

# The Ideology of Self-making and the White Working Class in Rebecca Harding Davis' *Life in the Iron Mills*

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## ABSTRACT

**R**ebecca Harding Davis' novella *Life in the Iron Mills*, published in 1861 in *The Atlantic Monthly*, is now considered a landmark of early American realism. This paper analyses the text's depiction of the white working class and the ideological consequences of the myth of upward mobility and self-making, which are presented as an impossibility to Hugh Wolfe, the story's main character. I will argue that Davis' choice to offer a representation of the precarious lives of the workers of Northern industrial capitalism implies a criticism of the quintessentially American narrative of upward mobility, and a subsequent reflection on how foundational narratives operate in a society that is not homogeneous in terms of race or class. More specifically, I will maintain that *Life in the Iron Mills* operates as a contestation to the myth of the self-made man, evinced by the comparison between Hugh Wolfe's situation and that of the mill owners, who encourage his aspirations from an oblivious position of privilege. Lastly, Hugh's tragic death will be taken as proof that the myth of self-making mystifies the actual social and economic dynamics of industrial capitalism.

**Key Words:** Realism; Harding Davis; self-made man; capitalism; ideology.

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Rebecca Harding Davis' novella *Life in the Iron Mills* is one of the first instances of nineteenth-century American fiction that explicitly focuses on the white working class. A largely forgotten text until it was republished by the Feminist Press in 1971, *Iron Mills* was published in 1861 in the *Atlantic Monthly*, a magazine "committed to the ideals of American democracy." (Tharp 3)<sup>1</sup> Against the backdrop of a nation on the verge of disaster and a society that was experimenting deep economic and political change, Davis decided to write about the deprived lives of the workers of industrial capitalism, managing to establish herself as one of the leading voices of reformist literature and American realism (Long).<sup>2</sup> The aim of this paper is to explore how her writing analyses the consequences of the myth of upward mobility for the working class. I will argue that *Iron Mills* is construed as a contestation to the pervasive—and quintessentially American—myth of the self-made man,<sup>3</sup> which by promoting an ideology of effort and hard work as the means towards personal self-realisation, overlooks class differences and socioeconomic realities. An analysis of the tragic unfolding of Hugh Wolfe's life will evince how this myth functions in an ideological way, obscuring the real social dynamics that operate under industrial capitalism.

The liminal position of Davis as a writer in a border state like Virginia might have been useful in the exploration of conflicts in a way that was relevant both to the North and the South of the United States. As Canada argues, people living in border states had a privileged position as they perceived the complexity of the conflict in a way that was uncommon. *Iron Mills* provides a glimpse of the worst of both worlds: slavery and exploitative industrial capitalism.<sup>4</sup> The novella begins with an anonymous, ungendered and presumably middle-class narrator describing the industrial town where the story takes place—a town governed by thick, polluted grey smoke. The introduction rapidly situates the reader in a suffocating environment that mirrors the equally grey, unhealthy lives of the people that inhabit it. The wealth of adjectives can only help to immerse the reader in the stifling atmosphere of the story, as the narrator invites us into "the thickest of the fog and mud and foul effluvia." (13)

The deliberate association between an industrial setting and thick pollution must be read as a political critique on Davis part, since as Gatlin explains, "smoke symbolized manufacturing might and economic triumph" for industrial advocates (202). What Davis sees as filth and unwholesomeness, industrial capitalists regarded as a means towards success. In a nation that was increasingly polarised, the Northern capitalist economy was seen as modern and in tune with the fight for freedom, as compared to the Southern plantation-based economy. The idealisation of the

<sup>1</sup> See Schocket, Tharp and Grauke for an analysis on the relevance and implications of the *Atlantic Monthly's* editorial political positioning of the time and its reading audience's assumptions.

<sup>2</sup> Although it is hardly arguable that Davis' writings qualify as, indeed, realist and reformist literature, critics have challenged these labels claiming for a more complex understanding of her oeuvre (Hughes 114).

