

## Alienation of Irish immigrant workers in Rebecca Harding Davis' *Life in the Iron Mills*

### Introduction: Rebecca Harding Davis and Realism

Rebecca Harding Davis's *Life in the Iron Mills* highlights the negative side of the American Industrial Revolution, which took place during the second half of the nineteenth century. The novella emphasizes the way that industrialization doesn't necessarily mean progress and profit for America—in *Life in the Iron Mills*, the industrialized city is a hellish place, rife with disease, poverty, crowded prisons, sickly workers, inescapable social structures, and terrible living and working conditions. *Life in the Iron Mills* also has thematic similarities with the slave narratives of the time. In addition, the novella was written during the American Civil War, which is briefly hinted at when the narrator refers to the city as being on the edge of a Slave State. *Life in the Iron Mills* was written and set three years before northwest Virginia became a free state called West Virginia with none other than Wheeling as its capital.

The novella is considered one of the first works to use realism in fiction, and it is considered an essential text for scholars of the labor movement and of issues relevant to women. Davis is counted among America's early historians and wrote largely to encourage social reform, not only for the working class and women, but for blacks and immigrants as well. *Life in the Iron Mills* was quickly seen as a trailblazing work that shed light upon the intolerable conditions under which workers toiled in the mills and factories of America during the Industrial Revolution.

The novella opens with a third person narrator watching ironworkers through a window. The narrator appears to be of the middle class. While looking outside, the

narrator has a memory of a time in the house and warns the reader to have an open mind about the character that will be discussed. Wolfe is a poor ironworker who also practices the art of sculpting for which he is ridiculed by other workers. Wolfe has a cousin named Deborah, who is hard working and shy and has a humped back. One day, when she learns that Wolfe did not take lunch to work, she walks a long distance in the rain to take him one. She finds the walk agonizing but persists for Wolfe.

When she arrives at the mill, Wolfe is among other workers and he recognizes her. From the narrator, it is learned that Wolfe is fond of Deborah but not in a romantic way. He does not have time to eat the food she has brought him and continues his work of the day. Deborah stays with Wolfe, resting until he finishes his shift. Wolfe is referred to as “Molly Wolfe” (Davis 8) by other workers due to his personality and his education that suggest he does not belong in the environment of the iron workers. While performing his job, Wolfe sees men approaching who do not look like workers; Clarke, a son of Kirby one of the mill owners, Doctor May, a local physician who sympathizes with the workers but cannot in all practicality do anything to improve their conditions, and a couple of other men. They, watching the laborers, notice a statue among the men and ask about it. They learn that Wolfe created it, and they ask him what it represents. His reply is, “She be hungry” (Davis 14). A discussion begins among the onlookers about the injustices that exist among laborers, one even suggests that Wolfe should be able to rise above the work he is doing, but offers him no assistance in doing so.

Before the men leave, Deborah steals a wallet from one of them. Wolfe and Deborah head back home at the end of the workday; Wolfe feels angry and like a failure. When they get home, Deborah tells Wolfe that she stole a wallet from Mitchell, the son-

in-law of the mill owner, and feeling guilty, gives Wolfe the money and tells him he can do with it whatever he wants. Wolfe decides to keep the money. The narrator shifts the scene and relates that Doctor May, while reading a newspaper, discovers that Wolfe has been imprisoned for stealing from Mitchell. The narrator explains that Deborah is also in prison with Wolfe, their situation is awful, and Wolfe ultimately declines mentally to such an extent that he takes his own life in prison. In the end, a Quaker woman tells Deborah that she will see to it that Wolfe has a proper burial and that she will come to Deborah's aid when she is released from prison.

What sets Davis's story apart from others that made up mainstream fiction at the time was her detailed descriptions of the unbearable conditions faced by workers at the time. The division between the classes was made all the more vivid by her use of the vernacular to express the low status of the uneducated segment of society she was exploring. Pervasive in the novella and in many other works of Rebecca Harding Davis is the theme that encouraged and incited revolutionary movements in society during her time. Conditions in the mills and factories of America set in motion a direct conflict between the industrial capitalists who owned the workplaces and the everyday laborers whose spirits were challenged and destroyed by them. The psychic trauma can be realized in the following lines:

I want you to come down and look at this Wolfe, standing  
there among the lowest of his kind, and see him just as he is,  
that you may judge him justly when you hear the story of this  
night. I want you to look back, as he does every day, at his  
birth in vice, his starved infancy; to remember the heavy years

he has groped through as boy and man, -- the slow, heavy years of constant, hot work. So long ago he began, that he thinks sometimes he has worked there for ages. There is no hope that it will ever end. (Davis 9)

The migrant workers, though not slaves, were conditioned worse than the slaves. They were compelled to work day and night without good food, comfortable bed and rest required for human beings. They were treated as if they were draught horse or mere animals but not human beings. They had no time allocated for health and sanitation but only work continues until they die. It is their obligation for survival. They sleep on the heap of ash and eat whatever they get either cold or stale. They work hard but profit goes to the pocket of others. In Marx's view, it is alienation from work/production in real life. The portrayal of the mill workers in the novella is done with realist perspective.

