

*Rebecca Harding Davis's "Life in the Iron Mills" In Its Cultural Context*

Your research paper will be based on Rebecca Harding Davis's short story, "Life in the Iron Mills," originally published in 1861. The Bedford cultural edition, edited by Cecilia Tichi, will be our main text in this part of the course. The Bedford edition promises to "move outward from the reading of the novella as a parable of the difficult life of a woman writer to include a variety of historical and cultural documents vital to Rebecca Harding Davis's nineteenth century." Your research paper will explore some of the materials--most contemporaneous with the fictional text--presented in that edition, supplemented with later investigations of these matters by modern scholars.

That is to say, your research paper will be a triangulation between:

- 1) the text of "Life in the Iron Mills," your most important source. Remember that your main job is to present a convincing interpretation of this short story, and that the outside materials you employ should be judged on their ability to shed light on the meaning of this story in its context.
- 2) one 19<sup>th</sup> century source from the Bedford cultural edition
- 3) at least two related sources from modern scholarship of the period

### ORAL REPORTS

As a way of beginning our research, you'll work in your existing small groups. Each group needs to select one of the general topic areas below. Each group will present BRIEF presentations on the readings in its section, one reading per person. (You'll need to confer ahead of time to make sure there are no duplications.)

### TOPICS

The Bedford cultural edition divides its contents into four main areas, four cultural approaches to "Life in the Iron Mills," and one of these should form the rough boundaries of your investigation. Remember that you'll need to specify and individualize these topics to suit your own reading of the story and your own chosen sources.

1. **Work and Class**--how did 19<sup>th</sup> century writers think about problems of class difference, of economic inequality, of social separation? What does "Life in the Iron Mills" have to say about these matters?
2. **Social Reform and the Promise of the Dawn**--what 19<sup>th</sup> century political and social movements were trying to change things? How widespread, popular, and/or effective were they? Where does Davis's story fit in? What changes, exactly, does she support? Is she optimistic about the prospects of reform?
3. **Art and Artists**--how did 19<sup>th</sup> century writers think about the purpose and meaning of art, and the role of the artist in society? Should the artist be contemplating Eternal Beauty or should (s)he be involved in the rough and tumble of political and social conflict? "Life in the Iron Mills" is often seen as an allegory of the artist--how do Davis's ideas about artists, as presented in the story, fit in with her times?
4. **Women and Writing: The Public Platform**--Modern interpretations of the story have often focused on Davis's difficulties as a woman writer, suggesting that this is part of what she was writing about in the story, though not directly. What were the typical 19<sup>th</sup>-century ideas about women writers? How popular were they, and how seriously were they taken (not the same thing!)?

### FORMAT

Keep your focus on "Life in the Iron Mills." Discuss your outside sources in that context. Remember that your main job is to offer a convincing interpretation of the story.

Make sure that you are making a convincing argument from beginning to end. Your paper should be a UNIFIED essay, with a single point of view that is coherently developed. Let the reader know in every paragraph how the material presented there fits in with what has been said before, and with your overall purposes in the paper. Use transitions, both between paragraphs and within them, to lead the reader skillfully and smoothly through your presentation.

In each paragraph, make sure that you present EVIDENCE for the points that you're making. Most often, this will be evidence from the text of your story, or from your outside sources, or, even better, from both. And make sure you take the time to discuss these quotations or paraphrases in detail, showing exactly HOW they support your points. All outside sources MUST be correctly cited in MLA style (NO OTHER!) Any time you use anyone else's information, ideas, interpretations, or words, you MUST have a complete MLA citation AND you must make clear in the text exactly where someone else's ideas leave off and your own ideas begin. Remember that paraphrased information must be cited the same way as quoted information, and that a single reference at the end of a paragraph is NOT sufficient: EVERY piece of information needs to be cited separately.