<sup>3</sup> The social advancement and "rags to riches" trope has been often taken to epitomise the so-called "American Dream", a ubiquitous expression whose "definition is virtually taken for granted" (Cullen 5) and which as a result becomes problematic when used casually. Because of its complex implications, this essay avoids such phrase, opting instead for the more precise "upward mobility." See Jim Cullen's *The American Dream. A Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation* (2003) for a concise survey of all the myths and narratives that make up the American Dream ideology, among which we can find the upward mobility trope.

<sup>4</sup> Hence the "tropes of blackness" and "orthographically denoted dialect" applied to white workers that we find in *Iron Mills* (Schocket 46). See *Schocket's Vanishing Moments* for an appraisal of the intermingling of images of race and class oppression in Davis' text.



*Iron Mills* is construed as a contestation to the pervasive—and quintessentially American—myth of the self-made man, which by promoting an ideology of effort and hard work as the means towards personal self-realisation, overlooks class differences and socioeconomic realities.



North often had ideological consequences, as Foner rightly puts: “glorifying northern society and [...] isolating slavery as an unacceptable form of labor exploitation served to justify the emerging capitalist order of the North.” (qtd. in Schocket 37) By associating successful capitalism with a lethal environment, Davis begins to destabilise common assumptions about success and what they may entail for working-class individuals in a way that will resonate throughout the story.

The workers of the iron furnaces are presented as a homogeneous mass of people with no names. Their lives are uneventful and highly routinised, consisting of activities that contribute to the destruction of their bodies: “Their lives were like those of their class: incessant labor, sleeping in kennel-like rooms, eating rank pork and molasses, drinking...” (*Iron Mills* 15) Davis provides a careful description of the physical squalor that impregnates every movement of the workers’ existence. The destructive nature of their daily routine is tragically ironic if we consider that the workers’ only worth is as physical capital. The fact that workers are metonymically conceptualised as *hands* signals the commodification they are subjected to: they are valuable insofar as their impaired bodies can produce. For Kirby, one of the mill owners, workers are no more than machines: “If I had the making of men, these men who do the lowest part of the world’s work should be machines,—nothing more,—hands.” (34) Their physicality is their only value, but it is a physicality that is not only flawed but also alien to themselves. The “vast machinery of system by which the

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bodies of workmen are governed” (19) as presented in *Iron Mills* is a paradigmatic example of a dehumanising force that alienates the workers in a Marxian sense, as labour is not an end in itself but a means for mere survival and “therefore not voluntary, but coerced; it is forced labor”. (Marx 655) Because labour under the capitalist mode of production, is a matter “of self-sacrifice, of mortification,” (655) working means the ultimate dispossession. The worker’s labour, then, “belongs to another” and therefore “it is the loss of his self.” (655)

Davis’ effort in portraying the lives of the white working class suggests that her story is not merely an account of the life of an individual. Although Hugh Wolfe is the main character in the novella, it seems that he is only an arbitrary example chosen from the many lives of the many white working-class industrial workers. The narrator confesses: “I cannot tell why I choose the half-forgotten story of this Wolfe more than that of myriads of these furnace-hands.” (14) The story about Hugh’s wasted potential, read as a contingent example of what it is like to live as white labour, talks about the wasted potential of a whole class. Hugh’s artistic endowment could defy this claim if we took it as evidence of his being a special case among his working peers. However, Davis’ emphasis on the interchangeability of the workers’ lives points to the idea that if this potential

does not show in other workers, it is because they are just too alienated to have any ambition beyond mere survival. Furthermore, the very title of the story accentuates the non-individuality of characters. Hugh's is "only the outline of a dull life, that long since, with thousands of dull lives like its own, was vainly lived and lost: thousands of them, massed, vile, slimy lives." (13) In other words, what is at stake in Davis' novel is not the tragic story of a man, but rather the tragedy of a class.

