicts individual development as wholly determined by environment); and Romanticism (communicated by the korl woman's status as an aesthetic object that has the potential to heal the riven community). This last element is most interesting to me, because it goes beyond what one tends to find in Dickens's or Stowe's ultimately Christian and anti-aesthetic portrayals of "life among the lowly" and unites Davis's story to the concerns of the American Renaissance writers, especially to Hawthorne's fears about the fate of art in Puritan and materialist society (cf. "The Artist of the Beautiful").

Another fascinating element of the story is its nameless narrator, who stages his or her own narration as coming from within the former house of Wolfe, where his korl woman still sits behind a curtain. The narrator essays and exhorts and preaches, sometimes tiresomely, but his or her dense, allusive, poetic prose lifts the story above reportage and gives it a tragic resonance uncommon in realistic short stories:

> The road leading to the mills had been quarried from the solid rock, which rose abrupt and bare on one side of the cinder-covered road, while the river, sluggish and black, crept past on the other. The mills for rolling iron are simply immense tent-like roofs, covering acres of ground, open on every side. Beneath these roofs Deborah looked in on a city of fires, that burned hot and fiercely in the night. Fire in every horrible form: pits of flame waving in the wind; liquid metal-flames writhing in tortuous streams through the sand; wide caldrons filled with boiling fire, over which bent ghastly wretches stirring the strange brewing; and through all, crowds of half-clad men, looking like revengeful ghosts in the red light, hurried, throwing masses of glittering fire. It was like a street in Hell. Even Deborah muttered, as she crept through, "looks like t' Devil's place!" It did,—in more ways than one.

This story very much deserves its newfound place in the American canon.

Tillie Olsen's long biographical essay places "Life in the Iron Mills" in the context of Davis's life and times. Olsen has an interesting case to make: that Davis's literary career was thwarted by the domestic responsibilities she took on when she married and had children. This is a more difficult argument than it seems, because Davis was productive, writing fiction and non-fiction until her death and earning a living through her work. She was not "silenced" in the conventional sense. But Olsen argues that none of her subsequent work lived up to her early promise, that in fact "Life in the Iron Mills," written when she was thirty and living with her parents in Wheeling, isolated from literary life and from the social scene, remains her greatest masterpiece. The pressures of domesticity and the consequent need to write potboilers for money combined to warp Davis's gift, so that she never produced the great novels one might have expected from the author of such a brilliant first novella. The contrast is to women writers who did not have children and who either never married or were lucky enough to find supportive spouses: Emily Dickinson, George Eliot, Willa Cather, Virginia Woolf. Olsen's implicit politics are Marxist-feminist, in that freeing up mothers to be great writers would necessarily involve a revolution in the economic and familial order.

Olsen does not do as much textual analysis or intellectual biography as one might wish; I was disappointed

to see no discussion at all of Dickens's potential influence on "Life in the Iron Mills," since the story seems almost like a programmatic reply to—and advance upon—the characterization of Stephen Blackpool in *Hard Times*. I do admire Olsen's lack of special pleading for the bulk of Davis's work, which she admits does not bear re-reading or merit rediscovery:

> But Proust is right. There are no excuses in art. Including having been born female in the wrong time/place.

Such a clear assessment of reality, such a forthright admission that poverty and deprivation make people worse and not better, is a great improvement on the dominant Left perspective today, mired as it is in a strange belief that oppression is something like a superpower, granting magical powers of accurate perception to the oppressed that the privileged do not have.

