Life in the Iron Mills

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF REBECCA HARDING DAVIS

Rebecca Harding Davis was born in Pennsylvania in 1831, but lived much of her life in Wheeling, Virginia (now West Virginia), which served as the inspiration for the unnamed town in *Life in the Iron Mills*. Davis was a voracious reader and graduated as valedictorian in 1848 from her female seminary school in Pennsylvania. She is one of the progenitors of American literary realism and had a prolific literary career, working as a fiction writer, journalist, and editor. Her first completed work, *Life in the Iron Mills*, was an instant success and appeared in the ultra-prestigious *Atlantic Monthly* in April of 1861. 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*, Rebecca Harding Davis 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*.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

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. 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 (which later changed to Charleston).

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Considered one of the first works of American literary realism, *Life in the Iron Mills* portrayed the everyday lives of its run-of-the-mill characters in a fashion similar to the realist works of William Dean Howells, such as *A Modern Instance*, which follows a broken marriage and the negative effects of capitalism. Rebecca Harding Davis and *Life in the Iron Mills* also had admirers in the transcendentalists, such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Louisa May Alcott. Transcendentalism was another reaction against industrialization, specifically finding fault in the way the industrial revolution undermined the power of the individual by ousting workers in favor of machinery. Transcendentalism also emphasized the power of the natural world, as seen in Emerson's "Nature," which is comparable to *Life in the Iron Mills*' critique of the industrialized city and praise for the countryside. *Life in the Iron Mills* also has thematic similarities with the slave narratives of the time. Published one year after *Life in the Iron Mills*, Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* details Jacobs' experience as a slave in the American South. Both works highlight the harsh realities of forced labor in the South and both works attempt to reach an upper-class audience to spur change. Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* also contains similar strands of social criticism and Christian ethics that appear within the pages of *Life in the Iron Mills*. Modern books about laborers that have a similar social message include Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimed*, which examines the effects of the 1996 Welfare Reform Act on the working class, and Valeria Luiselli's *The Story of My Teeth*, which chronicles one man's experience of living in Mexico City's industrial suburbs.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Life in the Iron Mills*
- **When Written:** 1860
- **Where Written:** Wheeling, Virginia
- **When Published:** April 1861
- **Literary Period:** Realism
- **Genre:** Literary Realism
- **Setting:** An unnamed industrialized city in the American South that is based off of Davis' hometown of Wheeling, Virginia
- **Climax:** When Hugh commits suicide
- **Antagonist:** While Kirby, Doctor May, and Mitchell seem like antagonists upon first look, the novella firmly asserts that industrialization is the true antagonist
- **Point of View:** First person and third person omniscient

EXTRA CREDIT

Fast Fame *Life in the Iron Mills* was Rebecca Harding Davis' first completed work and was published in *Atlantic Monthly*, the

most esteemed magazine in the country at the time.

Famous Friends Rebecca Harding Davis and Nathanial Hawthorne were fans of each other's work and eventually met at Hawthorne's home in Concord, Massachusetts.

PLOT SUMMARY

Life in the Iron Mills opens with a description of an unnamed industrialized town in the American South, which primarily produces iron. The account is given by an unnamed narrator, who is a resident of the town. Perched at his or her window, the narrator looks out over the town, noticing the drunken workers smoking tobacco, the muddy **river** flowing sluggishly along its course, and the workers trudging to or from work in the mills.

Watching the world inch by out the window, the narrator is reminded of a story that took place in this very town. The narrator knows the reader may be skeptical of the importance of a story of one worker who led a dreary existence just like thousands of other workers. However, there is a dangerous secret hidden in this particular story that has driven people to insanity or even death. This secret can only be uncovered if the reader listens to the narrator's story with an open mind, putting aside all preconceptions of what kinds of people and places are acceptable subjects for literature. The reader must follow the narrator down into the grimy, dirty city to meet a Welsh immigrant named Hugh Wolfe, a furnace tender at Kirby & John's iron mill. Thirty years prior, Hugh lived in what is now the narrator's house. Back then, the single house was rented out to six families, but the two cellar rooms were rented out to Hugh, Hugh's father, and their cousin, Deborah.

Narration shifts from first person to third person, and the story of the Wolfes begins. On a stormy night after work, a cotton-picker named Deborah returns to her home, which is a small, dark cellar room coated with moss. Hugh's father, a small, frail man, is asleep in the corner on some straw, so Deborah quietly fixes her dinner. Deborah is pale and little sickly with a slight hunchback. Unlike her peers, she does not drink alcohol. The narrator speculates that she must have something else in her life keeping her afloat—perhaps a far-flung hope or love. When that thing is gone, the narrator speculates, she will likely indulge in whiskey like everyone else.

As she eats, she hears a faint noise and realizes that hidden within the old coats on the floor is Janey, a young Irish girl from the neighborhood. Janey says she is sleeping the night at the Wolfe's home because her father is in prison. She mentions that Hugh is working the night shift at the mill. Immediately, Deborah jumps up and begins throwing together a meal to bring to Hugh (including her own portion of ale). Although it is pitch black, pouring rain, and nearing midnight, Deborah makes her way to the mill with Hugh's dinner, just like she does almost every night, usually with little thanks from Hugh. She thinks about how the mill looks like it belongs in Hell, with its roaring fires and shadowy figures of half-clothed men.

Once at the mill, Hugh eats his meal and tells Deborah to rest and warm up by lying on the pile of ash. The narrator lingers on the image of Deborah, overwhelmed by pain, exhaustion, and cold, lying in the bed of ash. The narrator asks the reader to take a closer look at Deborah and see not just her filth and dismal state, but to recognize her selflessness, envy, and consuming love for Hugh. The narrator points out how her face looks lifeless—an expression carved out from years of unrequited love for Hugh and knowing that he is kind to her because he is kind to everyone (even the cellar rats). Deborah recognizes in Hugh a longing for beauty, which she thinks makes him repulsed by her physical deformity and drawn to little Janey. The narrator reminds the reader to have empathy, since these feelings of heartbreak and envy are universal.

The narrator briefly describes Hugh, noting that the other iron workers have deemed him effeminate and strange. Sick with tuberculosis, Hugh has yellow skin and weak muscles. He does not regularly drink or fight like the other men—when he does, he gets beaten up badly. In addition, he has an odd hobby of carving statues into korl, a byproduct of making iron. He works on each statue for months at a time only to destroy the figure upon its completion. The narrator implores the reader to not be quick to judge Hugh as the story unfolds, since his personality and choices are the result of a lifetime of hard labor, years of disease, and overwhelming feelings of hopelessness, dissatisfaction, and pain.

Back in the mill, a small group of visitors enter the mill. Hugh recognizes a few of the men: the overseer named Kirby, the son of one of the mill owners; and the local physician, Doctor May. Among them is a newspaper reporter and another gentleman. The men talk of profits and politics and make passing remarks about the mill's striking resemblance to Dante's *Inferno*. After the reporter leaves, Kirby, Doctor May, and the other stranger (named Mitchell) remain to wait out the rain. When the men finally depart, they are startled to come across a giant, lifelike **statue** of a woman carved out of korl. Mitchell guesses that Hugh is the artist, and Doctor May asks what Hugh meant by the statue. Hugh says the woman is "hungry" for life. Doctor May is confused by this answer, but Mitchell seems to understand. Kirby is flippant about the statue, asserting that he has no interest in nurturing his workers' artistry. In fact, no social problems are his problems—he is only responsible for is paying his workers on time. Doctor May decides to encourage Hugh and tells him that he has extraordinary potential. When Hugh asks Doctor May to help him, Doctor May quickly recoils and says he does not have the money to do so and that there is no point in helping one person if he can't help everyone. Kirby, Doctor May, and Mitchell wait for the coach, as Mitchell asserts that reform needs to happen from within, rather than being

spurred by outside help.

Once the three men leave, Hugh is overcome by feelings of inadequacy and anger. When they return home, Deborah reminds Hugh about what the visitors said back at the mill about money being what could save them. Growing increasingly hysterical, Deborah thrusts a large wad of money into his hands that she has stolen from Mitchell. Hugh simply asks if life has come to this.

The following day, Deborah reminds Hugh that he has the right to keep the money. He debates this for an entire day but eventually decides to keep the money. He walks through the town saying a mental goodbye to all its sights, knowing that a new life is before him. He stumbles into a church and appreciates the preacher's rich language but deems the sermon irrelevant to him and meant for privileged people. The narrator suddenly interjects, revealing that Hugh was found guilty of theft by the morning. When Doctor May sees Hugh's conviction in the paper, he angrily mutters to his wife about how ungrateful Hugh was for all of the kindness Doctor May showed him.

The jailer, Haley, notes that Hugh's nineteen-year sentence is the harshest punishment the law allows. Haley also says that the man Hugh stole from, Mitchell, visited Hugh in jail out of "curiosity" the following day. Since then, Hugh has been quiet and growing increasingly sick but he still tries to escape whenever he can. Hugh's accomplice, Deborah, only has a three-year sentence. Haley says she begs him every day to see Hugh, and Haley finally complies. When Haley lets Deborah into Hugh's cell, Deborah immediately realizes that Hugh is dangerously sick and losing his mind. Crying, Deborah confesses her love for Hugh. He ignores her, instead captivated by scraping a piece of tin across the bars. Deborah can see on Hugh's face that he is dying.

Meanwhile, the sounds of the market outside the window make Hugh realize that his time on earth has come to a close. When Haley comes to return Deborah to her cell, Deborah tells Hugh that she knows he will never see her again. Hugh agrees and tells her to say goodbye to his father and Janey for him. Later that night, Hugh uses his now-sharpened piece of tin to cut his arms and commit suicide. From her cell, Deborah can sense what is happening and repeats to herself that Hugh "knows best."

The next day, a crowd gathers at Hugh's cell, including a coroner, reporters, and Kirby. Later, a Quaker woman arrives to tend to Hugh's body. Deborah begs the woman to bury Hugh out in the countryside so that he doesn't have to remain trapped in the city, buried under thick layers of mud and ash. The Quaker woman says she lives out in the countryside and will bury Hugh there the following day. She also promises to return to fetch Deborah and take her to the countryside after Deborah has served her three-year sentence.

