The Seam Between Romanticism and Realism

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Abstract

This essay examines "Life in the Iron Mills" to discern the differences and similarities between American Romanticism and Realism. Using popular conventions of both literary movements, this study shows that "Life in the Iron Mills" is a unique piece of writing that straddles the line between the two movements in its own distinct way. The contributing factors to this conclusion are related to labor, environment, history, and more. A confirmed piece of Romanticism and Realism are used for comparison to show that "Life" is a hybrid genre that serves the time in which it was written and the subject matter that it discusses.

Human beings thrive on classification. The desire to categorize similar things in order to draw distinctions between them fulfills an inner desire for permanence and continuity. The academic landscape of literature exemplifies this taxonomy. Anthologies of literature divide different works into nice, neat, literary movements, usually based on similarities of convention and subject matter. Not all works fit neatly into these esoteric subsets, and ever since Homer, academics have had problems agreeing on what label belongs with what piece of writing. "Life in the Iron Mills" by Rebecca Harding Davis is one such so-called "problem piece." Written at the dawn of the American Civil War, the story contains elements of both romanticism and realism. Ever since the advent of literary criticism, scholars have been arguing about how best to categorize the piece. Until recently, I was counted among the many who feel the need to slam the story into one box or another; vagaries and exceptions be damned. However, after researching the wealth of scholarly material available on the subject, I am compelled to land squarely in the middle of the argument. "Life in the Iron Mills" is a piece of romantic realism.

My evidence for this seemingly squishy claim comes in the form of comparison and contrast of two well-known, definable works of literature: Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Rappaccini's Daughter," a romantic piece, and Ambrose Bierce's "Chickamauga," an undeniable piece of American realism. The two works, along with other academic essays, will serve as a prism through which I view Davis' work and conclude that neither the romantic nor realist elements can be jettisoned without negatively impacting the sovereignty of the story. Davis uses a middle-class narrator, allegorical imagery, and the transcendence of humanity in her story suggesting that it is, in at least three senses, romantic. One the other hand, Davis uses the struggle of the working poor, Darwinian logic, and the embodiment of white, male, labor, implying that her story is, indeed, realist. The hybrid marriage of these disparate elements does not make "Life in the Iron Mills" a "problem piece"; rather it serves as the seam between the romantic and realist literary movements.

The forty years prior to Davis' 1861 publishing of "Life in the Iron Mills" saw cohesion of style in American literature. Romanticism dominated the presses, and no doubt Davis grew up reading the likes of Emerson, Poe, and Hawthorne. Hawthorne in particular drew the eye of Davis, and she was heavily influenced by his writings (Hesford 71). For my purposes, I will focus on Hawthorne's short story "Rappaccini's Daughter," which Davis undoubtedly read, to help show how and why "Life in the Iron Mills" is a piece of romanticism. The first connection I will make is between the narrators in both stories. In "Rappaccini's Daughter" Hawthorne creates a Frenchman narrator who specifically tells the reader that the writer (Hawthorne) "seems to occupy an unfortunate position between the Transcendentalists…and the…men who address…the multitude"

(430). The narrator also possesses an undeniable bourgeois perspective, which comes across in his flippant self-deprecation, “we would fain do the little in our power towards introducing him favorably to the American public” (431), and his overt contempt for some of his readers, “they can hardly fail to look excessively like nonsense” (430). This literary device serves perch the narrator in a relative position of affluence, also it appears in “Life in the Iron Mills.” Davis uses the personage of a middle-class woman who implores her readers to travel down into the depths of the working class. As Walter Hesford states, “Davis writes, as it were, on the border of her world—the middle-class world shared by the majority of her readers—and the unknown, mysterious world of the workers” (73). Davis implores her readers to “hide your disgust, take no heed to your clean clothes and come right down with me….There is a secret down here, in this nightmare of fog” (1707). That invitation can only be given by someone on the outside; that is, someone like Davis, who is decidedly not in the working class. This downward gaze into the secrets of the working poor reveals the narrator’s romantic intentions: she aims to reveal a mystery, to transcend the class barrier to reveal some hidden truth. One of the staples of Hawthornian romanticism is search for “‘the truth of the human heart’” (Hesford 72). Davis’ search for truth and her waffling on the border between transcendence and the multitudes shows the romantic nature of her story.

