

The Oswald Review: An International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Criticism in the Discipline of English

Volume 24

Article 5

2022

Desperate, Exploited, and Abandoned: Laborers in "Life in the Iron-Mills" and Today

Danielle Durning
Delaware County Community College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/tor>



Part of the [American Literature Commons](#), [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [Literature in English, Anglophone outside British Isles and North America Commons](#), [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#), and the [Literature in English, North America Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Durning, Danielle (2022) "Desperate, Exploited, and Abandoned: Laborers in "Life in the Iron-Mills" and Today," *The Oswald Review: An International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Criticism in the Discipline of English*: Vol. 24, Article 5.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/tor/vol24/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you by the College of Humanities and Social Sciences at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Oswald Review: An International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Criticism in the Discipline of English by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact digres@mailbox.sc.edu.

Desperate, Exploited, and Abandoned: Laborers in "Life in the Iron-Mills" and Today

Keywords

industrial revolution, iron mills, poverty, labor, Rebecca Harding Davis

Desperate, Exploited, and Abandoned: Laborers in “Life in the Iron-Mills” and Today

Danielle Durning

When the nineteenth century began, the United States was in its infancy, an agrarian society still grappling with its emergence as an independent, self-governing nation. By the end of the century, it had transformed into an industrial powerhouse well on its way to becoming the superpower it is today. The rapidly advancing technology of the Industrial Revolution meant that everything from food and tools to furniture and toys could be produced in larger quantities for lower prices. Mills churned out textiles and raw materials, factories produced consumer goods, and coal mines provided the fuel on which industrialism ran. The men who owned such establishments became fabulously wealthy. The middle class could afford material comforts and luxury that their parents and grandparents could only dream of. New innovations were appearing left and right. It was an incredible time to be alive—for a lucky few.

Rebecca Harding Davis was one of the lucky ones. She was born into a comfortably well-off family and received a quality education. Unlike many others in her position, however, she was not insulated from the grim realities of industrial labor. Davis spent most of her life in the city of Wheeling, in what is now West Virginia. It was a city so heavily industrialized that smoke was considered its most notable feature (Gatlin). From a young age

Davis would have seen firsthand the effects of unchecked industry on the environment and poorly-regulated workplaces on laborers. It appears to have disturbed her deeply, so much so that “her first major artistic statement” (Duvall), the piece of writing that would launch her career, was a short story depicting the desolation and desperation that industry had wrought. In this 1861 story, “Life in the Iron-Mills”, Davis portrayed the detrimental physical and spiritual effects of industrial labor, the exploitative and dehumanizing relationship between employers and employees, and the reality that most laborers were doomed to live and die in poverty. The story portrays the downfall of Hugh Wolfe, a poor mill worker who sees a chance to pursue his natural gift for art when his cousin, Deb, offers him a stolen wallet with a check inside. They are apprehended and, devoid of hope and facing a lengthy sentence, Hugh ends his life in the jailhouse. It was a groundbreaking work; not only had Davis crafted “the first notable work of fiction to concern itself with the life of the factory worker in an industrial American town”—she was also contributing to the development of American literary realism (Hesford 70).

Naturally, after Tillie Olsen republished “Life in the Iron-Mills” in the 1970s, reintroducing Davis into the literary world after decades of obscurity, many critics have examined the story through a variety of lenses. With labor, poverty, and the interaction of social classes being central to the story, one would expect Marxist theory to dominate the conversation, yet critiques centered on class and labor are few and far between, and only xtime burrough and Sabrina Starnaman appear to take an interest in how Davis’s work remains relevant in the twenty-first century. For while many readers

may walk away from “Life in the Iron-Mills” pleased that such an unhappy era is long behind us, a modern laborer might not agree. This raises some uncomfortable questions: why have a century’s worth of laws, regulations, and reforms not solved the issues faced by the working poor? Are these problems an innate part of American capitalism? Can they be fixed, or do they stem from a deep, dark corner of human nature?

The first criticism of industrialism Davis raises, introduced in the first paragraph and looming throughout the rest of the story, is its filth—and the toll that filth takes on the town’s denizens. Davis’s narrator describes a town covered in soot, with smog-filled skies above and a river brown with pollution below. Every inch of the town appears to be colored by its toxic environs, the people included, their “skin and muscle and flesh begrimed with smoke and ashes [...] breathing from infancy to death an air saturated with fog and grease and soot, vileness for soul and body” (Davis, n.p.). The most defining physical qualities of the main character, Hugh, are marks of how his labor and polluted environment have laid waste to his body. Despite his youth, Hugh has “already lost the strength and instinct vigor of a man, his muscles [are] thin, his nerves weak, his face (a meek, woman’s face) haggard, yellow with consumption.” Living and working in this town almost seems to drain the life from its inhabitants; in the case of Hugh, it is quite literally slowly killing him via tuberculosis.