The narrator affirms that that thee years later, the Quaker woman was true to her word, and that the combination of nature and Christian love transforms Deborah into the most calm, humble, loving person among all of the Quakers. The narrator also notes that Deborah's love for Hugh still endures.

The narrator says that the only sign that Hugh ever lived is the korl statue, which the narrator now keeps in his or her library behind a curtain. The statue asks questions like, "Is this the end?...nothing beyond?—no more?" A glimmer of light breaks through the room and shines on the statue. The narrator notes that the statue's arm seems to point to the east, where God will make the sun rise once more.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Hugh – Hugh Wolfe, one of the novella's protagonists, is a 32-year-old furnace-tender in an iron mill in the American South. Hugh leads a dismal life of constant labor and terrible living conditions, and he has an overwhelming feeling of being stuck. Despite his sad and unsatisfying life, Hugh possesses an intense craving for beauty and art, which he satisfies somewhat through carving **statues** out of korl (a byproduct of making iron), as well as through his affections for Janey, a young Irish girl who frequently leans on Hugh for comfort and friendship. Hugh's admiration for beauty prevents him from returning the affections of his cousin, Deborah, whose devotion to him leads her to steal money so that he might have a better life. Hugh's desire to live a more beautiful life leads him to keep the stolen money, but this ultimately leads to Hugh's downfall when he's sentenced to nineteen years in jail for theft. Hugh quickly goes mad in prison, eventually committing suicide with a piece of tin that he sharpens on the barred windows.

Deborah – Deborah, a protagonist of the novella, is a cotton picker in an unnamed industrial city in the American South. Deborah lives with her cousin Hugh, his alcoholic father, and six other families in a cramped house. Like Hugh's life, Deborah's life is full of pain and suffering. Despite this, Deborah consistently acts with love and selflessness, since her unrequited love for Hugh propels her existence, much as Hugh's love of beauty propels his. Deborah is self-conscious about her physical deformity (she has a slight hunchback) and she knows it is one of the reasons why Hugh doesn't love her. Out of love, she struggles to bring Hugh meals at work and, ultimately, steals money from Mitchell on Hugh's behalf, which leads both her and Hugh to go to prison. After Hugh dies in prison, Deborah's life is transformed by the Quaker woman, who helps Deborah escape from industrialized city life and shows her the healing power of nature and Christian love. Away from the vice and hardship of the city, Deborah becomes happy, calm, loving, and humble.

Narrator –The unnamed narrator, who tells the novella's central story from thirty years in the future, lives in the same house that Hugh, Deborah, and Hugh's father lived in (although the narrator lives in the whole house, while the Wolfes only inhabited two of the cellar rooms). Living in the Wolfes' old house means that the narrator possesses the **statue** of the hungry woman that Hugh carved, which is the catalyst for the narrator telling Hugh and Deborah's story. The narrator positions him- or herself as an expert on factory workers, even though the narrator doesn't seem to be one. As the house suggests, the narrator seems somewhat privileged, and his or her nuanced and articulate observations about industrial life position him or her to reach an equally privileged middle-class audience to warn them about the dangers of industrialization. The narrator holds firm moral positions about industrial cities being inhuman and believes that high- and low-class people all have the same desires and emotions, they just relate to different experiences. The narrator is nonjudgmental and wants the reader to be, as well.

Quaker woman – The Quaker woman is the gentle and kindly older woman who visits the prison to tend to Hugh's body after his death. During this time, she meets Deborah and promises to return in three years once Deborah is released from prison. The Quaker woman is true to her word—three years later, she brings Deborah to the Quaker community in the countryside to experience the healing effects of nature and Christian love.

Doctor May – Doctor John May, known as Doctor May, is the local physician who visits the mill with Kirby, Mitchell, and the reporter. He is unable to step out of his mindset as an upper-class doctor. He can't find a deeper meaning in Hugh's **statue**, as he is preoccupied by the statue's accurate musculature. Doctor May thinks highly of himself and considers speaking kindly to Hugh to be a great act of charity. When Hugh asks Doctor May to help him, Doctor May is ultimately unwilling to put his encouraging words into action, revealing the novella's sharp critique of positive words that are not backed by positive actions. Although he outwardly scoffs at Mitchell's assertion that the workers need to rise up on their own accord without outside help, he inwardly accepts this idea and does nothing to help the workers except pray that they have the strength to revolt on their own.

Mitchell – Mitchell is Kirby's brother in law, who is in town to study the institutions of a Slave State. He is one of the men who visits the mill with Kirby, Doctor May, and the reporter, and is the man Deborah steals money from. Upon their meeting, Hugh is immediately fascinated by Mitchell, as he appears to be the kind of wealthy, intellectual gentleman that Hugh has always dreamed of being—even Mitchell's voice seems to exude elegance. Hugh's interactions with Mitchell make Hugh more painfully aware of his unsatisfying life and wasted potential. In addition, Mitchell is the only person in the group of visitors who understands the meaning behind Hugh's **statue**, recognizing that the statue is hungry for life and for answers from God. Despite his artistic eye, Mitchell reveals himself to be cold, emotionally detached, and arrogant. Mitchell only interacts with Hugh for the sake of amusement, both at the mill and when visiting Hugh in prison. Although he is critical of Doctor May's hesitance to help Hugh, Mitchell's remarks seem to be said in jest. He ultimately distances himself from social issues, firmly asserting that the workers must rise up on their own without outside help.

Kirby – Clarke Kirby, known just as Kirby, is the overseer and the son of one of the mill owners. He only cares about his mill's profits and is blatantly uninterested in the workers who make his mill function smoothly. To him, the mill workers aren't even people, they're just "hands" or "wretches" who do the dirty work. Like Mitchell, Kirby is cold and emotionally detached.

Preacher – The preacher gives a sermon on the night that Hugh stumbles into a church and decides to keep the money that Deborah stole from Mitchell. Hugh thinks the preacher's words are beautiful and emotionally charged but ultimately irrelevant. Hugh feels that the preacher's sermon is empty and meant for privileged people, since the preacher hasn't experienced hunger, alcoholism, or poverty.

Janey – Janey is a young Irish girl who frequently stays with Deborah and Hugh when her father is in jail. Helpless, young, and pretty, Janey is the object of Hugh's affections and Deborah's jealousy. Janey is primarily described through the lens of Hugh's desire and only speaks when she sleepily mumbles to Deborah that her father is in jail and that Hugh is working the night shift.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Hugh's father – Hugh's father is an old, frail man who is only seen sleeping throughout the course of the novella. He lives in the cellar with Hugh and Deborah, drinks frequently, and works in the mills.

Haley – Haley is the jailer who oversees Hugh and Deborah while they are in prison. Haley is gruff and no-nonsense, though he is sympathetic to Hugh's overly harsh sentence of nineteen years and he arranges for Deborah and Hugh to see one another.

Joe Hill – Joe Hill is the kindly lamp lighter who Hugh calls out to one night in prison when he is overcome by the urge to be spoken to one last time.

Reporter – The newspaper reporter visits the mill with Kirby, Doctor May, and Mitchell. He only speaks when asking Kirby for details regarding the mill's finances for the sake of his newspaper report.

Neff Sanders – Neff Sanders is one of Hugh's fellow workers. While in prison, Hugh notices Neff out the window and tries to whistle to get his attention. When Neff doesn't notice him,

Hugh feels forgotten by the entire outside world.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

THE CITY VS. THE COUNTRY

Life in the Iron Mills mainly takes place within the city limits of an unnamed Southern mill town that is based on Rebecca Harding Davis' hometown of Wheeling, Virginia. In this town, which is meant to stand in for industrial cities in general, immigrant workers live brutal lives, as shown through a cotton-picker named Deborah and her cousin, an iron worker ("puddler") named Hugh. Ultimately, the novella is highly critical of the city (and industrialized cities as a whole), painting it as a toxic and dangerous place that destroys its inhabitants' physical and mental wellbeing. Davis asserts that true healing of the body and mind can be found only in the countryside, where nature remains untouched by industrialization.

The city is characterized by the frantic hustle and bustle of its people and the stagnancy of its nature, both of which drain residents of their vitality. In the city, people are constantly at work; laborers are assigned to night or day shifts, mirroring the way "sentinels of an army" relieve one another so that someone is always on duty keeping watch. However, all of the workers are sickly from such constant, consuming labor. Even the machinery seems tired from the never-ending work: "the unsleeping engines groan and shriek," as if they, too, are crying out in exhaustion. The unnamed narrator illustrates how the muddy brown river that cuts through the city "drags itself sluggishly along, tired of the heavy weight of boats and coal-barges," "slavishly bearing its burden day after day." Like the workers and the machinery, the river is in constant motion and is subjected to nonstop labor. As a result, the river looks dull and sickly. Even the air that blankets the entire city is "muddy, flat, immovable" and heavy with smoke. The narrator, who resides in the same house that protagonists Hugh and Deborah lived in thirty years prior, says nothing much has changed in the city in the past few decades. The city itself is still dirty, and the workers are still subjected to constant work in the mills.

Beyond simply draining workers of their vitality, the city is a dangerous place in terms of health and safety, and it's riddled with social ills. The narrator notes that the mills look more like a "scene of hopeless discomfort and veiled crime" than a workplace, which suggests that the mills are disguised as productive businesses but are actually evil, corrupt places. On her nightly walk to bring Hugh his dinner, Deborah similarly notes that a walk through the mills is like traversing "a street in Hell." In the opening, the narrator notes how the city's residents are "breathing from infancy to death an air saturated with fog and grease and soot, vileness for soul and body," meaning that the city's environment is poisonous to its inhabitants' physical and mental health. In addition, the city brims with alcoholism, physical fights, jeering, and crowded prisons. The workers are sent to prison so frequently that they refer to it as "the stone house," as if it were their second home.