The realists try to show life as it really is in fiction or literary world. Moreover, realism represents life in literature. The writers of this literary movement such as 'Balzac in France, George Eliot in England and William Dean Howells in America' typified it. In realistic fiction, there is absence of romance and life is not present more picturesquely, adventurously, heroically than it actual is. On the contrary, the realist authors reflect life in fiction as it seems to the common readers. As a result, preference was given to an ordinary citizen of Middletown to be the protagonist (Abrams 141). In fact, they are living on main street and is shown engaged in some sort of real business by charactering from the middle or working class. The characters, thus, do not possess exceptional aptitude. They live through ordinary experiences of life from childhood to death. That means, they become adolescent, love, marry, become parents, they find life rather dulls

and often unhappy, 'though it may be brightened by touches of beauty and joy (141). The subject matter is selected in a special literary manner in order to give the readers an impression of actual experience.

Realism as a literary movement presents life and experiences around different wars and crisis in US and Europe. The realist mode and proponents are summed in *Encyclopedia Americana* as:

The era of American realism is most commonly defined as the period from the end of the Civil War to about 1900. Within this, the somewhat shorter span of 1870-1890 can be delineated as the time when realism was clearly the dominant literary idea in the USA. Theorists such as William Dean Howells (1837-1920), Thomas Sergeant Perry (1845-1928), and Henry James (1843-1916), laying the tenets of realism in the 1870s and 1880s, believed that literature should portray people such as one might meet, in situations that those people might actually encounter.

(1281)

In the US, the Civil War and industrialization gives contexts for realist projection of life and sentient. The fiction was filled with the characters who are from working class and face hardships as the people in community face. The three theorists mentioned above beckoned realism in the American literary history.

In my research work, I have analyzed how Rebecca Harding Davis projects 'mill workers' as the prime site of exploitation. In other words, the situation has separated the workers from their own self and dignity: Hugh Wolf, an Irish Migrant Worker suffers not

because he has deficiencies, but because of the situation created in such a way he turns out to be the recipient of all the discrimination. Since Davis' fiction has the element of sentimentalism, the suffering generates sympathy towards him. The readers identify with him from the very beginning and want to share his pain and oppression. They forget the fact that they are reading a story but feel as if it is they who are badly oppressed and victimized. In fact, it is a unique feature of realism. The setting of the novella and the compelled Irish Migrant Workers find life dull and unhappy. They are regarded in their work place not as part of the work but as cog of the machine. They are treated inhumanely which is easily shared by the readers while going through the story.

Harding Davis enjoys the prestige of being a trailblazer of realism in American literature. She attempted to effect social change for blacks, women, Native Americans, immigrants and the working class throughout her life time intentionally writing about the plight of these marginalized or alienated groups (Harris and Cadwallader ii). In 1836, when her family moved to Wheeling, West Virginia, the place was developing into a productive factory town. The great concern was on iron and steel mills there. She describes her childhood as having belonged to a slower, simpler time, writing her 1904 autobiography *Bits of Gossip* that “there were no railways in it, no automobiles or trolleys, no telegraphs, no skyscraping houses. Not a single man in the country was the possessor of huge accumulations of money” (Davis 1). Her works combine different elements such as sentimentalism, naturalism, romanticism and realism.

Her career as writer was fertilized after she wrote exclusively for *The Atlantic Monthly* in which her novella *Life in the Iron Mills* was published in the April 1861 issue. It addresses the psychological interiority of the working class characters by depicting

their psychic trauma as a product of the developing capitalistic economy that alienated them from their body, work/production and culture. It was written at a tumultuous time in American history between the south's secession and the outbreak of the Civil War (Curnutt xiii). It represents the ambivalence and uncertainty that surrounded issue of class formation, migrant workers' alienation and inter-state conflict combining the elements of realism and sentimentalism. There is a call for an increased understanding of the plight of the working class. Davis articulates both physical pain and psychic trauma of the migrant workers' lives in the iron mills: "Wolfe had already lost the strength and instinct vigor of a man, his muscles were thin, his nerves weak, his face haggard, yellow with consumption" (Davis 8). It is the plight faced not only by Wolfe but by all the Irish Migrated workers in America. Their condition was too weak to stand and continue their work for survival in the host country.