To a modern reader, these observations seem obvious. It goes without saying that pollution is harmful to the human body. During Davis’s time, however, this was not at all the case. Jill Gatlin reports that “mid-nineteenth-century courts often ruled that the economic hazards of smoke

abatement outweighed the health hazards of coal burning” (203) and furthermore, some industrialists and even doctors argued that coal smoke was beneficial to health (212-213). They argued that smoke should not be seen as a blemish, nuisance, or hazard, but as a symbol of progress and prosperity. Knowing that this was the predominant narrative, Davis’s statement suddenly seems bold indeed.

Davis’s description of her main character, Hugh, also rings true through a historical lens. Even if he had not met his demise in jail, his days seemed to be numbered from the start, as “consumption” was well on its way to draining the life from him. Tuberculosis was one of many diseases that ran rampant through the lower class in the nineteenth century. Modern readers might associate technological advancement with improved health-care, and thus with longer lives, but in Davis’s time, the opposite was true. Rapid industrialization led to the working poor concentrating in urban centers. There the polluted air and water weakened their health, while their cramped, unsanitary living conditions were breeding grounds for disease. In a study of life expectancy for white Americans by J. David Hacker, models created by three different researchers show a decrease in life expectancy between 1790 and 1860.

Another contributor to shortened life expectancy in laborers was the nature of their work and workplaces. Davis references the grueling nature of Hugh’s work throughout the story and implies that “the slow, heavy years of constant, hot work” have worked in tandem with his tuberculosis in weakening him into “one of the girl-men.” He works six days a week, long into the night—on the night the story begins, his boss has

decided to keep him working until morning. In prior centuries, the ancestors of men like Hugh would likely have been engaged in agricultural labor—a hard line of work, to be sure, but less cruel. When planting is done, it's done; when a batch of iron ore is done processing, there is immediately another to take its place. In agriculture, there are portions of the year where little or no time needs to be spent in the fields, and workers have time to improve their homes, make extra money, or relax and socialize; there are no such lulls in an iron mill. Andrea Graziosi quotes a steel worker living toward the end of the nineteenth century, who succinctly describes the demanding nature of industrial labor: “Hard! I guess it is hard. I lost forty pounds the first three months I came into the business. It sweats the life out of a man” (512).

Davis does not focus solely on physical harm, either; she also portrays the way that heavy labor drains people of their spirit. Drinking is the coping mechanism of choice in her unnamed mill town, and alcoholism plagues its people, men and women alike. Hugh does not rely on drink, however; his mental strain manifests in other ways. He is a man with an artist's soul and a natural hunger for beauty and creativity, yet has been forced into mindless, ugly labor by the circumstances of his birth. The effect is an overwhelming despair that a modern reader might interpret as depression— “[a] morbid, gloomy man, untaught, unled, left to feed his soul in grossness and crime, and hard, grinding labor [...] [t]here are moments [...] when his nature starts up with a mad cry of rage against God, man, whoever it is that has forced this vile, slimy life upon him.”

The mills and factories were a living hell, and it is no wonder that

Hugh was so desperate to escape the mill town. Unfortunately, the people in the best position to improve the life of laborers like Hugh—the industrialists who employed them—were the people with the greatest vested interest in keeping them poor, uneducated, and without hope. Davis embodies this in the character of Kirby, the son of one of the iron mill’s owners. He maintains that he has no responsibility toward the workers save for their wages, and even this responsibility is barely met at all. Hugh, his father, and his cousin Deb all work, and at the beginning of the story we see what kind of life their wages pay for. The cellar they call home is “low, damp,—the earthen floor covered with a green, slimy moss,—a fetid air smothering the breath. [Hugh’s father] lay asleep on a heap of straw, wrapped in a torn horse-blanket” while a friend of the family, Janey, slept nearby beneath “a heap of ragged coats.” The three of them barely earn enough to survive, let alone improve their lives in even the most minimal of ways. The US Bureau of Labor Statistics states that in 1861, in Pennsylvania, the average wage for a puddler—Hugh’s job in the iron mills—was \$2.61 a day. That means he made approximately \$814.32 a year. Today, this would be \$23,807.36—for a job that worked him until all day and night, a job that was slowly killing him, physically and spiritually.