As a sharp contrast from the dirty, sluggish, dangerous city, the countryside remains untouched by industrialization, consequently making it a place of health, wellness, and healing. The narrator notes that "Man cannot live by work alone," a parody of Matthew 4:4, "Man cannot live by bread alone," when Jesus says that people need spiritual food in addition to physical food. Like Jesus urging people to look to deeper things to fill them up, the narrator suggests that people need to be filled by means outside of the city. The narrator contrasts the sluggish city and beautiful, restorative countryside by explaining the river's course: "What if it be stagnant and slimy here? It knows that beyond there waits for it odorous sunlight,—quaint, old gardens, dusky with soft, green foliage of apple-trees, and flushing crimson with roses,—air, and fields, and mountains." The river is radically transformed as it exits city limits and enters the country, healed by the beauty and purity of nature.

Furthermore, the Quaker woman who tends to Hugh's body—a country-dweller and the human embodiment of the virtues of rural life—is the story's most peaceful, compassionate character. She tells Deborah of where she lives, saying, "Thee sees the hills, friend, over the river? Thee sees how the light lies warm there, and the winds of God blow all day?" I live there." The Quaker woman's own light and warmth seems a result of her life in the countryside. Similarly, the "sunshine, and fresh air, and slow, patient, Christ-love" that Deborah experiences in the countryside while living amongst the Quakers are what "make healthy and hopeful" her "impure body and soul." She undergoes physical, mental, and emotional healing in the countryside, eventually shaping her into the most, calm, humble, and caring person in the entire Quaker community.

Life in the Iron Mills forges a sharp contrast between the city, which is blanketed by heavy smoke, exhaustion, disease, and corruption, and the countryside, which is marked by fresh air, nature, community, and wholesomeness. In making this contrast, Rebecca Harding Davis highlights to her middle-class readership that industrialization doesn't necessarily mean progress, a better quality of life, and more money. In fact, for workers like Hugh and Deborah, industrialization means rapidly deteriorating physical and mental health, deep poverty, and overwhelming sense of feeling stuck. Davis urges her privileged readers to see industrialization more clearly and to look to

nature to restore the wholesomeness and health that industrialization has smothered.

COPING AND RELIEF

Life in the Iron Mills details the horrible working and living conditions that pervade industrialized cities, like the unnamed city that protagonists Hugh and Deborah reside in. To cope with such hardships, residents of industrialized cities turn to substance abuse or crime to ease their pain. However, the novella asserts that such coping mechanisms don't actually lead to relief—they only cover up the problem temporarily. Instead, relief from city life can only be found when one makes both a physical and spiritual change, moving to the countryside and turning to religion.

True relief from the horrors of industrialized city life cannot be found through temporary coping mechanisms. Such solutions provide only momentary escapes and usually make one's problems much worse. For example, many of the workers turn to alcohol to dull the pain. The way Hugh talks about the **statue** of a worker that he makes reveals how central alcohol is to their lives, as he believes that the statue wants something to make her live, which could be whiskey. Although Hugh drinks infrequently, the narrator points out that when he does, he drinks "desperately," frantically trying to cover up his problems. The narrator notes that Deborah's love for Hugh is her coping mechanism of choice, and "When that stimulant was gone, she would take to Whiskey." Although Deborah does not currently indulge in alcohol like her peers, the narrator notes how she is likely to do so in the future, simply changing her means for dealing with her difficult life from one temporary solution to another. In addition, Deborah tries to find relief from city life for herself and Hugh by stealing money from Mitchell. Deborah's theft only momentarily alleviates Hugh's pain—he only has the money for one night, during which he dreams about how much better his life is about to be. The plan quickly backfires, leading to Deborah and Hugh's imprisonment, revealing that stealing was not a lasting solution.

Taking refuge in the purity of nature is the first step to finding true relief. The novella argues that relief from the evils of industrialization can only begin to happen if a person physically removes himself or herself from the city. Deborah begs the Quaker woman to bury Hugh outside of city bounds, claiming that that being buried in the city under thick layers of "mud and ash" will "smother" him, even in death. When Deborah leaves the city to live with the Quakers, her mental and physical health is transformed, and she finally finds relief from her suffering. The narrator specifically notes that such transformation is partially due to "long years of sunshine, and fresh air…where the light is the warmest, the air freest"—all elements "needed to make healthy and hopeful this impure body and soul." None of these elements are found in the smoke-clogged, disease-ridden city.

While leaving the industrialized city for the countryside is necessary for finding relief, the novella highlights that ultimate relief is found when one turns to religion and spirituality. Once in the countryside, the other part of Deborah's relief stems from the "slow, patient Christ-love" she is shown by the Quakers. Her time with the "silent, restful," and loving Quakers transforms her into the most loving, calm, and modest person in the community. This is a dramatic contrast from how exhausted and sickly Deborah was before her time spent immersed in a religious community. The narrator closes the novella by talking about the sunrise "to the far East, where, in the flickering, nebulous crimson, God has set the promise of the Dawn." The narrator underscores the way that sunrises, like new beginnings, come from God. By closing the inner narrative with Deborah's newfound peace from being a Quaker and closing the outer narrative with the narrator's attribution of sunrises to god, the novella draws attention to the way spirituality brings relief.

THE POWER OF ART

While most of *Life in the Iron Mills* is about the dismal, heartbreaking lives of immigrants who work in the iron mills in the American South, the novella is also about the power of art. Throughout the pages of *Life in the Iron Mills*, art appears in many forms and is a powerful means for telling and preserving stories, as well as for expressing and eliciting emotions. Art is also a means for illustrating ideas that language falls short of describing accurately, or ideas that are too dangerous to convey straightforwardly.

As a frame narrative, *Life in the Iron Mills* is a story within a story. The outer story—that of the narrator—is the means for telling the inner story of Hugh and Deborah. In this case, art in the form of literature functions as a way for stories to spread and endure. Both the outer story of the narrator and the inner story of Hugh and Deborah center on a physical piece of art: the **sculpture** that Hugh carves out of korl. This sculpture endures long after Hugh commits suicide and is the only sign that he ever lived, thus preserving his life story. The figure is also the catalyst for the narrator's retelling of Hugh and Deborah's story through literature—another level of storytelling and preservation.

Art is closely tied to emotions. In its many forms, art is a vehicle for emotional expression and a way to elicit emotions from others. For example, Hugh pours his pain and experiences into his korl figures. Although readers only gain insight into one of his sculptures (the "hungry" woman), Hugh is known for his penchant for making art out of korl, with final products that are clearly emotionally charged—"hideous, fantastic enough, but sometimes strangely beautiful." Even the other mill workers ("puddlers") secretly are moved by Hugh's art. When visitors to the mill (Kirby, Doctor May, and Mitchell) stumble upon Hugh's

korl figure of the woman, they experience a variety of emotions in tandem. At first, they are startled and even scared. Then, awe sets in, as the men admire the statue's attention to detail. The statue also elicits different emotions from each of the men: Kirby, the son of one of the mill owners, is flippant about the statue, caring more about his workers' productivity than their artistic pursuits, Doctor May is confused by the statue, and Mitchell is moved by it.

Art's power also lies in its ability to illustrate what can't be described using language, as the korl figure evokes emotions that Hugh doesn't quite have the words for. He is "bewildered" when the visitors to the mill ask him to describe what the sculpture means. "She be hungry…I dunno…It mebbe. Summat to make her live, I think,—like you. Whiskey ull do it, in a way." Hugh's struggle to find the words to describe the feelings that underpin his statue are reflective of his poor education but they also point to the way art is capable of describing what language falls short of. Similarly, when Hugh stumbles into a church while deciding what to do with the stolen money, the church's artistic elements elicit from him a confusing range of emotions that words can't capture. The architecture, stained glass, and marble figures "lifted his soul with a wonderful pain," which feels confusing and paradoxical when put into words. When Hugh realizes that keeping the stolen money can give him a better life, he sees the world like an artist's palette, bursting with rich colors. Seeing the world in this way "had somehow given him a glimpse of another world than this—of an infinite depth of beauty and of quiet somewhere,—somewhere,—a depth of quiet and rest and love." The repetition of the words "somehow" and "somewhere" show Hugh's inability to use language to accurately describe the strong feelings brought on by his artistic view of his surroundings.

Similarly, art also has the capacity to illustrate what shouldn't be described—ideas that are too dangerous, radical, or risky to be conveyed by more direct means. The men touring the mill compare the mill to Dante's *Inferno*, referencing a work of literature to allude to the conditions of the mill rather than explicitly stating that the mill looks dangerous, inhumane, and hellish. It would be incredibly polarizing were one of these privileged men to voice their discomfort with the puddlers' working conditions outright (instead of through the lens of literature), considering they are in the presence of Kirby, the son of one of the mill owners. Similarly, the inner story is meant to pose a question that the narrator can't straightforwardly ask. The narrator prefaces the story of Hugh and Deborah by asserting, "I dare make my meaning no clearer, but will only tell my story." The inner narrative as a whole is a work of art that brings to life things that are too risky for the privileged narrator to articulate outright, namely the horrors of industrialization.

Life in the Iron Mills emphasizes that art comes in many forms and is a powerful means for storytelling, expressing emotion, and communicating ideas. Besides all of the different forms of art that appear throughout the novella, *Life in the Iron Mills* as a whole is also a work of art. Through her novella, Rebecca Harding Davis tells the story of two working-class immigrants whose lives are governed and destroyed (or nearly destroyed) by industrialization. Underpinning the novella is Davis' desire to elicit empathy from her middle-class readership who are likely ignorant of what industrialization actually looks like. Davis is one of the first writers to partake in literary realism, as her novella's realistic setting and characters were nontraditional subjects for literature at the time. As a whole, *Life in the Iron Mills* artistically criticizes American industrialization, an idea that may have been too risky for Davis to articulate through other means.

WORDS VS. ACTIONS

Life in the Iron Mills considers the power of positive words and actions to fix bad situations and change lives for the better. Ultimately, the novella asserts that words alone are an ineffective means for creating positive change—only the combination of positive words with positive actions has true power and authenticity.