Although the novella was originally published anonymously, Davis was still widely known as the author and gained attention from famous authors like Nathaniel Hawthorne and Emily Dickinson. Though she was never able to replicate the success of *Life in the Iron Mills*, she penned more than five hundred published works during her lifetime, including ten novels, over one hundred short stories, and many pieces of journalism. Her writing primarily grapples with themes of gender dynamics, social justice, poverty, and the Civil War. In 1863, she married a journalist named L. Clarke Davis and went on to have several children, one of whom also became a journalist. She died in 1910 at the age of 79, six years after writing her autobiography, *Bits of Gossip*.

The author has portrayed the historical event of the Irish people in Ireland through the reference to the 'potato-blight'. This refers to a terrible "famine in Ireland in 1845"

(Brighton 132) when potatoes failed. A large group of population then migrated to the USA in order to make up the US urban working poor, “inhabiting some of the most undesirable sections” (Clark 1973). Ruthless industrial development of America isolated the poor Irish workers inhumanely ignoring their basic needs. Generally, the migrant workers were considered second class but the condition of the Irish workers there is described worse than one can imagine. As Hesford states:

The common laborer, though he works in a type of Hell, though his existence is seemingly meaningless, has a soul, and is a worthy of redemption as you, the middle class reader. He is capable of love and sacrifice, of aspirations and the appreciation of beauty. He has his role in the moral drama which, for the romantic historian, constitutes history. (74)

The laborer represents the whole Irish workers migrated there and struggling for just survival. The migrant workers are not given good place to sleep and rich food is not afforded by them as their pay is very little. They have to work without rest as if they are machine but their labor and toil has no meaning, because they are looked down and dominated though their contribution to the mills is incomparable to the Native workers. Davis, therefore, mentions the word “Hell” in ironical sense. Under capitalistic economic system in around the Civil War the workers were not considered as individual human being rather a tool of production.

The pathetic condition of the workers described in the story touches heart of every readers and they become sympathetic and at the same time, stand for action. They are curious to reach the depth of the fact how the migrant workers’ condition began



miserable journey. How they were treated inhumanely and alienated. What the critics contend after reading the story. When one reads the story, one grows determined to change the situation immediately by removing dehumanization of the fateful situation. At the same time, the readers are passionately inspired to change the world and make it more friendly, humane and inviting by removing the constructed class between the people. While going through the story, they get identified with the protagonist, Wolfe sympathetically who depicts the miserable world of the Irish Migrated workers in the USA and at the same time invokes them (readers) for action.

#### Migrated Irish as Factory Workers

The famine (1845-49) completely reframed the modern Irish history. It claimed an estimated 1.5 million lives and established emigration as Ireland's safety valve which relieved pressures on a primitive agrarian economy. In the Famine's wake, many Irish families raised most of their children for export. "Around three million Irish crossed the Atlantic in search of work and better life in those 75 years" (McCaffrey 78). These migrant workers worked in most of iron and cotton mills. The male folks worked in iron mills as Puddler and women worked in cotton factory. The working condition were worse: no modern country would like its citizen's work in such horrible situations. America as a nation founded on democratic principles, equal rights and justice can not do this. Davis is dissatisfied with the overlooking of the authority and she drags their attention and calls them to have a direct observation because the situation is clouded enough to bar the clear view of sufferings and hardships inflicted on the workers by their masters. The narrator asks the authorities to settle a curious point and to come and see because she wants them to

Be honest. . . 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 to hear this story. There a secret down here, in this nightmare fog, that has lain dumb for centuries: I want . . . you [to answer] this terrible question which men here have gone mad and died trying to answer. (1215)

Davis' stringent criticism with precise "you" may be directed to the injustices made on color or religion. The murky fog stretching across the Ohio may indicate the prevailing slavery and its dehumanizing ramifications. The terrible question can be both: the racial and religious. The Irish race has been taken to be inferior, weak, and brawling. Such stereotypes have done more harm than good to the migrated workers. On the other hand, Davis shows some sentiments to her characters too. A mulatto woman leaned "herself against the gas-post. She needed the post to steady her" back, for she must have worked in cotton factory without any rest" (1214). Such working situations have had high toll on the workers. It was the beginning of the workers' unions being formed and lobby for the better working conditions and higher pay.

The manifold discrimination has alienated workers from their self and robbed off their dignity. However, critics like Eric Schocket believes that *The Iron Mills* has less to do with class and more with race. In fact, the story "partakes of an antebellum discourse of racial discovery, it does so obliquely and largely symbolically" (47). In the story, there are only two instances--one the back straitening woman, and second a mulatto girl following her Mistress in the bazaar--of colored people. Socket believes that "Even the

Korl Woman, a statue that figures the terrible hunger of working-life turns out to be a white woman.” (47)