The working class presented in *Iron Mills* is defined in contrast to the mill owners. By introducing them into the story, Davis elucidates the privilege differences between the workers and the capitalist owners. With bitter irony, the narrator tells us how the visitors to the mills stop by Hugh's furnace as they are tired from *walking* around the foundries. As soon as Hugh sees them, he is invaded by curiosity: they represent the "mysterious class that shone down on him perpetually with the glamour of another order of being." (27) Hugh is painfully aware that he and the visitors belong to different worlds, and he cannot help but wonder: "What made the difference between them? That was the mystery of his life." (27)

The class abyss between them is an undecipherable secret for Hugh. The problem is aggravated when the immutability of class hierarchy is combined with disembodied identity ideals that efface any reference to class, as those represented by Mitchell. Hugh begins to compare himself to him, whom he sees as the epitome of Western civilization and refinement: "Wolfe listened more and more like a dumb, hopeless animal, with a duller, more stolid look creeping over his face, glancing now and then at Mitchell, marking acutely every smallest sign of refinement, then back to himself, seeing as in a mirror his filthy body, his more stained soul." (30) Mitchell's nonchalant knowledge of science and philosophy, of Kant, Novalis and Humboldt, and most importantly, his *white* hand symbolise for Hugh the "the impossibility of an identity." (Dow 53) Tellingly portrayed as an animal in this scene, Hugh is projecting onto Mitchell the ideals of class and manhood that he knows he will never attain: "he knew now, in all the sharpness of the bitter certainty, that between them there was a great gulf never to be passed. Never!" (30) Mitchell embodies the aspirational dream of whiteness constituted as "a signifying agent of class mobility" (Schocket 60) that makes one of the pillars of American nationhood.

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According to Miles, the nineteenth-century United States promoted an identity ideal of white disembodied masculinity that consolidated itself as the legitimate subject of American citizenship. Such ideal was based on an exclusionary subject that did not include the white male worker, among others. Because the dominance of the hegemonic white male subject in nineteenth-

century America was more tacitly enacted than explicitly agreed upon, Hugh cannot find a rational motive to think himself unfit for the same chances of middle-class success that Mitchell embodies. The frustration that Hugh feels on realising that he does not have access to those possibilities of self-realisation is especially acute in a land where it is a supposedly self-evident fact that “all men were created equal.” The Declaration of Independence, which marked the character of America as a self-made nation itself, offered the promise of a land of opportunities where all men who so desired could freely pursue a happy life. As Berlant suggests, the foundational documents of America “implicitly defined a ‘natural’ legitimate subject” that was white and male (qtd. in Miles 91). While America thought of itself as a welcoming nation where anyone could fulfil their dreams of upward mobility through individual effort, “Americans simultaneously founded the nation and consolidated a powerful disquisition of disembodied white manhood that would equate nationhood with all white men.” (Miles 91)

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The myth of upward mobility, then, albeit publicised as an opportunity for anyone who desired it, was in reality restricted to a very specific demographic, consisting of subjects that had a relevant degree of agency over their lives. The ideology of self-making relies on a modern conception of individuals as people endowed with freedom, who own themselves and who are able to accomplish their potential. Considering the alienated lives of the workers in *Iron Mills*, it is highly problematic to accept that these people have any sort of control over their own existence. Life does not seem to have much to offer to Hugh besides work and the filth that will accompany him to the grave, where he will have “not air, nor green fields, nor curious roses.” (13) The canary chirping in the first pages of the novella evokes a pastoral America that is just as desolate as the bird’s singing: “Its dream of green fields and sunshine is a very old dream,—almost worn out, I think.” (12) The promise of a fertile land brimming with opportunities for all those who may want to take them is revealed by Davis as a tantalizing dream that has been cruelly offered to Hugh, who will discover that, in reality, it had been denied to him all along.

