“‘Of Thoroughbred Gentlemen’ and Working Class Hunchbacks: Idle Narration and Eugenic Observation in Rebecca Harding Davis’s ‘Life in the Iron-Mills’”

In my paper today I want to consider the way that class is represented in the first significant Realist text written in the United States, Rebecca Harding Davis’s short story, “Life in the Iron Mills,” published in a middle-class magazine The Atlantic Monthly in 1861. I’ll briefly sketch out the plot of the story for those who haven’t read it before demonstrating how this text, which occupies an important place in working class literature, significantly undermines the apparent political progressivism for which it is routinely lauded.

The story is set in Wheeling, Virginia (before West Virginia was admitted to the Union during the Civil War). The narrator occupies a detached position above the streets of Wheeling, observing throngs of dirty immigrant laborers walking in muddy streets to and from their industrial jobs, working as iron-puddlers. This puts her in mind of a situation and a man she remembers from the past, a Welsh laborer named Hugh Wolfe and his female cousin and companion, a hunchback named Deborah Wolfe who works in a local cotton-mill and routinely brings Hugh his supper as he works the night shift. In his off-time, Hugh makes art from korl, a waste by-product of iron-puddling; he carves out disturbing, alienated, life-like characters from korl. For this, he is ridiculed by other workers. One night, the mill owner and his ilk tour the puddling site with a journalist. They see Hugh’s sculpture of a woman, have a debate about the nature of art and free-will (one that Hugh can barely follow or understand), and one well-intentioned, paternalistic man tells Hugh that he has the right to seek a life above his allotted station in life. Unbeknownst to Hugh, the opportunity to do so presents itself to Deb: she steals a wallet from one of the men. She presents it to Hugh, he has a moral crisis over it, he is eventually caught with the money, and subsequently is sentenced to nineteen years of hard labor—it must
be noted that he is nineteen at the time, so this is, in effect, a somewhat redundant life-sentence. Despairing in prison, he cuts his wrists and dies. The narrator then intrudes at the end of the story to reveal that she has somehow acquired Hugh’s korl woman statue, that it occupies a place in her study.

So, as an early depiction of the stultifying effects of industrial labor—as a literary depiction of alienation—most literary critics have pointed out how Davis’s story is groundbreaking, trend-setting, politically progressive, what have you. It is a powerful story: the iron-mill is hellish, the oppression is violent, extensive, and complete. And to attempt to bring this site to the attention of thoroughly middle- and upper-class readers of the *Atlantic Monthly* during the early days of the Civil War is both bold and daring. And yet, I find that the story itself, in the way that it is constructed, in the relationship between its narrator and her subject, cannot rise about the class antagonisms that the story itself lays bare. This happens in pretty insidious ways: namely, (for the purposes of my talk today) that she ascribes class difference as a function of that which can be inherited by blood. This is another way that the story was potentially ahead of its time, but in a purely negative way: in attempting to account for what seems like irreducible class difference, the story’s narrator encodes and explains that difference in a thoroughly eugenic logic.

It is at the beginning of the story that the narrator most deliberately reveals information about herself regarding class and race. The first line of the story, which has become almost mythic in criticism about “Life in the Iron-Mills,” interrogatively states, “A cloudy day: do you know what that is in a town of iron-works?” (Davis 39). It is highly unlikely that her readers—middle- or upper-class white readers of both sexes—have any knowledge of iron-works, so this question is largely rhetorical even as it enacts a clear sense of difference regarding place: “you”
are not a part of this world, and therefore must trust me when I describe it. Immediately afterwards, however, the narrator reveals herself to be both sheltered and above the degradation lived by crowds like the “drunken Irishmen” she observes. In order to see outside she must first open her window, revealing an important difference in privilege and access even as she declares her knowledge of the town.

Describing the polluted river she views from her back window, she reminisces, “When I was a child, I used to fancy a look of weary, dumb appeal upon the face of the negro-like river slavishly bearing its burden day after day,” a recollection she then describes as an “idle notion” (40). The language of privilege and class—in this case, of idleness—occurs three times throughout the first four paragraphs of the story: her childish vision of the river was an “idle notion,” which she later reaffirms by describing her “fancy about the river” as an “idle one” (40). She also describes her voyeurism of the workers below in conjunction with the act of “idly tapping the window-pane” (40).

The comparison between the “negro-like” river and the “slow stream” of dirty laborers daily passing before her is historically, marked by the language of the hiring classes. She illustrates this stream as “masses of men, with dull besotted faces bent to the ground, sharpened here and there by pain or cunning; skin and muscle and flesh begrimed with smoke and ashes” (40). This steady stream of dirty humanity also represents an almost geographic inevitability of the need for manual, menial, and unskilled industrial labor: US industrialization was enabled by a literal groundswell of laborers at work in textile mills and iron-rolling factories at the same time that those industries were considered proper mediums of assimilation for the foreign. Hugh Wolfe’s story 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” (emphasis added 40), Davis finds it
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necessary to repeat. So long as iron and cotton were valuable in Wheeling, the working class “stream” would have a place on the map of American industry.