#### American Ideals and Work Ethics and Unions

America is said to be founded on Puritan ideals that were fortified by the philosophical underpinnings of the scholars like Jefferson. The foundations were purely democratic, just and law bounded. However, those laws were applicable only to the whites. Blacks were not the separate beings rather they were property. Similarly, the Irish immigrants were by no means citizens. They were workers. There lies a great contradiction of American self. The inhumanity, exploitation of workers was not visible to the authority then. The justice was only justice of mill owner, ironically, the profit of the mill owners. Factory owners didn't have a sense of work ethics: they just installed a great, looming bell towers [in] the factories. And, these bells were to monitor the workers. The factory owner imposed long working hours as long as twelve to fourteen hours of labor winter and summer alike for the invention of gas lightning. They held the belief that "it is not the hours per day that a person works that breaks him sown, but the hours spent in dissipation." (Rodgers 155-6) But among workers to shorten the working hours "was long and fervent struggle." Rodgers observes:

By the 1840s, the ten-hour movement had moved into the New England textile mills, producing a massive flood of shorter-hours petitions, the largest, from Lowell in 1846, containing signatures equivalent to almost two-thirds of the city's cotton mill operatives. After 1850 the shorter-hours demand. . . was at the forefront of every organized labor effort. The National Labor Union at its first

convention in 1866 declared a federal eight-hour law 'the first and grand desideratum of the hour. . . P. J. McGuire of the Carpenters, for example, told a congressional committee in 1883 that the reduction of working hours was the 'primary object' of the union he headed. The American Federation of Labor under Samuel Gompers was a still more persistent champion of the shorter workday-'eight hours to-day, fewer to-morrow,' as Gompers defined the cause. The shorter workday was 'the question of questions,' 'the only one which 'reaches the very root of society.'

(156)

It was such a fervent movement around. But, the mill workers like Wolfe have to work round the clock. They even sleep there in the ash, perhaps it is warmer than the slum back home. They worked so hard by eating potato, and drink ale that "God and the distillers only know what" it is made of (Davis 1216). They work in such a pathetic condition that they are compelled to die pauper whereas the mill owners without toil enjoy better life. The growing strike, negotiations have compelled the authority and owners to review their work policy at the turn of the century.

#### Alienation: An Inhuman Practice

When somebody feels that everyone is against him; he is stranger in his own home, a foreigner in his own land, no one understands him and he feels isolated, rejected and divorced from the people around him whether they are his parents, family members, friends, employers or people in the local community, workplace, town or country, it

alienation. Moreover, he feels that he does not belong and develops a feeling of deep anger and frustration. As Martin Slattery contends:

Strong feelings, on the one hand, make him feel inadequate, inferior and unwanted and on the other hand, make him feel passionately angry, resentful and determined to prove people wrong and reestablish his rightful place in his own group, society or community. Such feelings, such passions inspire either fatalism, an acceptance of alienation, of inferiority and of being displaced, homeless, even; or a fervent, passionate even radical determination to change the situation, to change the world and make it more friendly, humane and inviting. (14)

It is feeling that plays a vital role to bring about the changes. History is an evident proof of it. Passionate feeling and determination to change certainly raises the voice of voiceless. The fruits one day surely ripens. “*Das Capital* (1970) is a scientific study of capitalism as an economic system and mode of production” (Ritzer 57). His study of alienation was in contrast a study of the social, psychological and personal effects of capitalism on people’s feelings and self-image. For Marx, capitalism is not only an unjust and inefficient system of economic production, it is an immoral and exploitative and that denies man his true nature, separates him from the products of his own labor and sets man against man in an “economic jungle” (63). The essence of human nature what distinguishes man from the animals is his consciousness, his imagination, his ability to control his own environment. This power is most clearly expressed in the productive process where men transform nature by working together. As Davis writes, “Wolfe dug

into the furnace of melting iron with his pole dully thinking only how many rails the lump would yield” (10). The iron is transformed into rails by melting. However, when this form of self-expression and social co-operation is in any way limited or obstructed, alienation will occur. “The mills were deserted on Sundays, except by the hands who fed the fires, and those who had no lodgings and slept usually on the ash-heaps” (12). Marx’s inquiry of 'what does this alienation of labor consist?' results in the relation between labor and work. 'First, that the work is external to the worker, that it is not a part of his nature, that consequently he does not fulfill himself in his work but denies himself.' (Bottomore 196) This denial leads to the feeling of misery and "not of well-being, [which] does not develop freely" rather it eats up an individual physically and mentally. In other words, it diminishes physical energy and renders a physically exhausted and mentally debased individuals. The only time when a worker feels himself is during breaks as leisure as Hugh Wolf recounts about freedom when he observes the church-goers. Marx further claims that

The worker . . . feels himself at home only during his leisure, whereas at work he feels himself homeless. His work is not voluntary but imposed, forced labor. It is not the satisfaction of a need but only a means for satisfying other needs. Its alien character is clearly shown by the fact that as soon as there is no physical or other compulsion, it is avoided like the plague. Finally, the alienated character of work for the worker appears in the fact that it is not his work but for someone else, that in work he does not belong to himself but to another person. (1961)

The Irish immigrants formed a large part of America's poor. They were taken as foreign other, exploited in workplace and the landscape of the US cities. They were forced to make their settlements in the "relegated and marginalized spaces" (Brighton 132). They had to live in a cramped tenement that was fraught with unsanitary condition. The living conditions in the districts close to the mills were horrific. In such environment, "several epidemics occurred throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Outbreaks emanating from these communities and spreading to other city neighborhoods caused panic among the US-born citizens." (Brighton 132) There was not good provision of sanitation in their tenement which caused the above mentioned consequences.