Davis suggests that positive, encouraging words that aren't backed by actions are empty and meaningless. Using Doctor May and the preacher as examples, the novella illustrates the way that words alone do little to fix negative situations. For example, Doctor May thinks highly of himself for speaking politely to Hugh—something he considers to be a powerful act of kindness. However, when Hugh accepts Doctor May's encouraging words and asks Doctor May to help him, Doctor May quickly recoils, asserting that he doesn't "have the means," and that there is no point in him helping one person since he can't help everyone. Doctor May's kind words don't change Hugh's circumstances, they just make Doctor May feel good about himself. Likewise, when Hugh stumbles into a church, he finds the preacher's words powerful yet foreign. Because the preacher has not experienced poverty, hunger, disease, or substance abuse, his sermon feels empty: "His words passed far over the furnace-tender's grasp, toned to suit another class of culture; they sounded in his ears a very pleasant song in an unknown tongue." The preacher's words have "failed," because they are not coupled with any sort of action or experience—they're just hollow, pretty words.

In contrast, the novella praises those whose altruistic words and actions align—namely those who act on their convictions rather than just talk about them, like Deborah and the Quaker woman. Deborah cares for Hugh deeply and shows it both through her words and her actions; throughout the novella, she showers him with kind words and takes actions to support him, such as walking in the blistering cold every night to bring him dinner, stealing Mitchell's pocketbook not just for herself but for Hugh as well, begging the jailer every day to be able to see

Hugh, and convincing the Quaker woman to bury Hugh in the countryside rather than let him be "smothered" by the city. Deborah consistently acts on her love for Hugh, rather than just talking about it. Likewise, when Deborah pleads with the Quaker woman to bury Hugh in the countryside, the Quaker woman "put her strong arm around Deborah and led her to the window." By putting her arm around Deborah, the Quaker woman acts, rather than just speaks, with love and kindness. The Quaker woman promises to help Deborah when she is released from prison in three years: "'When thee comes back,' she said, in a low, sorrowful tone, like one who speaks from a strong heart deeply moved with remorse or pity, 'thee shall begin thy life again,—there on the hills. I came too late; but not for thee…'" When three years have passed, the Quaker woman acts on her promise by returning to get Deborah, showing her authenticity and commitment to altruism.

Life in the Iron Mills gives the spoken word very little power, asserting that positive words by themselves are insignificant if not paired with positive actions. Perhaps, this is partially because the novella centers on two inarticulate, uneducated protagonists—naturally, actions would have more clout than words. More importantly, the novella's critique of empty words, and praise for words coupled with action, point to how social and political ills, like those detailed throughout the pages of *Life in the Iron Mills*, cannot be fixed by encouraging words, like those of Doctor May, or poetic sermons, like that of the preacher. Davis urges her privileged audience to actually take action in order to undo the evils of industrialization. Furthermore, Davis urges her audience to be like the Quaker woman and help heal those trapped in industrialization's grasp.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

STATUE

The statue of a woman that Hugh carves out of korl, a byproduct of making iron, symbolizes Hugh's longing for more in life. When visitors to the mill (Doctor May, Kirby, and Mitchell) stumble across the statue of the woman and interrogate Hugh about its meaning, Hugh explains that she is "hungry," not necessarily for food, but rather for life. This craving mirrors Hugh's own maddening desire for depth, beauty, and happiness. In addition, Hugh carves the statue in a crouching position with her arms extended in a frantic way, making her look as if she is vehemently warning the viewer about something. In this way, the statue also symbolizes the way that both the author, Rebecca Harding Davis, and the unnamed narrator seek to reveal hidden meanings within the text and warn the reader about the dangers of industrialization.

THE RIVER

The river that runs through the city and out to the countryside represents the evils of industrialization and the promise of nature. To illustrate this, the narrator uses personification, lending the river thoughts and feelings about the world around it. Within city limits, the river is tired, as its slow-moving, muddy waters constantly lug the barges and boats that are loaded with cargo. In contrast, the river feels relieved and energized once it reaches the countryside, surrounded by warm sunshine, fresh air, clover meadows, and mountains. Serving as a point of contrast between industrialized city life and soul-nourishing country life, the river points out the negative impact industrialization has on nature and humankind alike.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the CUNY edition of *Life in the Iron Mills and Other Stories* published in 1985.

Life in the Iron Mills Quotes

What if it be stagnant and slimy here? It knows that beyond there waits for it odorous sunlight,—quaint old gardens, dusky with soft, green foliage of apple-trees, and flushing crimson with roses,—air, and fields, and mountains. The future of the Welsh puddler passing just now is not so pleasant.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the narrator is discussing the different features of the industrialized town, including a brown river that looks sickly within city limits but will eventually reach the countryside and be surrounded by nature. This passage is important for several reasons. The contrast between the dull, muddy river and the fresh, pure countryside is actually a masked discussion of literary movements. *Life in the Iron Mills* was one of the first works of literary realism in America, meaning that the novella focuses on day-to-day people and places, including the muck and grime of industrialized life. What was considered to be proper literature, on the other hand, focused on more pleasant topics, like the gardens and meadows the river will come across in the countryside. By highlighting the way that the river doesn't just experience this peaceful, restorative scene

in nature—it also leadsa3/5/18 a sad existence in the city—the narrator suggests that both existences are worthy of being written about. The river's twofold existence illustrates the poisonousness of the industrialized city and the healing power of nature, which is a thread that runs throughout the course of the novella. The river's inevitable escape from city limits is contrasted with the immigrant worker's hopelessness of ever finding relief from city life. This sets up the narrative as one that seeks to gain empathy from its reader.

> This is what I want you to do. 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 you to hear this story. There is a secret down here, in this nightmare fog, that has lain dumb for centuries: I want to make it a real thing to you.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the narrator has just finished describing the iron town and urges the reader to listen to his or her story (the inner story of the frame narrative). This moment is one of authorial intrusion, when the unnamed narrator directly addresses his or her audience. The narrator is clearly addressing a privileged reader, considering that the reader wears clean clothes and is repulsed by the grime of the city and workers. *Life in the Iron Mills*' realistic subjects are the cornerstone of literary realism—a point emphasized by the narrator's desire to make the secret that underpins this grimy town " a real thing to you." The narrator establishes him- or herself as going on a type of journey with the reader by inviting the reader to "come right down with me." The direct addresses to the reader, the disgusting setting, and the idea of a journey feel reminiscent of Dante's *Inferno*, which is directly referenced later in the novella. In this way, the narrator appeals to the privileged, learned reader, as well as harnessing the power of art to express and elicit emotions and convey ideas that can't be articulated by more straightforward means—namely, the secret that is buried in the narrative. These elements also mean that Rebecca Harding Davis infuses elements of literary classics (and thus, credibility) into her innovative, realistic approach to literature.

> 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. Is this all of their lives?—of the portion given to them…?—nothing beneath?

Related Themes:

Page Number: 15

Explanation and Analysis

Here, the narrator describes the Wolfes' existence before diving into the inner story. The Wolfes' living conditions in an industrialized town feel more in line with that of mistreated dogs than humans. Like dogs, the Wolfes live in "kennel-like rooms," eat rotten food, drink whatever they can find, and are disciplined harshly. The narrator makes this association not because he or she sees workers like the Wolfes as subhuman, but rather to illuminate the underbelly of industrialization. While the privileged reader may see the Industrial Revolution as meaning progress, wealth, and power, the people powering the industrial towns (the immigrant workers) see the Industrial Revolution as meaning disease, poverty, substance abuse, and never-ending labor. The narrator is able to illustrate this disparity through open-ended questions that feel like a challenge to the reader's ethics, asking the reader if the workers' existences are meant to be this empty. Similar questions surface throughout the course of the novella as an intermittent reminder to the reader to consider the worth of the immigrant workers' lives.

> Fire in every horrible form: pits of flame waving in the wind; liquid metal-flames writhing in tortuous streams through the sand…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.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the narrator describes the iron mill as Deborah enters to bring Hugh his dinner. The hell imagery feels reminiscent of the underworld in classical literature—and, of course, Dante's *Inferno*, which is

referenced directly later in the text. The narrator calls the workers "revengeful ghosts," suggesting that the men are so zapped of their vitality that they are essentially dead. The combination of the energetic fire spewing out from all over the mill and the lifeless workers illustrates that the city is both sluggish and dangerous, marked by a flurry of constant motion and soul-draining lethargy. This passage serves as the narrator's reminder to the reader of the serious drawbacks of industrialization. Although the Industrial Revolution may boast of machinery and automation, there exists deep within the factories monstrous pits filled with immigrant workers enduring conditions are so terrible that they seem more fit for hell.

> You laugh at it? Are pain and jealousy less savage realities down here in this place I am taking you to than in your own house or your own heart,—your heart, which they clutch at sometimes? The note is the same, I fancy, be the octave high or low.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 23

Explanation and Analysis

Here, the narrator zooms out from Deborah lying in a pile of ash to urge the reader to see Deborah with empathy. The repetition of two questions in a row reads like an emotionally charged interrogation of the reader, almost challenging the reader to disagree with the narrator. This further characterizes the narrator as nonjudgmental and determined to make the reader be nonjudgmental, as well. The word "realities" serves as a reminder of *Life in the Iron Mills'* status as one of the first works of literary realism in America, detailing realistic people and places that were previously considered unfit topics for literature. By highlighting that the "savage realities" of heartbreak are universal—experienced by high- and low-class people alike—the narrator emphasizes that such topics are worthy subjects of art and literature. The passage also serves to further characterize Deborah, as it reveals her motivations for bringing Hugh his dinner every night and suggests that the "stimulant" mentioned earlier that keeps her going is her love for Hugh.

