

Life in the Iron Mills

Rebecca Harding Davis

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Vitani Days says

Un racconto breve densissimo, ricco di immagini e rimandi letterari, a tratti grottesco. Uno dei primi racconti "realisti" della letteratura americana, questo "Life in the iron mills" narra la faustiana caduta agli inferi di Wolfe, un ragazzo che lavora nelle fabbriche. Il rimando all'inferno dantesco è evidente, richiamato sia per immagini (il grigio del cielo, dell'acqua, l'odore fetido dell'aria, le fiamme delle caldaie, le sagome stesse degli uomini abbruttiti che lavorano nelle ferriere), che per citazioni dirette. Questo Wolfe è un ragazzo che pure lavora nell'inferno della ferriera, ma che in qualche modo è riuscito a non perdere la speranza e la sensibilità. Scolpisce, con materiali di scarto, piccoli oggetti e statue. In particolare, ne crea una femminile, enorme, con un braccio proteso verso il cielo. L'incontro con Kirby, figlio del proprietario della fabbrica, e i suoi due amici May e Mitchell, segna il suo destino. Deborah, sua cugina, è lì con lui e ruba il portafogli di Mitchell per poi donare a Wolfe il denaro. Wolfe, a questo punto, si trova a dover scegliere fra l'onestà di restituire il denaro e la tentazione di tenerlo per sé. Seguiranno la prigionia, la follia, la morte.

Un racconto, come ho detto, estremamente denso di temi: abbiamo la denuncia delle condizioni di vita umilianti, animalesche degli operai delle fabbriche; l'amore di Deborah, disinteressato, che affronta anche il sacrificio finale; la follia che assale Wolfe, il suo disperato desiderio di vivere, la sua sensibilità, il suo chiedersi "perché"; il cinismo, la spietatezza dei ricchi; una morte che diventa l'unico rimedio contro un'esistenza priva di senso e ragione, la sola speranza di un altrove; una religiosità estremamente presente, un Dio che guarda e non giudica, un locus amoenus che strizza l'occhio all'Eden dantesco e una salvezza che, come Beatrice, è donna.

Narrazione ricchissima di simbolismi, di rimandi colti, pensata per un pubblico borghese o comunque letterato, che rende lo straniamento anche grazie alle alternanze fra il linguaggio dialettale e quello aulico. Non di immediatissima fruizione, ma indubbiamente bello e di grande valore storico-culturale. Da rileggere.

Marissa says

The writing style was not particularly a kind I liked but this story has a soul.

“Something is lost in the passage of every soul from one eternity to the other- something pure and beautiful, which might have been and was not:”

Joy says

A classic of American Literature that shows the profound destitution of mill workers in the late 19th century. There is brilliant imagery of light and dark, good and evil, and paradise and hell. The characters couldn't be more sympathetic, and the contrast between the endings for Hugh and Deb leave readers with a raw wound and hopeful relief at the same time. Masterful.

Sarah E. says

I wasn't quite sure of what to make of this novella when I first picked it up for my modernist literature class.

It's a rather short story, which is fine by me, not nearly as long as the books I have read for my other classes, and I was able to plug through it in one sitting. Regardless of the length of this story, I was somewhat disappointed with the story itself.

The premise is promising enough. The beginning is strong, with clipped forceful language that sets an intriguing tone. I was sucked into the story almost immediately, especially with the description of the hunchback woman leaving her home to make sure that Hugh gets food to eat. That is a very humanistic trait, grounding the story in realistic human behavior.

Despite how strong this novella starts, I feel that the tone Davis started with gets lost as the story progresses. To me, it seems like she spent much more time on the beginning of the story and then just wrote the rest of it without as much of a second glance. But, there is no way to know that for sure. Which makes this more of a technical writing issue, and not so much as a plot issue.

The introduction of the Korl statue seems out of place. Not out of place plot wise, but out of place in the setting she has introduced. Here is this burly mil worker, who probably has torn and calloused hands, who uses those hands to make a delicate representation of the female form, with influences of the mil reflected upon her. It makes me wonder what kind of person this man is, and that question never really does get answered.

Hugh is told he is talented by a group of business men, and that he would do well as a sculptor. But, there is no way to get onto that path because he has no money. A simple enough concept, which twisted the story into a direction I hadn't anticipated. Deb steals money and gives it to him, and he feels he is within his rights in keeping it. But that act only solidifies his fate and he ends up going to jail where there isn't even any Korl to sculpt with. So, basically, his want for money and his want to get out of the mil is what screws him over.

I hear all this talk about what message we are supposed to get out of this. That the Korl woman represents this universal form of an immigrant mil worker and this book is riddled with spectacular symbolism. And I don't know if it's because I only read it once, but I am not getting any of that. I just see a story about a man who wanted more, but ended up getting much less.