On that note, the most interesting story about Davis's life related by Olsen involves the young author's entry into the literary society of Emerson's New England. As a writer from the Pittsburgh lower middle class (not too far from Wheeling) who has also spent a lot of time negotiating the culture of the intellectual/academic left, I have to say that I identified with Davis in this passage:

> Emerson came shortly thereafter. Her tongue was "dry with awe" ("I went to Concord, a young woman from the backwoods, firm in the belief that Emerson was the first of living men"). It loosened, after listening the entire morning, along with Emerson and Hawthorne, to Alcott's "orotund" sentences
>
> *paeans to the war, the "armed angel which was wakening the nation to a lofty life unknown before."*
>
> *I had just come up from the border where I had seen the actual war; the filthy spewings of it; the political jobbery in Union and Confederate camps, the malignant personal hatreds wearing patriotic masks, and glutted by burning homes and outraged women, the chances in it, well improved on both sides, for brutish men to grow more brutish, and for honorable gentlemen to degenerate into thieves and sots. War may be an armed angel with a mission, but she has the personal habits of the slums.*
>
> Rebecca found herself tartly, though tremblingly, saying substantially the above.
>
> *This would-be seer who was talking of it, and the real seer who listened, knew no more of war as it was, than I had done [as a child] in my cherry tree when I dreamed of bannered legions of crusaders, debouching in the misty fields.*
>
> Alcott's orotund sentences went right on, till Hawthorne "rose lazily to his feet, and said quietly: 'We cannot see that thing at so long a range. Let us go to dinner,' and Mr. Alcott suddenly checked the droning flow of his prophecy and quickly led the way to the dining-room."
>
> Her dislike for Alcott, "that vague, would-be prophet," is unconcealed and sometimes vitriolic. She found Emerson's deep respect for him "almost painful to see."
>
> For all Emerson's flattering and receptive attention to her, his "exquisite courtesy," she felt he regarded her not as Rebecca Harding, writer, human being, but as some kind of specimen.

Davis, like Hawthorne, was ambivalent about the Civil War, wishing for an end to slavery even as she recoiled from the carnage and corruption and feared for the future of the nation. Such ambivalence is never welcome; to query the Civil War as a good war at all is to apologize for slavery, they say, just as to question that World War II was an even better good war is to apologize for Nazism, and to oppose the Iraq War was to support Saddam Hussein. And to be sure, he who wills the ends wills the means; but to be glad that slavery and fascism were defeated should not involve denying the disasters of war and should not be used to silence questions about the necessity of war in the present and future, however unavoidable we may judge it to have been in the past. Fiction writers, who have to keep their eyes on details and on individual stories, will inevitably notice the cost of bloodshed in even the most just cause, and will prefer the naming of facts to the recitation of abstractions. But I digress…

Hawthorne, Olsen notes, was the nicest to the young Rebecca Harding of all the New England literati; he has a bad reputation among feminists for his notorious remark about "the damned mob of scribbling women," but he was disparaging commercial fiction when he wrote that. He knew the real thing when saw it, and "Life in the Iron Mills" is certainly the real thing.

Mia says

Depressing, certainly. But the novella that is "Life in the Iron Mills" (it's about 54 pages long in this edition) is beautifully written. The smoke and soot of the town is described so artfully, yellow river and all, that I found myself reading those descriptive passages over again aloud. The working class was shafted big time in the 19th century, and this story captures the horror of it. Read it!

Werner says

"Life in the Iron Mills" (1861) was one of the first major Realist works in American literature and created an immediate sensation in the literary world when it was first published, though it was subsequently forgotten and only re-discovered in relatively recent times by editor Olsen. I'd read, and really liked, it already back in the 90s, when we were home-schooling our girls and I was preparing to teach American literature (I made it required reading!). Since the additional material in this volume consists only of two more stories by Davis, one much shorter, and Olsen's "Biographical Interpretation," I selected it to read this month mainly because I could finish it by January (when I'll be starting a common read in one of my groups). I didn't expect it to be a five-star read, but it earned every one of them.

We should note at the outset that this book doesn't purport to be a collection of "the best of" Davis' voluminous short fiction, let alone anything like a comprehensive or representative collection (though Olsen or someone else hopefully will someday produce one!) Rather, it's a thematic one, linking three very different stories that nevertheless have a common underlying element: a protagonist who has artistic (in the broad sense --sculpture in one case, music in the other two-- talent and temperament, but whose situation doesn't afford any opportunity for it to be developed. Olsen makes a very convincing case that Davis could identify personally with this aspect of her protagonist's experience, and that this was an important part of the author's consciousness (see below).