### **STEPS IN THE RESEARCH PROCESS—DEFINITIONS**

(Every class period something is due--see Syllabus and Blackboard for schedule of due dates):

**3.1 Discussion of Bedford Source:** This will be an offshoot of your oral report: discuss the *text* of your chosen source in some detail, focusing on passages that you believe are most important to an understanding of the social context in which Rebecca Harding Davis wrote her story. Tell us what you have learned about this period in American history (1840-1870) that you didn't know before. *Don't* just summarize: this should be an *analysis*. (about 2 pages)

**3.2 Discussion of Davis story and Bedford Source:** Concentrate on the connection to "Life in the Iron Mills." What does it help you understand about the story? (2-3 pages.)

**3.3 List of sources consulted:** Print-out(s) of results of searches conducted as described in the Bibliographic Instruction class. You should circle the ones that look most promising for your particular research topic.

**3.4 Close reading of relevant portions of Davis story.** Once you have identified your area of research, some aspects of the story will now appear more relevant than others, possibly including some that previously seemed unimportant. Focus on these areas, select and analyze relevant passages, and prepare the way for your research. See study questions: each question contains suggested "key passages" to start you off—but feel free to use others as well.

**3.5 Annotated Bibliography:** Brief description and evaluation of 5 sources, that you have actually read, which you consider finalists for your outside source. Each entry should begin with a COMPLETE Works Cited entry in MLA style. After the citation, in about a paragraph you should both briefly summarize what is in each source, AND evaluate why it might (or might not) be appropriate for your topic.

**3.6 Outline of Research Paper:** You're going to need to integrate a) your interpretation of "Life in the Iron Mills," which will be your primary task in the paper b) your Bedford source and c) your outside sources. How are they going to fit together, topic by topic? How are you going to organize your argument? What's a logical order of presentation so that the reader will be able to follow your ideas?

**3.7 Discussion of Outside Sources:** Now you've made your decisions. Tell me why. What angle do these scholars take? How does this give you a new insight into the historical period (1840-1870) that you didn't have before? *Don't* just summarize: this should be an *analysis* (about 1 pages on each source that you'll be using).

**3.8 Complete Draft:** This means *complete*, including correct MLA documentation style. Do NOT tell me that you will put that in later!

**Peer Critiques (online, with your partner)**

**3.9 Revised version. Conference with instructor**

**3.10 Final version**

**3.11 Reflective Essay (written at final exam)**

**Study Questions on Rebecca Harding Davis, "Life in the Iron Mills" (1861)** (Bedford edition) Answer on your Group Wiki the question that corresponds to your topic.

1. Work and Class: Summarize and evaluate the positions on matters of class suffering taken by each of the visitors to the mill: a) Kirby b) May c) Mitchell. What does Davis seem to think about each of these positions? How adequate are they as responses to the social structure of 19th-century America? [Key passages: pp. 49-58; pp. 65-66]

2. Social Reform: What does the narrator say about her/his purpose in telling this story? What assumptions are made about the targeted readers and their expectations? How are those assumptions addressed/undermined/alterd? What attitude does the narrator take toward the efforts of the Quaker woman at the end, the most visible image of social reform in the story? [Key passages: pp. 40-42; p. 64; pp. 72-74]

3 Art and Artists: Davis presents us with two female images in the normally all-male world of the mill: Deborah, sleeping on the ash heap, and the Korl woman, literally carved from the discarded refuse of industrial society, but nevertheless powerful, athletic--and desperate. What is the relation between these two images? How does each fit in with mid-nineteenth century conventions of depicting women? What does the narrator's final gesture of displaying the statue only behind a curtain tell us about the relation of this image to mainstream 19th-century American ideas about the function of art and artist? [Key passages: pp. 45-47; pp. 52-54; p. 74]

4. Women and Writing: Hugh is known as "Molly Wolfe," "one of the girl-men" at the mill. In what ways is he feminized, and in what ways does he remain within the usual province of the masculine? What kinds of problems and concerns does a working-class male artist share with a female artist of any class in 19th-century America, and what kinds of issues are specific to each gender? [Key passages: pp. 47-49; pp. 67-71]