> There was not one line of beauty or grace in it: a nude woman's form, muscular, grown coarse with labor, the powerful limbs instinct with some one 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.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 32

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the narrator describes Hugh's statue of the korl woman that Doctor May, Mitchell, and Kirby just stumbled upon. Mentally and physically, the woman is a product of her industrial environment, suggesting that just as the industrialized city produces goods like iron, it also produces a certain kind of worker. The woman's physical form shows the physical danger of the industrialized city. Though she is strong, she is "coarse," "tense," and "rigid," like a tightly coiled spring. The emotions carved into the statue show the mental danger of the industrialized city. Subjected to a life of constant work, crushing poverty, and a seemingly inescapable city, the statue feels (or looks like it feels) overcome by a vehement desire. The comparison between the statue and a wolf points to the similarity between the word wolf and Hugh's last name, Wolfe. This association shows how Hugh pours himself into his artistry and suggests that the same "longing" that inhabits the statue also torments Hugh. It also suggests that while the city has drained the statue of her vitality, deep down, she is still a wolf—dangerous, cunning, and powerful.

> "I dunno," he said, with a bewildered look. "It mebbe. Summat to make her live, I think,—like you. Whiskey ull do it, in a way."

Related Themes:

Page Number: 33

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Hugh is explaining to Kirby, Doctor May, and Mitchell why the statue is "hungry." Hugh believes that the statue is deeply unsatisfied with her life as an industrial worker and is longing for a reason to live. By suggesting that whiskey could be this incentive, Hugh draws attention to the rampant alcoholism among his fellow immigrant workers. Hugh's addendum that alcohol only works "in a way"

highlights how substance abuse is a temporary (and negative) coping mechanism that numbs a problem but eventually wears off. In addition, Hugh clearly struggles to choose words that adequately describe the ideas that, for him, are clearly illustrated in the statue. He's confused to even be asked for an explanation, which shows how he sees art as a means for expressing ideas that can't (or shouldn't) be articulated through the spoken word.

> I wash my hands of all social problems,—slavery, caste, white or black. My duty to my operatives has a narrow limit,—the pay-hour on Saturday night. Outside of that, if they cut korl, or cut each other's throats, (the more popular amusement of the two,) I am not responsible.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 35

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Kirby explains his political and philosophical views to Doctor May and Mitchell as they tour the mill. Kirby's firm refusal of responsibility for his workers' behavior—and a sweeping list of social issues—shows that his loyalty lies not with the people who actually power the mill but with money. As the overseer and the son of the mill owner, Kirby is only concerned with profits and paying the workers promptly. Kirby's attitude toward industrialization and workers is one of the upper-class attitudes that the narrator (and Rebecca Harding Davis) seeks to critique. In addition, Kirby's refusal to help the workers' situation in any way points back to the substance abuse and other negative coping mechanisms that the workers turn to. Since the workers can't find help from those who have the power to do so, the workers try to numb their problems.

> Something of a vague idea possessed the Doctor's brain that much good was to be done here by a friendly word or two: a latent genius to be warmed into life by a waited-for sun-beam. Here it was: he had brought it…"Make yourself what you will. It is your right."

Related Themes:

Page Number: 37

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Doctor May has just met Hugh and found out that Hugh is the artist responsible for the korl woman statue. Through the lens of the narrator, we see the self-important way that Doctor May sees himself. The flowery language—"latent genius to be warmed into life by a waited-for sun-beam"—shows his conceit, as it implies that Doctor May is a sort of savior figure (the "waited-for sun-beam") who is responsible for other people's salvation (being "warmed into life"). Throughout the text, Doctor May fails to back up his encouraging words with positive actions. His downfall is foreshadowed in this passage with the way he considers "a friendly word or two" to be an act of great altruism. The flowery language also suggests that Doctor May overestimates the power of words, thinking them sufficient. In addition, his encouragement of Hugh shows a refusal of responsibility similar to that of Kirby. Doctor May tells Hugh, "Make yourself what you will," making it clear that Doctor May will be of no help and that finding relief is solely Hugh's responsibility.

> Then flashed before his vivid poetic sense the man who had left him,—the pure face, the delicate, sinewy limbs, in harmony with all he knew of beauty or truth. In his cloudy fancy he had pictured a Something like this. He had found it in this Mitchell, even when he idly scoffed at his pain.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 40

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Hugh is thinking about Mitchell after the visitors have left the mill. Hugh clearly deifies Mitchell, comparing him to "a Something," which seems to be Hugh's hazy conception of God. Thus, to Hugh, God is the embodiment of "beauty and truth," just like Mitchell. Interestingly, Hugh is willing to overlook Mitchell's glaring indifference and rudeness all because he looks like a refined, learned man. This description of Mitchell seems to echo—and invert—the description of the korl woman. Like the korl woman, Mitchell is described as a work of art, with special attention paid to the details of his face and limbs. Of course, while the korl woman is sturdy and rough, Mitchell is elegant, immaculate, and cultured. In this way, Hugh considers Mitchell a work of art, as well. Just as the korl woman encapsulates Hugh's pain and longing for more, Mitchell encapsulates exactly what kind of man Hugh longs to be.

> ...they sounded in his ears a very pleasant song in an unknown tongue. He meant to cure this world-cancer with a steady eye that had never glared with hunger, and a hand that neither poverty nor strychnine-whiskey had taught to shake. In this morbid, distorted heart of the Welsh puddler he had failed.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 49

Explanation and Analysis

Here, the narrator is describing Hugh's perception of the preacher and his sermon on the night that Hugh stumbles into a church after deciding to keep the stolen money. Hugh's artistic soul leads him to appreciate the sound of the sermon (it seems to him "a very pleasant song"). However, because these pretty words aren't backed by action or experience, the song sounds like it is in a foreign language, and thus its content fails to reach Hugh. This is one of the many instances where the novella critiques those whose words and actions aren't aligned. By listing all of the things the preacher hasn't experienced—starvation, deep poverty, alcoholism—Hugh paints a vivid picture of all the struggles that face immigrant workers. The mention of "strychnine-whiskey" is also interesting, because it shows just how far the workers are willing to go to numb their problems. Strychnine-whiskey is riddled with impurities and was often poisonous to drink.

> ...a wan, woful face, through which the spirit of the dead korl-cutter looks out, with its thwarted life, its mighty hunger, its unfinished work. Its pale, vague lips seem to tremble with a terrible question. "Is this the end?" they say,—"nothing beyond?—no more?"

Related Themes:

Page Number: 64

Explanation and Analysis

This passage comes from the very end of the novella, in the closing of the outer narrative when the narrator is looking at Hugh's korl statue in his or her library. Affirming art's power to preserve stories, the narrator believes that Hugh's soul is encapsulated in the statue. The narrator also emphasizes how art can express ideas that language can't or shouldn't—in this case, the way the statue's lips "seem to" ask a "terrible question." The questions, which center on whether there is more to an immigrant's life, echo the Alfred Lord Tennyson quote from the novella's opening. The return to the opening quote makes the novella come full circle, consequently pointing to the cyclical lives of the immigrant workers, trapped in the never-ending cycle of work and drink. In addition, since the narrator has already established that the town looks the same as it did thirty years prior (during Hugh and Deborah's time), the return to the opening quote shows how nothing has changed in the city. It is still as stagnant as before, and the perils of industrialization still exist.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

LIFE IN THE IRON MILLS

The novella is prefaced by a quote that asks if this is "the end" of a hopeless, pointless life, or if hope and change exist.

The quote is adapted from Alfred Lord Tennyson's "In Memoriam A.H.H." The quote points to the theme of coping and relief, which resonates throughout the novella.

As a frame narrative, the novella begins with the outer story. The unnamed narrator describes an unnamed industrialized city, which specializes in making iron. Smoke coats every inch of this industrialized city—even the narrator's pet canary is dirty with ash and hopelessly dreams of the countryside.

As a frame narrative, the novella begins with the outer story of the unnamed narrator whose gender is unspecified. The town, too, is unnamed but is based off of Rebecca Harding Davis' hometown of Wheeling, Virginia.

Looking out the window, the narrator points out how the **river** is also dirty and sluggish. When the narrator was young, he or she used to enjoy the look of the muddy, lethargic river. The people outside the window are also muddy and lethargic, subjected to a life of constant labor, substance abuse, and poor living and working conditions. Calling the reader an "amateur psychologist," the narrator asks the reader to reflect on the kind of existence iron workers lead.

The river illustrates industrialization's negative impact on nature, as the river looks dull and sickly within city limits. The river also symbolizes the industrial revolution's negative impact on humankind's mind, body, and spirit. Personified as a human worker, the river feels tired, overworked, and drained of its energy. The narrator also appears to be an expert on mill-workers without actually being one.

The narrator notes that the slimy, brown **river** knows that once it stretches beyond the city limits, it will find itself in the pure, beautiful countryside. For the iron workers (who are mostly Welsh immigrants), there is no such hope of nature, fresh air, or sunshine. After their deaths, the iron workers will be buried under thick layers of mud and ash.

Besides showing the negative impacts of industrialization, the river also introduces the key theme of the city versus the country, emphasizing that true health and healing only come from leaving the city limits for the countryside. The fact that the workers have no hope of finding such healing reveals how the city is a trap that is difficult to escape.

The narrator reveals that he or she has an important story to tell. The story may seem insignificant, as it is "only the outline of a dull life" in the midst of thousands of others like it. However, the narrator urges the reader to ignore his or her feelings of "disgust," put aside all notions of what a proper story should entail, and instead get sucked into the narrative. Hidden amidst the narrator's story is a secret question that has driven men mad—or even to death. The narrator can't straightforwardly ask this question, but if the reader looks deep into the story, he or she will find the question and maybe even an answer.

The narrator's insistence that the reader put aside his or her preconceptions of what makes proper literature points to the way that Rebecca Harding Davis was a pioneer of literary realism. Life in the Iron Mills *went against the cultural grain of what kinds of people and places were considered worthy of appearing in literature by focusing on an average industrial town and its workers. The reader, used to conventional literature, is likely privileged. The narrator's insistence that the reader be open minded reveals that the narrator is empathetic and nonjudgmental.*

The narrator explains that the story follows a furnace tender named Hugh Wolfe, and his cousin Deborah, a cotton picker. In fact, the narrator resides in the same house that Hugh and Deborah lived in thirty years prior along with Hugh's father and about six other families. Back then, the Wolfes just rented out two of the rooms in the cellar.