The worker toils hard but gets no profit at all. He is only a worker but not one of the parts of the the production he makes. He is used but not physically cared for. They are obliged to live in group not different from the goats or animals in a dirty cellar for the sake of others. As a result, they become sick, weak and become unable to win the bread. It is exploitation. In *Life in the Iron Mills*, Davis manifests the pitiable condition of the workers represented by Wolfe and Debora who are to work day and night but their survival is not easy with what they get as wage. They can not afford good bed to sleep. Rather they sleep on ash-heap. They make fortune for others. Their sweat is devalued. They can't visit the doctor for medicine but are obliged to take domestic medicine and die untimely. They are deprived of clean dresses. In this sense, the workers are alienated from their own body. In the story, the protagonist, Wolfe lacks rich food as denoted by his feeble physical condition. Putting differently, the workers and their physical deformity as well as weaknesses are the consequences of not getting proper food. Similarly, Debora's hunchback, her obligation to take food to Wolfe being wet in heavy

rain, her tiredness, shivering due to cold and lack of warm clothes to protect herself from cold, her acceptance to sleep on the ash-heap making pillow of Wolfe's ragged clothes all indicate to a same direction that the mill-workers are detached from the product of their toil as well as from their own body. Everyone loves their own body but the Irish migrant workers who are working for America's prosperity are put beyond love and care of their own body. It is, as Marx clarifies, is alienation from the workers' own body.

With the industrialization, 19<sup>th</sup> century America faced an ever shortage of workers and it set the perfect stage in which the poor immigrant workers with little or no skill to work tirelessly in dirty and dangerous factory conditions. "Human beings were made as valueless as the cogs in the machine they toiled upon, all for the benefit of the bourgeoisie." (16) It was in this social context that Rebecca Harding Davis wrote *Life in the Iron Mills*, a story about countless chattel slavery to industry. She and other evangelical reformers took it upon themselves to awaken their society and restore humanity to the working class. In this novella, Davis motivates her readers to help the wage workers by casting *Life in the Iron Mills* as an unjust form of alienation.

Throughout the story, Davis uses symbolic action to characterize the experience of the mill workers as a "living death." (8) She illustrates, "[Old Wolfe] was a pale, meek little man, with a white face and red rabbit-eyes. The woman Deborah was like him; only her face was even more ghastly, her lips bluer, her eyes more watery" (Davis 4). With their white faces and blue lips, the characters look like ghosts or corpses. Why, then, are they dead even while they live? Davis explains, "Man cannot live by work alone" (Davis 4). She evokes this quote in an ironic sense, since the mill workers can barely avoid starvation. Her statement is a critique of factory employers, embodied in the character



Kirby, who believes they have fulfilled their duty to their workers by scarcely paying them enough money to stay alive. On the contrary, she asserts, they pay the laborers only enough to keep them working. To consider this empty, miserable existence “life” is a farce, as workers are also robbed of their health and life expectancy. Does not it imply alienation from their body?

Next, Davis establishes that life in the mills is not only a kind of death, but also damnation at the hands of society. Davis writes:

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. (6)

Work in the iron mills is tortuous and endless, like eternal damnation. However, these souls have not been condemned to the mills by God, but by the upper classes of society. After his encounter with Mitchell, Wolfe “griped the filthy red shirt that clung, stiff with soot, about him, and tore it savagely from his arm. The flesh beneath was muddy with grease and ashes, —and the heart beneath that! And the soul? God knows.” (18) The inescapable layers of grime symbolize poverty as the sin that indentures wage workers and separates them indefinitely from a full and beautiful life. Davis demonstrates

here that society has assumed God's prerogative and unjustly damned the poor to lives of toil and misery.