Ironically, the path towards such dream of self-making is hard work and diligence, an idea resonant with a Protestant work ethic and most famously embodied by Benjamin Franklin’s *Autobiography*. The fact that work is the main engine of self-making is painfully ironic since the only thing that Hugh and his working-class fellows do is, indeed, work. This is why Doctor May’s unwillingly perverse advice to Hugh that he may become what he chooses becomes the catalyst of



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the tragedy in the story, as it represents the absolute clash between what culture is interpellating Hugh to believe and his real, material possibilities as conditioned by an exploitative system: “Do you know, boy, you have it in you to be a great sculptor, a great man? Do you understand?” [...] A man may make himself anything he chooses (37). Even if he might be trying to be sympathetic towards Hugh, the truth is that his words have the most devastating effect upon him, since on making Hugh believe that he has power over his own life, Doctor May hampers Hugh’s understanding of the mechanisms of capitalist society in a way that will prove fatal: “It’s all wrong, [...] all wrong! I dunnot understan.” (41) When the idea that he can “make himself anything he chooses” is injected in his debilitated mind, Hugh begins to assimilate the ideology behind the mill owners’ words and acquires a “false consciousness,” which Terry Eagleton defines as a set of ideas “functional for the maintenance of an oppressive power” while “those who hold them are ignorant of this fact” (24). Similarly, Adorno and Horkheimer claim that “the deceived masses are today captivated by the myth of success even more than the successful are. Immovably, they insist on the very ideology which enslaves them” (134).

Hugh’s unaware participation in this ideology leads him to desperation for not really understanding the ways of the world he lives in. Anxiously not knowing who is to blame for his desolation, Hugh begins to blame himself, wondering whether it is his own fault that his life is so miserable: “What am I worth, Deb? Is it my fault that I am no better? My fault?” (41) Because the ideology of self-making is essentially individualist, it makes all the weight of responsibility fall on the shoulders of individuals, thus obscuring the real reasons why Hugh cannot, indeed, make himself what he chooses. The reasons are no other than the fact that Hugh’s only function in the system he is inserted in is to be a *hand*; a system where the privilege of upward mobility is reserved for the aforementioned legitimate subject of rights. Since capitalism “educates and selects the economic subjects which it needs through a process of economic survival of the fittest,” (Weber 20) Hugh is simply destined to accept his place in that system and perish as one of the *weakest*. This extreme individualism is accompanied by a negation of any type of collective responsibility, which allows privileged agents not to admit they have a share in other people’s misery. As Kirby tells Doctor May, “Ce n’est pas mon affaire. I have no fancy for nursing infant geniuses.” (34) In an ideology in which everything depends on the alleged free agency of individuals, those who are “unsuccessful” are to blame for their own situation.

Hugh’s incomprehension of the logics of this “world-cancer,” (49) as he calls it, is so unbearable that the only way out for him is suicide. Several critics have read Hugh’s suicide as his final proclamation of self-making, as a way of “assert[ing] ownership over his body by erasing it” (Miles 99) Likewise, Schocket has argued that “Davis assures us symbolically that Hugh finds whiteness in his death,” a death which works as a parody of “the mill visitor’s desires for self-made men” and as “salvation by way of spiritual transfusion.” (61) While I agree that that Hugh’s final suicide is an example of accomplished agency, I think it is a highly problematic instance of it since the transformational possibilities that his death offers are virtually non-existent. The ending of the novella renders an ironic presentation of art and religion by tacitly suggesting that they lack the redemptive potential that they are often presumed to have. The narrator’s final reverie about

“homely fragments, in which lie the secrets of all eternal *truth and beauty*,” (65, emphasis mine) situated in a middle-class environment, acts like a mockery of the tragedy we have just witnessed.

In conclusion, Davis’ novella can be read as a case study of the harmful consequences that a particularly pervasive ideology as that of self-making had upon a given sector of the population that had not received much attention in American literature heretofore. By addressing a target audience that consisted mainly of well-to-do Bostonians, Davis managed to introduce complex debates in the core of American middle class, critically reflecting upon how certain national foundational narratives operate in a society that is not homogeneous in terms of race or class. Hugh’s tragic ending can only help to evince how subaltern identities that did not fit into national narratives deserved a recognition that took into consideration their equally American realities.

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