In the title story, set in her native Wheeling, WV (then part of Virginia) the crippling situation protagonist Hugh Wolfe faces is that of poverty: wage slavery, working in an exhausting and dangerous job 12 hours a

day, six days a week, for subsistence wages, with no chance for leisure or education. This is the first work of American literature that focuses on the laborers in this situation, and the first social criticism of the treatment the Industrial Revolution was meting out to them. It's gritty, powerful, and tragic, and deeply informed by the author's Christian faith; the sympathetically-treated faith of the Quakers plays a key role, with a trajectory of despair and ruin contending with one of hope and Christian redemption. And the language and imagery of the ending strongly evokes the eschatology of the Christian faith, with a rare appreciation of its socio-economic significance. Davis' achievement in bringing all this to life in what we now recognize as Realist style is remarkable, given her background and resources: she had no formal education beyond "female seminary" (essentially a boarding high school for girls, with a fairly limited curriculum), her reading didn't include Realist models --she adopted that mode of expression naturally, without outside influence and against the Romantic current of all the literature she knew-- and with her genteel class position, the direct observation of working-class life that forms the matrix of the story took a lot of focused effort.

In the other stories here, we have female protagonists whose family responsibilities tie them down to a degree that precludes fulfilling their aspirations for a singing career, or for a life lived in a milieu of aesthetic and intellectual stimulation. But these are not simply stereotypical feminist tracts (because Davis herself wasn't a stereotypical feminist). They recognize the profound truth that loving family ties are what life is all about, and that we get deep emotional satisfaction in return for what we give to spouses and kids who need us, and whom at one level we need. Like many worthwhile things, this can require tradeoffs and sacrifices -- but real sacrifices, as opposed to mock ones, involve some pain, some giving up something that has real worth to us, and Davis also recognizes that truth (at the same time that she sees that the grass on the other side of the fence isn't always as green as we paint it in imagination). She recognized all of this from the personal experience of a woman who sacrificed a lot, in terms of time for writing and artistic development, to the needs and wants of her husband and three kids (the youngest born when Davis was 41). That gives these stories a realism, an appreciation of shades of grey, that lifts them above white-and-black tracts (feminist or traditionalist) posing as fiction. And even though I'm a male, I can relate, because like Davis I pursue my writing in the bits and pieces of time I can grab in the midst of family responsibilities (including, in my case, a day job to support the family!) and family fellowship. (The alternatives don't *have* to be confined to just two, all of one and none of the other!)

At 89 pages, plus 17 pages of notes, Olsen's bio-critical material isn't a full-length biography (that remains to be written!), but it's substantial and fascinating, and added a good deal to my knowledge of this author. (It was written with access to Davis' own diary, and letters.) My only real criticisms would be that the placement of this section between the title story and the other two is awkward, especially since it includes spoilers for both the other stories (it would work better placed at the end, so it would be more apt to be read in that order, as I did in fact read it), and that as a Marxist scholar, Olsen isn't really able to sympathize with Davis' faith.

While Olsen considers the title story to be Davis' only really great work, and finds her subsequent productions mostly flawed, she makes a convincing case that at least some of them have enduring worth. Personally, I'd say that "The Wife's Story" and "Anne," which appear here, and "Balacchi Brothers" (which I've read elsewhere) are on a par with the short fiction of Jewett, Freeman and Garland. This book has whetted my interest in reading more by this author, and I hope eventually to do so!

Connor says

Fairly interesting reading for those interested in the actuality of events. The lives described are mostly brutal

and dumb, with a casual cruelty and disgusting habits. I'm not a huge fan of her style, it almost seems condescending to me. The critical notes by Tillie Olsen were top notch.