While she denounces society for its unjust treatment of the poor, Davis also poses questions in order to call on society to save the industrial workers from their condition. After exposing the filth on his arms, Wolfe exclaims to Deborah, "Look at me! . . . What am I worth, Deb? Is it my fault that I am no better? My fault? My fault?" (19) Although he speaks to Deborah, his question really is addressed to society. It casts doubt on the idea that the American system is, as Kirby puts it, "a ladder which any man can scale" (19), a notion that puts the blame on the poor for their own misery. Wolfe represents all the wage earners, who cry out for society's absolution, and who desire to escape from the miserable toil that is their perdition. In the same way, Wolfe's statue pleads on their behalf, "What shall we do to be saved?" (15) It is likely that these questions invoke empathy for the laborers in evangelists because it suggests that the plant workers need help just as much as people who ask for religious salvation. The questions that Davis poses throughout the narrative are meant to call society to action.

By presenting the lives of factory workers as an unjust treatment, Davis motivates society to act on their behalf. She awakens empathy for them by presenting them as souls in need of saving. Moreover, her story reveals the hypocrisy of those who believe they owe the workers nothing more than the wages they need to survive. She demonstrates that society, by refusing to act on their behalf, in effect condemns its working poor to hellish misery. However, she offers hope that society may still redeem itself by abandoning its state of apathy and hearing the workers' cries for better living and working conditions.

Secondly, the Irish migrant workers are alienated from their work/production.

Alienation of immigrants from social, political and economic capital in the host land is a common experience (Brighton 133). The immigrant workers are discriminated when there comes the matter of just decision. The Irish workers in the iron mills are not considered human beings. They are dehumanized and paid very poor wages which is not enough for fulfilling their daily needs. They work all the time but they are not the part of their work. That means, they get no share of benefit at all. It is the owner who takes the all share in power of capital he has invested. The workers are not able to satisfy their needs with what they are paid. The satisfaction of needs develops the powers and potentials of human beings. However, all forms of production result in objectification, by which people manufacture goods which embody their creative talents yet come to stand apart from their creators. Karl Marx delineates, "Alienation is the distorted form that humanity's objectification of its species being taken under capitalism. Under capitalism, the fruits of production belong to the employers, who expropriate the surplus created by others and in so doing generate alienated labor. (Ritzer 62)

Alienation renders the workers to a commodity to be traded in the market rather than a social being. Alienation from the act of production itself means work comes to be a meaningless activity that offers little or no intrinsic satisfaction. It has psychological effect on the workers which develops feelings of powerlessness, isolation, and discontent at work. When the workers are alienated from their work, from their production of their labor, work becomes torture. So, men turn elsewhere for release and a sense of control. They turn to drink and depression and a privatized lifestyle. Frustration veils their psyche and discontent overwhelms them. They always feel dominated and, in fact, experience no

economic and cultural advancement. They always remain hungry as the statue made of Korl by Wolfe symbolizes; “A nude woman’s form, muscular, grown coarse with labor, the powerful limbs instinct with someone poignant longing. One idea: there it was in the tense, rigid muscles, the clutching hands, the wild, eager face, like that of a starving wolf’s. (Davis 13)

To the owners and the guests’ surprise, Wolfe replies “she be hungry” to their question “what did you mean by it?” implies that the Irish workers are alienated in the US. There is a wide social and economic gap between the dominant society and the immigrant group besides the capitalist exploiters i.e. the owners. The laborers are nude and hungry but the owners do not realize it at all. They have been weakened ignoring their necessities and exploiting them overnight. In short, denial of surplus value to the workers is alienation from the production. “*Life in the Iron Mills*” invokes the culture of sentiment only to dismiss it as ineffectual in a burgeoning capitalist economy. The novella articulates this dismissal through three potentials, yet unrealized, sentimental figures- Deborah, the Korl woman, and Wolfe himself.

Initially, Deborah seems to be typical sentimental heroine, whose selflessness drives the plot and usually results in the salvation of the oppressed characters. She first appears safe in the confines of the home, engaging in a self-sacrificing act: she is making dinner for Wolfe, even though she, too, is near starving. Later, she even commits a crime for Wolfe, taking money from Mitchell in order to help him. Thus, Deborah exhibits several characteristics of the traditional sentimental heroine. The most convincing evidence for this reading lies in the fact that, eventually, Deborah is able to leave the mills behind and join a Quaker community. Among the Quakers, far

from the capitalist society of the mills, Deborah is finally able to express her own emotions through her body: "Slow, solemn tears gathered in her eyes: the poor weak eyes turned so hopelessly to the place where Hugh was to rest" (Davis 32). In addition, the Quaker woman who takes Deborah in response to this affective display "like one who speaks from a strong heart deeply moved with remorse or pity." (32) Thus, the two women perform a proper conversion of sentiment into sympathy: Deborah's tears elicit the Quaker's pity. Even in the final moments of the novella, however, what is resurrected is not Deborah herself but her unrequited love for Wolfe: "Something is lost in the passage of every soul from. Sheila Hassell, for example, argues that the korl statue represents Deborah's pain rather than Wolfe's and suggests that Deborah's body "incarnates the divine." (Hassel 125) Davis contends:

One eternity to the other, -something pure and beautiful, which might have been and was not: a hope, a talent, a love, over which the soul mourns, like Esau deprived of his birthright. What blame to the meek Quaker, if she took her lost hope to make the hills of heaven more fair" (33)? The puddler lived a hard life and died a martyr seeking beauty i.e. justice and equality.