Finally, and most importantly, this forced comparison—the geographic with the human, the Negro with the white—inaugurates a central tension in the story’s text: how to race the foreign-born laborer who, when clean, appears white. The important racial opposition at play in “Iron Mills” is not black/white but unclean-white/pure-white. The unclean-whites are, unnaturally, the bodies of the Welsh puddlers. Their dirty white bodies are not black, for the truly black body is still tied to slavery—the Negro river cannot operate apart in any fashion other than slavishly, both servile and enslaved. But these bodies also do not fit into the rubric of native-born, middle- or upper-class whiteness sufficiently opposed to blackness, so the narrator necessarily conflates the outward manifestations of racial discourse (black skin/white skin) to include national characteristics like drunkenness and dirtiness or, for my purposes, inheritable qualities such as criminality. As Davis makes clear, Welshmen become easily distinguishable from other foreigners:

You may pick out the Welsh emigrants, Cornish miners, out of the throng passing the windows, any day. They are a trifle more filthy; their muscles are not so brawny; they stoop more. When they are drunk, they neither yell, nor shout, nor stagger, but skulk along like beaten hounds. A pure, unmixed blood, I fancy: shows itself in the slight angular bodies and sharply-cut facial lines. (emphasis added 42)

Later, the narrator lauds the “Welsh Wolfe blood” as “honest,” compared to the Irish, who have a seemingly natural propensity for crime (61). When Deborah asks young Janey, an Irish girl staying with the Wolfes, where her father is, she replies, “He’s beyant [beyond],—wid Haley, in the stone house” (44). The narrator then states parenthetically to the audience, “Did you ever hear the word jail from an Irish mouth?” (44).
Class, too, increasingly becomes an almost genetic quality over the course of the story. The first indication of class as an immutable and inheritable factor follows on the heels of the narrator’s original description of the Wolfes: “Their lives were like those of their class: incessant labor, sleeping in kennel-like rooms, eating rank pork and molasses, drinking—God and the distillers only know what; with an occasional night in jail, to atone for some drunken excess” (42). Although she admits that this can hardly be all there is to their lives—she rather circuitously asks “Is that all of their lives?” (42)—the narrator consistently ascribes problems of class inequality to internal biological difference rather than external exploitation, especially when compared to the wealthy characters in the story, who belong, from Hugh’s perspective, to a “mysterious class” because they are “thorough-bred” gentlemen (emphasis added 51). Note, for instance, that in the quote above the Wolfes have many “duplicates” swarming the street today, as though poverty somehow has the ability to clone itself into perpetuity, like a virus. More revealing is the narrator’s tendency to cite Deborah as an exemplum of the lowest class, which happens on numerous occasions. When Deb unceremoniously falls asleep on some warm ash after delivering Wolfe his midnight dinner, the narrator states,

Miserable enough she looks, lying there on the ashes like a limp, dirty rag, – yet not an unfitting figure to crown the scene of hopeless discomfort and veiled crime: more fitting, if one looked deeper into the heart of things, – at her thwarted woman’s form, her colorless life, her waking stupor that smothered pain and hunger, – even more fit to be a type of her class. (46)

Debs’ reign in the nether regions of the iron-works, is, of course, ironic—she lives without material comfort, decent food, warmth, love, and attention, an accumulation of deprivation that symbolically manifests itself ahold her contorted physique: she carries these burdens as part of her literal humpback. Referencing Deb again, the narrator directly addresses her readers, “If you could go into this mill where Deborah lay, and drag out from the hearts of
these men the terrible tragedy of their lives, taking it as a symptom of the disease of their class, no ghost Horror would terrify you more” (47). Although this metaphor implies that poverty might have a cure, we might be better served to understand “the disease of their class” along the lines of syphilis, another hereditary disease without cure that could haunt a family—even an economic class—for generations.

While it is important not to lose sight of the fact that Davis intended her story to function as a critique of industrialism and the hopeless situation in which these faceless immigrant workers found themselves, her narrator’s response—the naïve scientism, that class difference is a matter of inherited national tradition and blood, where both the rich and poor are “pure-blooded,” but the blood types matter—is obviously a dangerous one. In the kind of eugenic logic that marks the story, she participates in a larger discourse that, in one sense, predates the story. That is to say, there was always a eugenic component to racialized chattel slavery that predates the story: the firm belief, supported by pseudo-science, that blacks were inherently weaker mentally than whites but were better suited to hard labor. (And this is nothing to speak of the way that slavery was predicated upon a kind of human engineering: the careful breeding of peoples to produce new workers.) This is only subtext for the eugenic logic in the story. But in attempting to eugenically explain how class is inherited, the narrator in “Life in the Iron Mills” also anticipates, by more than a decade, the birth of the eugenic movements proper, which began in earnest in 1877 with the publication of Richard Dugdale’s The Jukes, a Study in Crime, Pauperism, Disease, and Heredity. What began as a critique of environment and heredity in Dugdale’s work was quickly picked up as proof that defects like drunkenness, laziness, and promiscuity were a result of blood, and it was a short leap from that conclusion to the institution of widespread programs to sterilize and sanitize members of the lower classes in the 20th century.
I’m not saying that Davis jumpstarted the process to sterilization. But in a story that is often held up as politically progressive and aesthetically groundbreaking, her eugenic logic must be reckoned with. Perhaps, in closing, we should consider that the most dangerous result of this particular logic in the story is not that the middle-class narrator attributes inheritable defective qualities to the class of workers that she describes. It is that already in this story Hugh believes in it too. Though the story is told from the narrator’s point of view, it is Hugh who sees an inescapable gulf between his body and the bodies of the thorough-bred gentlemen in front of him. Thus, eugenic thought, that, which at the turn of the upcoming century will become a tool of class warfare, is already becoming inculcated by members of the working class themselves. This, perhaps, is the most insidious part of the story.
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Works Cited