Low wages were not the only way in which industrialists exploited their workers, either. “‘Twelve hundred hands? [...] Do you control their votes, Kirby?’” Mitchell, Kirby’s brother-in-law, asks, as if it were reasonable to demand one’s employees to vote for one’s preferred candidate (the story doesn’t specify the election’s purpose). Kirby clarifies that his father does not demand a certain vote of his employees, but that he rallied seven hundred of

them to the side of his candidate of choice, who almost certainly had Kirby Sr.'s interests at heart and not those of the laborers—as previously discussed, the interests of these two parties are almost exact opposites. Furthermore, Davis notes that the mindless, hopeless state of Hugh and his peers was also beneficial to the mill owners. While mocking the ostensibly charitable Doctor May as the physician tries to encourage Hugh, Mitchell says, “Let them have a clear idea of the rights of the soul, and I’ll venture next week they’ll strike for higher wages. That will be the end of it.”

When confronted with Hugh and the statue he wrought of korl (a gray, stonelike byproduct of iron smelting)—a poignant and disturbing representation of Hugh’s desperation and misery that affects even the cynical Mitchell—and thus the humanity of one of the people they were exploiting and the effects of that exploitation, Kirby, Mitchell, and even Doctor May quickly begin to deflect any sense of guilt or sympathy they might have felt with apathy. Each dismisses Hugh in his own fashion and gives his own justification as to why he can do nothing for the miserable puddler. Mitchell is outright derisive toward the laborers and openly states that he “is not one of them” in a context that reeks of social Darwinism. Kirby puts a thin veil over his disdain, instead denying that he has any responsibility toward Hugh beyond paying him. At face value, Doctor May is the kindest, telling Hugh “you have it in you to be a great sculptor, a great man [...] God has given you stronger powers than many men” and encouraging him to rise above the station of his birth, but providing him with no material assistance to do so—only words, which are enough to leave the doctor satisfied and “glowing with his own magnanimity” (Davis). After seeing a glimmer of hope, Hugh

again finds himself hopelessly stuck in the iron mills, only in even more anguish.

Davis's observations about the upper classes, too, have a strong historical basis. To exploit laborers to the fullest extent while accepting as little responsibility as possible—this was the *modus operandi* of industrialists in the largely unregulated days of the 19th century. Demand for jobs was astronomical; Graziosi quotes a worker who described a crowd of two hundred men standing outside a slaughterhouse, hoping a job would open up (518). With so much competition and no minimum wage, industrialists could get away with paying unskilled laborers next to nothing. They also maximized profits by cutting corners on workplace safety in ways that are horrifying from a modern standpoint. Ask somebody to describe a nineteenth-century factory, and they will likely mention horror stories about men being crushed by machinery or child laborers losing fingers. These were very much the reality of the age. Few standards for safety existed, and as James Weinstein outlines, companies had little incentive to follow the laws that did exist. Weinstein describes multiple legal cases in which employees were injured or maimed by their employers' negligence; in each one, the courts placed the blame on the employees for continuing to work in dangerous conditions rather than lose their jobs. Exploiting the masses of working poor maximized profits and carried no consequences, even when the results were truly horrific.

In the one hundred and sixty years since Davis wrote "Life in the Iron-Mills," a great deal of new legislation to protect the rights of workers has been created. The Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 established a

minimum wage, banned businesses from employing children under age 16, and required businesses to pay employees higher wages if they worked above a certain number of hours each week (United States Department of Labor). In 1970, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) was founded for the purpose of inspecting workplaces, identifying potential hazards, and penalizing businesses that put employees at risk. The world Davis portrays might seem almost alien to the modern reader, with its soot-coated city, hellish mills, and predatory industrialist overlords. Some might rest easy, satisfied that America has moved past this ugly, uncaring phase of her history.