The detail that the narrator lives in the entire house—which used to be rented out to six families—is a clue that the narrator is privileged. This detail also emphasizes the Wolfes' poverty and the poor living conditions for workers in an industrialized town, forging a contrast between the quality of life of the rich and that of the poor.

According to the narrator, Welsh immigrants, like the Wolfes, are dirtier and frailer than other immigrants. Welsh immigrants have angular, bony bodies, and a tendency to "sulk along like beaten hounds" when they are drunk. In this city, Welsh immigrants—and all those in the working class—are subjected to constant labor, live and work in terrible conditions, and make frequent trips to prison for their drinking habits. The narrator asks if this is all there is to an immigrant's life.

The narrator paints the lives of Welsh immigrants in a dreary light that seems to mirror the dreary description of the city from the novella's opening. The detail about the workers' drinking habits introduces the theme of coping and relief: the workers are trapped in a cyclical pattern of suffering, covering up their suffering with substance abuse, and then suffering some more.

The story of the Wolfes begins on a late, rainy night, as a group of female cotton pickers walk home from their shift. Many of the women are barely clothed and have to grab onto objects around them to keep their balance. A few of the women urge Deborah, one of the other cotton pickers, to attend a party that is happening later that night. Deborah declines, and the other women wander off.

The women are tired and weak after a long and laborious shift at the cotton mill but still plan to spend the whole night partying—and likely overindulging in alcohol—rather than resting. This builds on the way the workers rely on temporary means of coping rather than seeking lasting relief from their suffering.

Deborah enters her home, which is a dark, damp cellar room coated with moss. Sleeping on a pile of straw in the corner is Hugh's father, who is small and pale. Deborah looks somewhat similar to him, although she is even more sickly and has a hunchback. Quietly passing the sleeping man, Deborah fixes herself a dinner of cold potatoes and ale. She is relieved that there is enough food tonight, as she often goes hungry. Unlike her companions, Deborah does not drink alcohol. The narrator interjects, suggesting that Deborah must have some other "stimulant" that keeps her going, like love or hope. Without that stimulant, she would indulge in alcohol.

The combination of Deborah's pond-like living quarters, meager dinner of cold potatoes, and ashen complexion gives a clear indication of what day-to-day life is like for the working class. This is the underbelly of the Industrial Revolution that the narrator (and Rebecca Harding Davis herself) seeks to expose and change. The narrator's comment about Deborah eventually turning to whiskey highlights that for a worker in an industrial town, substance abuse is inevitable because life is intolerable without something to numb the pain.

As she eats, Deborah hears a small noise behind her and sees that hidden in a pile of torn coats is Janey, a young Irish girl from the neighborhood. Janey says she's staying the night here because her father is in prison—"the stone house"—and Hugh told her to never be alone when that happens. Janey also mentions that Hugh is working the night shift at the mill. Upon hearing this, Deborah jumps up and frantically begins preparing a meal to take to Hugh. Although Janey urges Deborah to stay home and keep out of the storm, Deborah is insistent upon bringing Hugh his dinner and sets off through the dark, wet city.

Janey calls the prison "the stone house," as if it were a second home rather than a jail, implying that her father serves frequent stints in prison. There is also an abdication of responsibility implicit in the phrase "the stone house," as it seems to suggest a place of lodging rather than a place to atone for one's wrongdoings.

The narrator pauses the story momentarily to discuss the way industrialized cities work. Like "sentinels of an army," workers relieve one another's shifts, so someone is always on duty and work goes on constantly. On Sundays, the work pauses and "fires are partially veiled," but at midnight, the work picks up again at full force.

By comparing the workers and their schedules to "sentinels," or watchmen in an army, the narrator suggests that this industrialized city seems more like military camp or an army base—even a forced-labor camp—than a standard town where everyday people work and live.

The narrator returns to Deborah, hurrying through the city to the mill that sits a mile below the city. After every block, she pauses to rest. She's exhausted from standing for twelve hours during her shift, the mill is a long way away, and she is sickly, but she is committed to bringing Hugh his dinner—as she does almost every single night. She knows that he will barely thank her.

The narrator rehashes Deborah's poor mental and physical condition to emphasize her selflessness in bringing dinner to Hugh every single night without being asked. The meager thanks that Deborah knows she will receive from Hugh is the first characterization of him, suggesting he may be ungrateful, rude, aloof, or shy.

The mill looks "like a street in Hell," spilling with fire. Deborah thinks to herself that the mill looks like it belongs to the devil, and the narrator interjects in agreement, noting, "It did,—in more ways than one."

Deborah's simile paints the iron mill as an evil, otherworldly place rather than just Hugh's workplace, reaffirming the connection between the industrial city and forced-labor camps, like those that were at the time imprisoning Native Americans or enemy soldiers. The narrator's interjection suggests that the industrial city doesn't just look evil—it is evil, and the Industrial Revolution is at the core of that.

Deborah finds Hugh and waits for him to have a spare moment to eat his dinner. She is exhausted, cold, wet, and in severe pain, but she waits patiently for him. Hugh forgets that Deborah is waiting, and when he remembers, all he says is, "I did no' think; gi' me my supper, woman." He eventually tells her to rest in a pile of warm ash while he goes back to tending to the furnaces, and she does so. The narrator notes that this scene—with the hellish-looking mill, half-clothed workers, and Deborah lying in a pile of ash to find warmth—is one of "hopeless discomfort and veiled crime."

It seems impossible for Hugh to forget Deborah is waiting for him since she brings him dinner every night. His words and behavior make him seem standoffish and a little insensitive but not cruel. However, it's obvious that Hugh and Deborah's care for one another is not evenly matched. In addition, the narrator sharply—and clearly—criticizes industrialization by labeling the mills as places of "veiled crime," building on the earlier characterization of the mills as hellish, evil places disguised as places of work.

The narrator also points out that underpinning Deborah's selflessness is a deep, enduring love for Hugh and years of trying to please him. Although Hugh is kind to her, Deborah knows that it is just because he is a kind person (he's even kind to the cellar rats). Her unrequited love gives her face a look of "apathy and vacancy." The narrator notes that it's the same "dead, vacant" expression that is sometimes found on the faces of delicate ladies. Under that expression, and "hid beneath the delicate laces and brilliant smile," is a deep, crushing heartbreak.

It is now entirely clear the narrator is addressing a privileged audience. Instead of simply discussing Deborah's emotional state, the narrator forges a comparison between Deborah's heartbreak and that of upper-class ladies with their "delicate laces" and "brilliant smile." This comparison makes it clear that the narrator is trying to encourage an upper-class reader to relate to and empathize with Deborah.

Deborah knows that Hugh can't stand the sight of her deformed body. Unlike his peers, Hugh is moved by beauty and art, making Deborah seem all the more distasteful to him. Bitterly, Deborah thinks about the way Hugh obviously prefers Janey, the young, helpless girl with dark blue eyes. In the midst of Deborah's painful thoughts, the narrator interjects, asking the reader to realize that these feelings of heartbreak, pain, and jealousy are universal: "The note is the same, I fancy, be the octave high or low."

By asserting that "the note is the same…be the octave high or low," the narrator highlights the way some emotions, like heartbreak ("the note"), are part of the human experience regardless of one's social standing ("the octave"). Drawing upon the power of art to express ideas and elicit emotions from the viewer, the narrator uses music as a metaphor to convey the importance of empathy to the reader.

The other men who work at the mill refer to Hugh as "Molly Wolfe," because they think his delicate face, lack of muscle, and penchant for carving intricate statues out of korl (a byproduct of making iron) makes him effeminate.

A fuller picture of Hugh emerges. Up until this point, we've mostly seen Hugh through the lens of Deborah's desire. Here, readers see him as the workers do—weak, peculiar, and separate from the rest of them.

For Hugh, carving statues out of korl is "almost a passion." He works on each figure for months at a time, but when the figure is finally finished, he usually smashes it into pieces out of frustration.

Hugh's hobby of carving statues is referred to as "almost a passion," implying that there is no such thing as true passion in such a dismal place as the industrialized city. Instead, creating art is more of a coping mechanism for Hugh—the way Hugh destroys his statues upon their completion shows that this coping mechanism, just like alcohol, is temporary.

The narrator urges the reader to abstain from judging Hugh and to see Hugh fully by understanding how his entire life has been made up of long years of constant labor. These years are particularly agonizing because of the way Hugh longs for beauty. Although he sometimes finds little bits of beauty in his life—like a ray of sunlight or a friendly smile—such moments are maddening because they only emphasize how "vile" and "slimy" the rest of his existence is. The narrator points out how this intense conflict between Hugh's inner artist and dismal outer life as an iron-mill worker is important for understanding the "crisis of his life" that is about to unfold.

Hugh's dissatisfaction goes beyond his art to his whole life, which is an important characterization that will linger throughout the narrative. Art elicits strong emotions from High, like the way small moments of beauty drive him mad.

The story returns to Hugh, tending to the furnaces, while Deborah looks on from her pile of ash. The usually rowdy workers suddenly go quiet as a small group of men enter the mill. Hugh recognizes a couple of the men: Clarke Kirby (the overseer and the son of one of the mill owners) and Doctor May (a local physician). Among them is a newspaper reporter and another gentleman, both of whom Hugh doesn't know. Hugh is drawn to the group of men because of their obvious privilege and he wants to figure out what makes them different from himself.

Unlike the other workers, Hugh pays careful attention to the visitors because of their obvious privilege, showing Hugh's preoccupation with class and status. Hugh seems to think that finding out what makes him different from the men will help him find relief from his difficult life.

One of the strangers compares the mill to Dante's *Inferno*. Kirby laughs, while one of the other men suggests that many of the workers will probably end up in hell anyways. The men decide to sit and wait out the rain, as their conversation shifts to business, profits, and worker politics.

The direct reference to Dante's Inferno shows that the men are cognizant of how terrible the working conditions are in the mills, but they are ultimately flippant about it, using the comparison between Inferno and the mill as means for a laugh. Drawing upon Inferno is also a way for the visitors to safely voice their shock at the bad conditions while in the presence of Kirby, the son of one of the mill owners, who likely wouldn't take kindly to pointed criticism about his operation. The reference to a literary classic also emphasizes the men's privilege and education.