Deborah's hope is that she might someday be reunited with Wolfe and form a meaningful relationship with him. This hope is irrevocably lost when the narrator notes-significantly, in the very next passage-that only the korl woman has managed to sustain an enduring connection with her creator.

Although Deborah is secreted away, safe from her former working class lifestyle, she has not achieved the fulfillment of her desires. As Jean Pfaelzer notes, Deborah's

relationship to and desire for Wolfe overshadows any individual agency she may possess: “Because her subjectivity is defined through Wolfe’s desire, Deborah is constricted as a romantic subject; her quest is never for autonomous selfhood but rather for psychological intimacy” (39).

Despite her final gesture towards sentimental agencies, Deborah cannot transcend her association with Wolfe or recreate her body in a way that erases his rejection of her. Throughout the story, her body exhibits sign of Wolfe’s neglect, her face maintaining its stupor and vacancy. Thus, as Rose Marie Garland Thomson asserts “Deborah is at once sympathetic and monstrous. Contained finally in the Quaker heaven rather than empowered by it” (Thomson 572). Deborah, therefore embodies the qualities of a sentimental heroine but remains cut off from the transcendent potential of sentimentalism, because her love for Wolfe outlives. It is suggesting that Wolfe not Deborah is the enduring focus of the narrator’s story. Like Deborah, the kohl woman could be a potential site of sympathetic identification with the working class: both are aesthetic images of suffering bodies, and, as such, they encourage their readers both inside and outside of the novella to form a sympathetic identification with them. However, this potential is never fulfilled because the two women have been appropriated as representations of Wolfe’s pain and are, therefore, dissociated from the suffering that they embody. Moreover, as representations of Wolfe’s desire to participate in the capitalist economy, the female figures are implicated in the capitalist marketplace. While Wolfe’s treatment of Deborah is similar to his treatment of material objects, the kohl woman provides a more overt example of the way in which capitalist objects relations and artistic appropriation coincide. By displacing his frustrated desires- specifically

ambition onto the korl woman, Wolfe imbues the statue with both artistic and economic possibility. The korl woman is not only an artistic representation of pain but also a potential commodity- a form of capital facilitating Wolfe's participation in the capitalist market economy.

Indeed, the upper-class visitors to the middle project onto the inanimate sculpture of both the working class suffering reified through Wolfe's artistic talent and the economic possibilities created by that talent. The mill owner Kirby and the town physician, doctor May, are positioned as opposites in their readings of the korl statue: they represent the ideologies of capitalism and humanitarianism respectively- the pocket and heart of the world. However, the similarity of their readings suggest the implication of the two perspectives and situates art at the center of the debate. Both Kirby and May conceive of class hierarchy in relation to the antebellum binary of mind versus body, and both acknowledge that Wolfe's art deconstructs that binary by depicting the interior, mental trauma of the worker. Nevertheless, both Kirby and May understand their relationship to Wolfe and to the working class in general as essentially economic. Though they gesture towards a sympathetic reading of the statue as emblematic of the problem of class difference, they make no effort to alleviate that suffering.

The Irish migrant workers in the US are shown culturally alienated. They fall in trap of winning bread. They have to work all the time without caring what day it is. But today he takes the breath of freedom after he has money from Deborah. He feels different in his life now:

He stood up. A man, he thought, stretching out his hands, free to work, to live, to love! Free! His right! He folded the scrap of paper

in his hand. As his nervous fingers took it in, limp and blotted, so his soul took in the mean temptation, lapped it in fancied rights, in dreams of improved existence, drifting and endless as the cloud-seas of color. Clutching it, as if the tightness of his hold would strengthen his sense of possession, he went aimlessly down the street. It was his watch at the mill. He need not go, need never go again, thank God! – shaking off the thought with unspeakable loathing. (Davis 23)

Though it was an act of theft, it truly dramatizes the victory of the working class people Marks imagined. The surplus that the owner had 'taken away' from the workers returns to the workers again. This frees him from the drudgery of the mill workers and gives space to think for the future. Hugh Wolf imagines to be a man of prestige and experiences better life as if freed from prison. He has now time to go to church for prayer every Sunday. He can follow his own cultural activities and enjoy human life. He need not be slave of other and now he has got the fruit of his labor. He has been the boss of his own soul as Karl Marx stated in the *Communist Manifesto*.