A working-class reader, on the other hand, might have to disagree. Remove the particulars of Hugh's story, the garb of his time and place, and examine the essential issues that led to "the crisis of his life" and the tragedy that followed. What currents were at play in Hugh's life, pulling him toward his demise? Mental anguish born of years of longing for beauty and self-expression while employed in grueling manual labor. A constant state of financial hardship, simultaneously the result of his lack of job skills and the obstacle keeping him from investing in learning a skill. An employer who viewed him with no more compassion than a cog in one of the machines, a tool to be used until it is too worn and broken to be of any further use. Behold the story of countless working poor in the twenty-first century. The lowest socioeconomic ranks of American society develop mental illness in much higher proportions than upper classes (Hollingshead and Redlich), and so their anguish is evident. In 2019, 10.5% of Americans were found to have low or very low food security (Coleman-Jensen et al.), and so their

financial hardship is evident. There is a constant barrage of stories about the grueling and even dangerous conditions employees of businesses such as Amazon and Wal-Mart face, and so their employers' lack of concern for them as human beings is evident.

A century and a half of legislation and reform has failed to solve the essential problems that plague the lives of working-class Americans. Davis herself repeatedly references "reformers" in her short story, universally depicting them as alienated from the laborers and ultimately ineffectual; it seems like she may have had vaster changes than mere reform in mind. William L. Watson notes that at the time Davis was writing, both the Republican and Democratic parties were proponents of classical liberalism—pro-free market and anti-big government—and argues that "Life in the Iron-Mills" offered a critique of the economic mores of the day. Based on the subject of her concern, common laborers, it is clear that she was more left-leaning than many of her contemporaries. The question is, how far to the left?

Two of her characters, Kirby and his sardonic brother-in-law, Mitchell, both reference a viewpoint *substantially* more leftist than classical liberalism. "I tell you, there's something wrong that no talk of 'Liberte' or 'Egalite' will do away," says Kirby, referencing the motto of the French Revolution; several of the leading thinkers behind said revolution promoted ideas that foreshadowed Marxism. Later, dismissing the need to aid Hugh or any of the laborers, Mitchell says "Some day, out of their bitter need will be thrown up their own light-bringer,—their Jean Paul, their Cromwell, their Messiah." All three figures he mentions—Jean-Paul Marat, Oliver Crom-

well, and Jesus Christ—were leaders of movements that actively threatened the upper class. Marat and Cromwell were both leaders in revolutions that saw monarchs beheaded; Christ condemned his culture's priestly caste and created a religious system that did not require such a caste at all. In these instances and others, the dialogue of these characters carry double meanings they seem to be unaware of, serving as a sort of aside to the reader.

While Kirby and Mitchell probably mean to show their intellectual chops with these references, the recurring theme of revolution stands out and seems to call back to the closing sentences of Davis's introduction to her narrative: "Their lives ask it; their deaths ask it. There is no reply [...] this terrible dumb question is its own reply; that it is not the sentence of death we think it, but, from the very extremity of its darkness, the most solemn prophecy which the world has known of the Hope to come. I dare make my meaning no clearer." The simple question that seems to answer Davis's riddle is the question of *why*—why is this the life that these men must live? As Davis says, the answer is also why—why do they need to accept to such a life? What is stopping them from demanding something else—something more? Of course Davis dares not speak her mind on this matter. To speak her mind would be to be condemned, censored, and silenced, for this idea—the idea of the lowly coming together as one and demanding something more, or even taking it—would have terrified the middle and upper classes of 1860. They knew well what can happen when the masses strike back; in 1848, America had looked on as thousands of European peasants took up arms against their aristocratic overlords (Britannica).

Was Davis a die-hard socialist advocating revolution? Probably not;

if she was, why address her message to the educated, middle- and upper-class readers of *The Atlantic*? However, her generally dim view of “reformers” in the text—and the fact that “reformers” have not fully fixed the problems she criticized, even today—implies that she sought something that would change the system on a much deeper level. She recognized that the people in power—industrialists and politicians—would not eagerly modify a system that rewarded them so well. At best, they would relinquish enough power to satisfy the public and fix some surface-level issue. Real change would have to start at the bottom; in fact, the stirrings of such change were already in motion when Davis wrote “Life in the Iron-Mills”.

As described by Watson, the 1850s had seen a number of widely-publicized strikes and demonstrations led by working-class men and women. It was a promising start, certainly, but Watson also points out that many “industrialized workers and artisans who had been radicalized [...] were ‘nearly bereft of aid’ in ‘their quest for a change in the laws governing economic endeavors.’” The middle class lacked the vested interest of industrialists; if they could be convinced to side with the working class, they could potentially bring money, education, political savvy, and their good reputations to the cause. Davis, herself middle-class, realized this. With “Life in the Iron-Mills,” she sought to spread awareness of the issues the working class faced and inspire sympathy in the middle class. They had seen articles about factory workers striking and might have feared an upset in the status quo; Davis showed them why such an upset was necessary.