The gentleman that Hugh doesn't recognize is Kirby's brother-in-law, Mitchell, who is visiting a Slave State "to study the institutions of the South." He is a gymnast, an intellectual, and a "thoroughbred gentleman." Hugh is fascinated with Mitchell—even his voice sounds like beautiful, refined music.

The narrator mentions that Mitchell is in town "to study institutions of the South" in a Slave State, which is one of the only indications of the time in which the story is set. Appearing as a "thoroughbred gentleman," Mitchell has the air of a man well versed in art in philosophy—the type of man Hugh longs to be. Hugh's brief comparison between Mitchell and music shows how for Hugh, art expresses ideas that are too difficult to articulate using language—in this case, Hugh's deep and immediate admiration of Mitchell and his longing to be a learned, upper-class man.

The reporter leaves the mill, but Mitchell, Kirby, and Doctor May remain. Hugh begins to compare himself to Mitchell and grows increasingly upset by their apparent differences. While Mitchell is cultured and well bred, Hugh is grimy with a "filthy body" and "stained soul." Hugh knows that he can never be like Mitchell, as there is a "great gulf" separating them.

Hugh likens the class divide to a "great gulf," emphasizing his hopelessness for upward mobility. However, the phrase "great gulf" alludes to Luke 16:26, a biblical parable of a beggar named Lazarus and a rich man: "...between us and you there is a great gulf fixed." The "great gulf" is what separates heaven, where Lazarus finds peace, from hell, where the rich man suffers. This implies that contrary to Hugh's belief, Hugh's suffering will be eventually reversed, and Mitchell's cushy life will eventually fall away.

After an hour, Mitchell, Kirby and Doctor May prepare to leave. As they turn the corner to exit the mill, they are startled by a giant woman crouching in the middle of the pathway with both of her arms frantically stretched out, as if in a "gesture of warning." Upon closer examination, the men realize that the woman is a **statue**. One of the lower overseers at the mill tells the men that the statue is made of korl, a byproduct of iron, and was carved by one of the workers.

The statue, which is the main symbol in both the inner and outer stories, is the first glimpse of what Hugh's art actually looks like, teeming with pent-up energy and longing. Korl is flesh colored, which is why the statue initially appears alive to the visitors. The implicit warning in the statue's outstretched arms points to the way that the narrator (and Rebecca Harding Davis, herself) seeks to covertly warn the reader about the dangers of industrialization.

Mitchell is captivated by the **statue**'s "poignant longing" and "one idea" that seems hidden in the woman's limbs and expression. Doctor May is more preoccupied with the statue's accurate musculature. Flippant about the statue's artistry, Kirby says the workers "have ample facilities for studying anatomy," motioning to the half-clothed furnace tenders.

Each of the men's preoccupations with the statue is reflective of themselves, showing the way that they struggle to see beyond themselves and empathize with people like Hugh. Mitchell, an intellectual well-versed in art and philosophy, senses a deeper meaning hidden in the statue but ignores how that "poignant longing" also manifests in the workers. Doctor May, a physician, primarily notices the statue's detailed anatomy and fails to recognize any deeper purpose. Kirby, the son of the mill owner, does not care about the statue and instead makes a dehumanizing remark about the workers.

Doctor May is confused about the **statue**'s meaning. Mitchell tells him to ask the artist himself, pointing to Hugh (somehow knowing Hugh is the one responsible). Putting on the extra-kind smile that "kind-hearted men put on, when talking to these people," Doctor May calls Hugh over. Gently, Doctor May asks Hugh what the statue means. Staring at Mitchell, not Doctor May, Hugh answers that the woman is "hungry." Doctor May thinks this can't possibly be true—the woman is too strong and sturdy to be hungry.

Doctor May continues to be unable to see the statue through any other lens than that of a physician, pointing out that the statue's body is too muscular and bulky to be "hungry." In addition, Doctor May seems to treat Hugh more like a child than a man, speaking extra gently to him and smiling at him.

Hugh answers that the **statue** of the woman isn't hungry for food. Kirby sneers at Hugh's answer and asks what the statue is hungry for. Hugh is "bewildered" by the question and answers, "I dunno…It mebbe. Summat to make her live, I think,—like you. Whiskey ull do it, in a way." Kirby laughs rudely, and Mitchell exclaims that the statue obviously "asks questions of God, and says, 'I have a right to know.'" He affirms that the statue is, in fact, hungry.

Hugh's obvious struggle to use language to articulate the meaning that underpins his statue is reflective of his poor education but also shows the power of art. The novella asserts here—and throughout the course of the narrative—that art is special for the way it expresses the ideas that language can't.

Doctor May asks Kirby how many of the other workers are artists and what Kirby plans to do with their talents. Kirby replies in French that it is none of his business what the workers do, and it is not his job to cultivate his workers' artistic talents. Either God will grant them salvation, or they can work for it on their own.

By responding to Doctor May's question in French, Kirby flaunts his privilege and education and sets himself apart from his workers. The novella implies that this disregard for fellow humans is one of the problems of the Industrial Revolution.

Kirby rants about the concept of liberty, ultimately stating that he is not responsible for any social problems—all he is responsible for is paying his workers in a timely manner. Trying to get Kirby worked up further, Mitchell quotes scripture and compares Kirby to Pontius Pilate. Mitchell also quotes scripture for Doctor May, reminding him that in the Bible, Jesus says, "Inasmuch as ye did it unto one of the least of these, ye did it unto me." Doctor May calls Mitchell a "mocking devil" for his remarks.

In Matthew 27:24, Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, claims no responsibility for Jesus' death, despite allowing Jesus to be crucified. By comparing Kirby's abdication of responsibility to that of Pontius Pilate, Mitchell conflates Hugh with Jesus. To Doctor May, Mitchell references Matthew 25:40, which once again aligns Hugh ("one of the least of these") with Jesus. However, Mitchell seems to make these references and comparisons for the sake of agitating Doctor May and Kirby out of amusement.

Doctor May thinks that "much good" can come out of speaking to Hugh encouragingly. He tells Hugh that he has extraordinary potential both as an artist and a leader, stating, "Make yourself what you will. It is your right."

Doctor May overvalues the impact of his words to Hugh. Like Kirby, albeit more subtly, Doctor May shows no interest in intervening with the workers. By telling Hugh, "Make yourself what you will," Doctor May is essentially telling Hugh to save himself.

Hugh is moved by the encouragement and asks Doctor May to help him. Doctor May quickly shrinks back, claiming he doesn't have the finances to be of actual help. Mitchell interrupts with a snide remark, and Doctor May sharply responds that helping Hugh would be pointless, for "Why should one be raised, when myriads are left?"

The novella's critique of those who fail to back up their positive words with positive actions is seen most clearly here, since Doctor May's entire disposition seems to change for the worse once Hugh directly asks for help. Doctor May also dehumanizes Hugh and the workers by comparing them to infants or livestock that must be "raised," pointing to his true view of the workers.

Hugh latches onto the idea that money is what can save him. Cynically, Mitchell agrees, calling money the solution to all the world's problems. He sarcastically tells Doctor May to preach "Saint-Simonian doctrines" to the workers the following day so that they will revolt on their own.

Mitchell's snide remark to Doctor May is a reference to the founder of French socialism, Henri de Saint-Simon. This reference is complicated, because although Saint-Simon sought to improve lives of the poor, he was overwhelmingly pro-industrialization, wanting an industrialized state headed by leaders in science and technology who would even take the place of religious leaders.

As Mitchell, Kirby, and Doctor May wait for their coach, Mitchell asserts that the workers must produce their own leader and revolt without outside help. Doctor May scoffs at this idea, although it is a concept he privately accepts. The narrator notes that later that night, Doctor May prays for the workers to find the strength to revolt.

Even though Doctor May scoffs at the idea that the workers must revolt on their own, his refusal to help Hugh and his prayer later that evening show that he actually accepts this idea. Just like Mitchell and Kirby, Doctor May takes no responsibility for the social problems that unfold right before his eyes.

Mitchell, Kirby, and Doctor May prepare to leave. As a parting word, Doctor May reminds Hugh that "it was his right to rise." Mitchell tips his hat politely to Hugh, and Kirby throws a little money at Deborah.

Just as each man had a characteristic response to the statue, each man departs in a characteristic way. Doctor May, with his preoccupation with words, leaves Hugh with another encouraging phrase. Mitchell, a gentleman, tips his hat, while Kirby once again dehumanizes his workers, this time throwing money at Deborah as if he were throwing food to a dog.

After the men depart, Hugh is in agony. Somehow the conversation with Mitchell and Doctor May made him see his life in a new, terrible light, and all of his pain and experiences feel unbearably real. He particularly thinks of Mitchell, whom he considers "all-knowing, all-seeing, crowned by nature, reigning"—the kind of man Hugh wants to be.

Even though Mitchell was cold, sarcastic, and snide, Hugh is still obsessed with him, going so far as to conflate him with an omnipotent God. Hugh seems to think that being like Mitchell would be the ultimate relief from his problems.

Hugh usually longs to get out of the city and rest in the countryside, but tonight he feels too angry and agitated. Turning to Deborah, he dejectedly asks her if it is his fault that he leads such a lowly life. Deborah begins to sob, and the two slowly make their way home for the night.

Hugh's longing for the countryside foreshadows events later in the narrative. His willingness to entertain the thought that his dismal life is his fault is a clear contrast from Kirby, Mitchell, and Doctor May's refusal of responsibility for social ills.

When they return, Janey and Hugh's father are both asleep, though Hugh's father has clearly been drinking since Deborah left earlier that evening. When Hugh sees little Janey, he decides to finally let go of any hope he had of making a better life with her. The narrator interjects, noting that Hugh's soul "never was the same" after this moment.

The mention that Hugh's father has been drinking is a reminder that while Hugh's world seemed to stop with the visitors at the mill, all of the other workers are still partaking in their regular, inescapable cycle of drinking and working. It is also clear that Hugh has been entertaining the thought of marrying Janey, mirroring the "stimulant" of Deborah's love that keeps her going.