The image of the functioning iron mill is described to be mechanical in many aspects. Davis uses this imagery to allude to the commonly unnoticed, systematic structure of classes within our culture:

Not many of even the inhabitants of a manufacturing town know the vast machinery of system by which the bodies of workmen are governed, that goes on unceasingly from year to year. The hands of each mill are divided into watches that relieve each other as



regularly as the sentinels of an army. By night and day, the work goes on, the unsleeping engines groan and shriek, the fiery pools of metal boil and surge (5).

This machine-like image and hellish description of the iron mill allows the reader to see the constant oppression of the lower class. This system leaves the oppressed so distracted by their need to work for the necessities, that they are blinded to the possibility of social mobility. While listening to the upper-class men read the newspaper, Wolfe realizes that between them there was a great gulf never to be passed. (12) He is constantly confronted with the issue that God has placed him in the social structure as nothing more than a lower-class citizen until May explains that Wolfe's talent for carving korl could be used to move up the social ladder. This hints, thought faintly, that working class people, like mill workers, can and have to move up the social ladder through application of their own work. However, Mitchell attempts to discourage May's enthusiasm for the korl statue:

The Lord will take care of his own; or else they can work out their own salvation. I have heard you call our American system a ladder which any man can scale. Do you doubt it? Or perhaps you want to banish all social ladders, and put us all on a flat table-land, --eh, May? (14)

These members of a higher class cannot understand the torment of our class structure. They see the talent in Wolfe's statue and its power to create social mobility for Wolfe, but, only one of them can see the true meaning of the statue. May "cannot catch the meaning" (14), while Mitchell is written to have seen "the soul of the thing" (14).

This statue shows a strong, working woman, reaching out to escape social oppression. She is hungry for freedom, but since the upper-class men do not know how it feels to be oppressed, they cannot see this image in the statue.

Kirby and Mitchell describe the mill as a “den”; for Kirby, this is too much to handle: “Come, let us get out of the den. The spectral figures, as you call them, are a little too real for me to fancy a close proximity in the darkness, —unarmed, too.” (12-13) The upper-class citizens are able to ignore class inequalities, because they are blinded by the light of their success in the American social structure. In contrast, the lower-class workers cannot overlook their oppression, because they are constantly being reminded of it. Davis illustrates this by describing the effort that Wolfe has put into carving his statue on his “off-time,” which is a direct symbol of his oppression.

From legal perspective, the story can be seen as persistent of atrocity. The Irish Workers are exploited and paid very little. When Debora steals Mitchell’s wallet and divides money with Wolfe, it is later found. Then Wolfe is sentenced 19 years’ imprisonment for committing crime and Debora for 3 years. The US legal provision as described in the story is quite discriminatory and unfair. This is because stealing money wallet of somebody is not subject to imprison for such a long period and if were done by a Native American, it would perhaps be no longer than one year.

Conclusion: Sentimental Activism for the Case of the Mill Workers

Davis writes a perfect narrative to the class inequality that is still evident in today’s American culture. She writes to the free-man, begging them to open their eyes as wide as sea. Her imagery allows the readers to connect with the “reality of soul-starvation, of living death, that meets you every day under that besotted faces on the

street.” (8) Her story shines with truth and misery for the forever-struggling, working-class and will live on to illustrate the unjust conflicts within the American class structure.

The story does not provide a solution, rather it asks to come closer to see the injustice being done to the workers who don't have agency to manifest that they have been exploited. On the other hand, Davis' direct authority may be a literary activism or perhaps sentimentalism to get a solution to address such injustices. It is plausible because for middle-class Americans of leisure, removed from but dependent on the work done by laborers, the essay and stories in periodicals served as a bridge to a world they knew little about; perhaps such pieces generated some sympathetic understanding in readers, if not a sense of responsibility or culpability. "Calls for reform in literature, normally are implicit rather than explicit; a realistic description of labor practices and their consequences are hinted." (Smith 143) The solution seems bleak; as bleak as the setting of the story. It's opaque and no solution is visible. Only visible possibility is that a state has to be protective to the citizens, who have been historically unfortunate, marginalized and subdued.

Wolfe, the protagonist is madly dehumanized and suffers a lot from both natural and unnatural catastrophes. Outbreak of potato blight forced him to migrate for life from his home land, Ireland to the USA is natural catastrophe to victimize him. The unnatural catastrophe that fueled his sufferings are poverty, foreign otherness in the host country, unskillfulness and his religious aspect upon Catholic. He works hard without thinking about his body, family, and religion but his labor is never awarded. he is paid too little to afford sustenance i.e. food, shelter and clothes. He is regarded as non-human. His physical energy is worthy. When he is not able to work, he is taken to a place and kept

carelessly as if he is not a man but animal. It is inhuman treatment and act of alienating him from his body, production and culture. It manifests the picture of the 19<sup>th</sup> century America that was not kind but discriminating. This is because only the natives are citizens but others are only migrants and they are oppressed and dehumanized.

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