Sadly, the class unity Davis hoped to encourage is still a long way from being realized. It is not an accident that there is such a nega-

tive narrative about America's working class. If the middle class remains convinced that the working class is filled with sluggards and criminals, they will continue to oppose changes that seek to improve working-class lives—even when they, too, would stand to gain. If the middle class learned to empathize with the working class, to recognize the hardship and injustice they face, to stand together as one, change *would* happen, and life *would* improve for all. This is why empathy is so often ridiculed and derided—it is a threat. It is powerful. It is the key to a better world.

Works Cited

- Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Revolutions of 1848". *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Revolutions-of-1848>. Accessed 17 May 2022.
- burrough, xtine, and Sabrina Starnaman. "A Digital Korl Woman: *Students and Workers Recover the Spirit of Life in the Iron Mills from the Digital Factory to the Classroom*." *Transformations: The Journal of Inclusive Scholarship and Pedagogy*, vol. 27, no. 2, 2017, pp. 121–41, JSTOR, Accessed 29 Apr 2022.
- Coleman-Jensen, Alisha, Matthew P. Rabbitt, Christian A. Gregory, and Anita Singh. 2020. *Household Food Security in the United States in 2019*, ERR-275, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service. www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/99282/err-275.pdf?v=228.1. Accessed 3 Feb 2022.
- Davis, Rebecca Harding. "Life in the Iron-Mills" [1861]. *Project Gutenberg*, 2008, www.gutenberg.org/files/876/876-h/876-h.htm. Accessed 22 Nov 2021.
- Duvall, J. Michael. "Davis, Rebecca Harding." *Student's Encyclopedia of Great American Writers*, Facts on File, 2021. *Bloom's Literature*, online.infobase.com. Accessed 10 Dec 2021.
- Gatlin, Jill. "Disturbing Aesthetics: Industrial Pollution, Moral Discourse, and Narrative Form in Rebecca Harding Davis's 'Life in the Iron Mills.'" *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, vol. 68, no. 2, 2013, pp. 201–33, <https://doi.org/10.1525/ncl.2013.68.2.201>.

- Graziosi, Andrea. "Common Laborers, Unskilled Workers." *Labor History*, vol. 22, no. 4, Fall 1981, 512-44. *EBSCOhost*, doi:10.1080/00236568108584633. Accessed 10 Dec 2021.
- Hacker, J. David. "Decennial Life Tables for the White Population of the United States, 1790-1900." *Historical Methods*, vol. 43, no. 2, Spring 2010, pp. 45-79. *EBSCOhost*, doi:10.1080/01615441003720449. Accessed 10 Dec 2021.
- Hesford, Walter. "Literary Contexts of 'Life in the Iron-Mills.'" *American Literature*, vol. 49, no. 1, 1977, pp. 70-85, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2925555>. Accessed 27 Feb 2022.
- Hollingshead, A. B., and F. C. Redlich. "Social class and mental illness: a community study. 1958. *American Journal of Public Health* vol. 97,10 (2007): 1756-7. doi:10.2105/ajph.97.10.1756. Accessed 3 Feb 2022.
- United States Bureau of Labor Statistics. *History of Wages in the United States From Colonial Times to 1928 : Bulletin of the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics*, No. 604, U.S. G.P.O., October 1929, <https://fraser.stlouisfed.org/title/4126>. Accessed 10 Dec 2021.
- United States Department of Labor. *The Fair Labor Standards Act Of 1938, As Amended*, U.S. Dept. of Labor. <https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/WHD/legacy/files/garn01.pdf>. Accessed 1 Feb 2022.

Watson, William L. “‘These Mill-Hands Are Gettin’ Onbearable’: The Logic of Class Formation in ‘Life in the Iron Mills’ by Rebecca Harding Davis.” *Women’s Studies Quarterly*, vol. 26, no. 1/2, The Feminist Press, 1998, pp. 116–36. *JSTOR*. Accessed 26 Feb 2022.

Weinstein, James. “Big Business and the Origins of Workmen’s Compensation.” *Labor History*, vol. 8, no. 2, Spring 1967, p. 156. *EBSCOhost*, doi:10.1080/00236566708584013. Accessed 10 Dec 2021.