Deborah quietly asks Hugh if he heard what Mitchell said about money—that money "wud do all." Exhausted, Hugh ignores Deborah, but she persists, asking if he would take her and Janey with him if he had the money to escape the city. Sobbing hysterically, she thrusts a small wad of money into his hand, admitting that she is guilty of robbing Mitchell. Hugh simply replies, "Has it come to this?"

The novella doesn't necessarily praise Deborah for stealing the money, but the theft is portrayed as a mostly selfless act—Deborah stole Mitchell's pocketbook as a desperate attempt to give Hugh a better life, even if that life also contains Janey.

The narrator emphasizes that Hugh is an honest man and has no intentions of keeping the stolen money. The next day, Hugh finds the money hidden in his pocket. He tells Deborah firmly that he will return it to Mitchell, but Deborah tells him it is his "right to keep it," echoing what Doctor May said about it being his right to rise up.

The narrator's firm insistence on Hugh's upright moral character implies that the upper-class audience may identify more with Mitchell out of habit. The novella emphasizes the way Hugh's words and actions align, as he plans to return the money even though it could save him.

For the rest of the night, Hugh is torn about what to do with the money. He feels "mad with hunger," craving a better life brimming with beauty and kindness. He also thinks about how God feels real but distant, like "what fairy-land is to a child." He thinks that God created money for his children to use and that God loves all of his children equally. The divide between the wealthy and the poor is just manmade.

Just like the "hungry" statue, Hugh is "mad with hunger," yearning for a more satisfying existence. Hugh's conception of God also reveals that he is spiritually starved, a concept that will be revisited near the end of the novella.

With newfound hope, Hugh looks around and sees his surroundings in a more beautiful, artistic light, feeling "somehow" transported to "somewhere" that is filled with beauty and peace. He decides that he is free, and that he will keep the money.

Repeating the words "somehow" and "somewhere," Hugh struggles to find the words to describe art (in this case, his surroundings that he sees in a new, artistic light), as well as the strong emotions and sense of freedom that art incites in him.

Later that night, Hugh roams around the city, saying a mental goodbye to all of its sites. He stumbles into a Gothic church and feels moved by its architecture. The sermon is also beautiful but feels irrelevant. Hugh feels that the kindly old preacher, a Christian reformer, speaks empty words, since he has never experienced starvation, substance abuse, or poverty firsthand. To Hugh, the sermon is "a very pleasant song in an unknown tongue."

Once again, Hugh feels moved by art in ways he can't explain. The preacher's sermon sounds like art—"a very pleasant song"—but language gets in the way, making the "song" sound like it is in a foreign language. For Hugh, this is because the preacher's words aren't reinforced by action or experience.

The narrator interjects, revealing that Hugh was convicted of theft by morning. A month later, Doctor May reads in the newspaper that Hugh was sentenced to nineteen years in prison. Doctor May finds the punishment appropriate, claiming to his wife that Hugh was deeply ungrateful for all the kindness Doctor May showed him. The narrator reminds the reader that nineteen years is "half a lifetime."

The narrator's comment that nineteen years is half a lifetime—making thirty-eight years the duration of a full life—is a reminder of the low quality and brevity of life in nineteenth-century industrial America. Doctor May's approval of Hugh's nineteen-year punishment (and the fact that he is still full of himself for speaking kindly to Hugh) shows the very lack of empathy among the privileged that the narrator seeks to critique.

Haley, the jailer in charge of Hugh, gives a brief synopsis of Hugh's conviction, trial, and early days in prison. He says that at the trial, Hugh simply said that the money was "his by rights." Haley finds Hugh's nineteen-year sentence too harsh and knows it's meant as an example to keep the other workers in line. He also notes that the night after the trial, Mitchell visited Hugh in jail out of curiosity." Since then, Hugh has been quiet and growing increasingly sickly, though he still tries to escape whenever possible.

Haley's perception of Mitchell aligns with that of the narrator, highlighting that Mitchell is interested in Hugh only for the sake of "curiosity" and amusement. This seems to be a warning from the novella to its privileged audience to not find the story simply amusing, but rather to increase one's empathy and take action to alleviate the lives of the poor and undo the negative effects of industrialization.

Haley says Deborah was pegged as Hugh's accomplice and was sentenced to three years in prison. She has been begging incessantly to see Hugh, so Haley finally complies and brings her to Hugh's cell. Deborah immediately sees that Hugh has gone mad, which brings her to tears. She confesses her love for him, but he ignores her and scrapes a piece of tin across the metal bars.

The sixteen-year difference in Hugh and Deborah's sentences is reflective of nineteenth-century conceptions of gender. Since Deborah is a woman, she must have only been an accomplice and must only be capable of serving a small sentence. This moment in prison is the first time Deborah verbalizes her love for Hugh, aligning all of her past, loving actions toward him with loving words.

Deborah sees a "gray shadow" on Hugh's face and knows he is dying. She pleads with him not to die, but Hugh is distracted by the market outside of the window. The sounds of the market make him realize that his life is coming to a close and that he won't live to step outside again. He notices Neff Sanders, a worker at the mill, and tries to whistle for his attention. Neff doesn't hear him, and Hugh feels forgotten by the outside world.

Hugh's artistic sense turns the noisy market into a symphony of city sounds. Once again, music elicits deep emotion from Hugh and expresses ideas that can't otherwise be articulated. It is the song of the market—not his growing sickness, his nineteen-year jail sentence, or any pleading from Deborah—that makes him realize he will die soon.

Haley returns to bring Deborah back to her cell. Deborah says to Hugh that she knows he will never see her again, and Hugh agrees. Looking at Hugh intently, Deborah pleads with him, saying, "Hugh, boy, not THAT!" Hugh responds that "It is best," and tells her to say goodbye to Hugh's father and Janey for him.

Whether it is because of Hugh's strange behavior or Deborah's close connection to him, Deborah somehow instinctively realizes that Hugh plans to commit suicide (which she calls "THAT") to find relief from his bitter life and long prison sentence. Her vehement objections reveal that she thinks it is the wrong way to find relief.

Back in her own cell, Deborah crouches down by the crack in the wall to listen into Hugh's cell. All she hears is the sound of his piece of tin scraping across the bars. Meanwhile, Hugh is captivated by the people walking past his window. He sees Joe Hill, the friendly lamplighter, and is suddenly overcome by the desire to be spoken to one last time. Hugh calls out, but Joe doesn't hear him, which leaves Hugh feeling crushed. One of the jailers yells at Hugh to be quiet, and Hugh knows those are the last words he will hear.

Until now, Hugh has tried to cope with his life through art, theft, alcohol (occasionally), and love. With all of those coping mechanisms stripped from him, he tries to temporarily cope with his pain with a moment of human connection by calling out to Joe.

Using his now-sharpened piece of tin, Hugh calmly cuts his arms and commits suicide. In her cell, Deborah can sense what is happening and tries to convince herself that Hugh "knows best." Over the next hour, Hugh dies slowly and silently. His face seems to ask the question, "How long, O Lord? how long?"

Deborah's all-consuming love for Hugh makes her convince herself that he "knows best" in his decision to commit suicide, which seems a way of coping with her helplessness about the situation.

The following morning, a crowd gathers at Hugh's cell, including the coroner, a group of reporters, and Kirby. Later, a Quaker woman arrives and stays longer than the other visitors. She tenderly cares for Hugh's body as Deborah watches her closely. Eventually, Deborah begs the Quaker woman to bury Hugh in the countryside so that he doesn't have to be stuck in the city under layers of mud.

It is interesting that Kirby shows up, begging the question if Kirby showed up out of curiosity, duties as an overseer, guilt, or a miraculous, newly developed empathy. In addition, when Deborah pleads with the Quaker woman to bury Hugh in the countryside, it is important to note that Deborah is asking for help not for herself but for Hugh—showing that she is still selflessly committed to Hugh even after his death.

Putting her arm around Deborah, the Quaker woman points at the hills and stream in the distance and says she lives out in the countryside where the "light lies warm." She promises to bury Hugh there the following day. She also promises to return to fetch Deborah in three years, when she has completed her prison sentence. Then, Deborah will go with the Quaker woman to live in the countryside with the Quakers and experience a new beginning.

The Quaker woman's empathy and willingness to help Deborah in a significant way makes the Quaker woman a foil to Doctor May. Quakers typically emphasize harmony, altruism, simplicity, and nature, making the Quaker woman the perfect mouthpiece for the novella's critical views of industrialization and indifference to human suffering.

The narrator skips forward three years and says the Quaker woman was true to her word. The combination of nature and Christian love transforms Deborah into the most loving, calm, humble person in the entire Quaker community. Though her focus in life now is God's love, she still holds in her heart a deep, enduring love for Hugh.

The novella suggests that the Quaker woman is the exemplar of positive words backed by positive action—unlike Doctor May, the Quaker woman showed no ethical back-and-forth and no change of temperament upon being asked for help.

Transitioning to first person, the narrator says that the only sign that Hugh ever lived is the **statue** of the korl woman, which now sits behind a curtain in the narrator's library. Tonight, the curtain is slightly drawn, and the narrator studies the statue, which seems to ask questions like, "Is this the End?...nothing beyond?—no more?"

The outer story of the narrator picks up once more. The question that the statue seems to ask echoes the Alfred Lord Tennyson quote from the novella's opening, urging the reader to once again consider the worth and depth of an immigrant worker's life.

The narrator pauses from his or her writing and looks around at objects strewn around the library. Although it's the middle of the night, a "cool, gray light" shines through the room and rests on the **statue**. The narrator thinks the statue's outstretched arm seems to point to the "far East," where God will make the sun rise once again.

The "gray light" that falls upon the statue feels reminiscent of the "gray shadow" that fell upon Hugh's face as he was dying—a reminder of the way that art preserves Hugh's life, even after death. In addition, by ending the outer story with the notion that sunrises come from God, the narrator underscores the way spirituality brings new beginnings.

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