Still an interesting story, but not what I expected, I didn't interpret it how I was told, and I felt that there was so much missing in terms of the characters. Yes, this is a novella. But if Davis would have kept up with the tone that she introduced in the first part of the book, this novella could have been so much more. She aimed for more and got less, in my opinion. Just like Hugh.

Dawn Michelle says

I am not really sure how to review this - I enjoyed the audiobook, but I really need a book copy of this so I can take notes when things just out of me from the audiobook.

It is very sad and definitely shows a time in history that was not a pleasant time. I am sure I can give a better review when I revisit this after I find a book version of this.

Myckaila Leach says

This novella is unlike anything i have read before. It is a very deep story that i am unsure i interpreted

correctly. I found the book sad. The story describes so many things that i had not realized occurred in the past. Mrs. Davis does an amazing job painting the scene of this book and making the reader feel as her characters do. I can not say that i enjoyed reading this book because it was written in an unusual dialect, making it hard to understand also the subject matter of this story is rather grim and depressing.

Ariel says

This was a novella written in 1861 describing the awful conditions many of the working class lived in at the time. Davis uses her writing to make us think about morality and question the dominant moral structure of the day. She did a good job at that, and more besides. I did find her repeated questions to the reader grating, and not even because they took me out of the story. Davis so often asks: "Do you judge him?" or "Are you laughing?" at some particularly miserable moments. I'm not sure why she thought so many of her readers would find the misery in this novella hilarious. She also describes some of her characters as if she's looking down on them subconsciously.

Becky says

The author caught the attitude of a completely desperate life of the Welsh miners in America. This short book written in 1861, read like an essay with rambling thoughts, while telling the story of Hugh Wolfe.

Joan Buell says

A Troubling Tale

Only the ending redeems this story. It is full of pain and suffering, yet not at all what I expected. I expected something similar to Sinclair's "The Jungle" after the previews, but the suffering here is more existential.

Tom Ekman says

Interesting dialog not heard for many years. Must have been hell working in those iron mills. A fast read as it was.

RJ says

I went into this knowing only of Davis's reputation as a "realist" writer - a word which I find repulsive and generally turns me off of any author to whom it is attached. However, while Davis's fiction certainly has the intention of "socialist-realist" writers like Upton Sinclair, the incredible evocative power of her writing puts the comparison completely to rest. This piece of fiction is crafted with such intense, powerful imagery - the hell of the iron mills, the miserable gray ash suffusing everything, the hideous power of the carving created by the main male character - that it absolutely rises above any charges of base, insulting "realism."

The work has a powerful moral intention, don't get me wrong, and one that's absolutely timely considering the horrible working conditions of the people who, for example, make products factories in the Third World today. The kind of soul-crushing, hellish conditions depicted in the story haven't gone away, they've just moved geographically. But what makes this piece of fiction particularly notable as a real work of literary art, criminally under-read especially when compared to someone as clumsy as Sinclair, is the relentless and intense language which suffuses every angry, accusatory, invective page. If this is "realism," it's what realism should be.

Geoffrey says

This was an attempted eye opener of a story trying to open our eyes to the struggles of the poverty stricken 17th century America society. The story itself is one of a well intentioned exposure to the unfair(both intentional and un-intended) treatments of the hard working lower class of 17 century America.

In my opinion, Rebecca Harding did expose us to this harsh life in a relatable way; Rebecca Harding was able to demonstrate, through side by side contradictions, what the 17th century society valued in a person: wealth, the look of success, cleanliness of dress along with the material of dress(which demonstrates superiority) as well as a strong dislike of the lower class for not having any of the former blessings in their lives.

Having said that, I think that Rebecca Harding was a very descriptive writer and if you were to read this story, I would strongly encourage you to be prepared for a lot of metaphors to Christian scripture, descriptive as well as beautiful landscapes, texts(like in Huck Fin) where the dialogue is written to be spoken the same way a characters of the time would(both Wolfe and Deb, with their accents of Wales-saying "Hurr" for both "you", "Him" and "her"). Aside from these particulars, I think the story is very manageable and worth a read.

Strongly recommend this story! Good eye opener with ideas you could use today to open your eyes to different point of views.

Denise Kruse says

Powerful tho' short novel about the dismal life of immigrants in the mid 1800s in the America. It is so short that I am not going to say anything about the plot except that it is quite amazingly moving and descriptive. *Any form of art is a form of power; it has impact, it can affect change – it can not only move us, it makes us move. -Ossie Davis*

eva says

i finished The Painted Bird and A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again: Essays and Arguments on the same day while on vacation and was feeling kind of bummed, so...for some reason i read this to...cheer myself up??? apparently i used the iron-clad logic "it's short, so it must be a fun read!"

anyway. devastating. the narrator spends a little too much time hammering the point across to the reader in florid detail, but i guess that's what you had to do in the 1860s.

Agnes says

This story had such force in it, such indignation.