The next romantic convention that both Davis and Hawthorne share is allegoric imagery. Both “Rappaccini’s Daughter” and “Life in the Iron Mills” can be read as allegories warning the reader of the potential pitfalls of modern technology. In “Rappaccini’s Daughter,” Hawthorne obliquely warns American society about the dangers of miscegenation by demonstrating the peril of biological cross-breeding between species (read: races). Davis uses the iron mill (a microcosm for industrialization as a whole) as an allegory for hell; a multileveled pit of fire and despair that traps the mechanized man in the throes of the Sisyphean task of manual labor. Both these allegories use a modern practice or technology (in these cases cross-breeding and industry) to demonstrate the potential downsides of their implementation. Granted, the opaque nature of Hawthorne’s critique of his Paduaian garden contrasts the unmistakable commentary on industry presented in Davis’ mill, but Hesford states that Davis’ tale is “a forerunner of …early …American literary realism” (71) that “takes pains to initiate us into the knowledge of hitherto little acknowledged social realities” (71). Even though realism is generally not read as allegorical as romanticism, Samuel Coale states that “these writers [assumed realists] approached the psychological and allegorical territory that appeared in Hawthorne’s fiction” (30). The compassion I elucidated above supports Coale’s claim. The window dressings on the allegories may differ in their transparency, but they both undoubtedly let in light on a social reality that the authors feel compelled to reveal. Davis’ moral allegory is enough like Hawthorne’s for me to conclude that it provides another example of why “Life in the Iron Mills” is romantic.

The final example of a romantic convention that appears in both stories that I will discuss is the transcendence of humanity. The shadow of Emerson fell darkly upon Hawthorne, and at the core of that influence was the goal of personal transcendence. I should note that the successful consummation of transcendence is not necessary for it to be counted among the conventions of a story. That is important because both the example of “Rappaccini’s Daughter” and “Life in the Iron Mills” present attempts and failures at transcendence by the main characters. In “Rappaccini’s Daughter” Giovanni tries to transcend his ordinary existence and live in the garden with Beatrice, in spite of her poison touch and breath. In “Life in the Iron Mills” Hugh attempts to transcend his yoke by creating a masterful work of art in the form of a statue made of industrial waste. Both men’s mediums of transcendence, the poison garden and the industrial waste, symbolize the doomed nature of their attempts. For Giovanni, Beatrice is killed, and for Hugh, his own life is the cost. These men’s attempts at transcendence represent the different aims of the authors. For Hawthorne,

the aim was to show the limits of man's abilities to split between the inner reality and outer reality. No matter how hard Giovanni tried to convince himself that Beatrice was as she appeared, she still proved to be the "monstrous offspring of man's depraved fancy" (Hawthorne 440). In Davis' piece, no matter how hard Hugh tried to forget his work and escape, or transcend, into the world of sculpture, he still ended up a victim of the industrialized circumstances in which he lived. Both men had the potential for transcending the realities, but both were unable to do so. Hesford describes that "'real existence' as Davis witnessed it and a sense of 'the potential' hidden within the life of the iron-mill worker" (82) is, unfortunately for Hugh and Giovanni, "a potential to be *in time* revealed" (82: emphasis mine). This failed transcendentalist trope is common to both Hawthorne and Davis, which is my final piece of evidence, along with a middle-class narrator and moral allegory, that "Life in the Iron Mills" is a piece of romantic fiction.

That could be it. I could plug a conclusion in here and call my analysis of "Life in the Iron Mills" complete. But the research I conducted in order to write this essay prevents me from being so reductive. As much as Davis could be called a romantic writer, she could also, just as convincingly, be called a realist. It must be said that nearly all the scholarship I've used so far gives the caveat that "Life in the Iron Mills" is *usually* considered a realist work. Scholars like Hesford and Coale feel the need to nod their head to volumes of criticism that exists trumpeting the story as a work of realism. For my purposes, I will discover the realism in the story the same way I discovered the romance in it: I will compare "Life in the Iron Mills" to a confirmed piece of realism. "Chickamauga" is a brutal war story written by Ambrose Bierce. This work is undoubtedly realist in its classification. For instance, "Chickamauga" has no middle-class narrator, no overt allegories, and no transcendence (I would be remiss to not mention the scholarship claiming "Chickamauga" *is* an allegory for loss of innocence [for both the child and America as a nation], but I am choosing to ignore this angle because most scholars agree that that meaning, if at all intentional, was secondary to the description of war). What the story does contain are three specific conventions of realism: common people as characters, Darwinian concepts, and a, white, male labor. These aspects are shared by "Life in the Iron Mills."

The first realistic element I will focus on is the fact that both stories share very humble protagonists. In "Chickamauga," the protagonist is a young boy who is a "deaf mute" (Bierce 410). For "Life in the Iron Mills" it is Hugh, a lowly worker in the local mill. Both these characters are quintessentially humble in their physical capabilities and their meager status. Both characters also possess an early representation of the grotesque; that raw, unfiltered *reality* that engenders revulsion and pity with the audience that was later championed by post-Civil War writers in the American south. In Bierce's haunt, the boy's perspective is provided from beginning to end, with all his incumbent ignorance and naiveté revealed to the reader as his, for himself, is shattered. The soldiers in the story also appear as a horde of human beings – nameless, faceless representations of the masses. The story exemplifies this commonality when it describes the boy seeing the men approach: "they came by dozens and by hundreds; as far on either hand as one could see" (Bierce 407). This debasing of individuality is inherently anti-romantic, which is why it's considered a hallmark of realist writing. The same dehumanization is seen in "Life in the Iron Mills." Hugh, the protagonist, is described as "thin" and "weak" (1712); a man amongst many in the mass of labors. The narrator says "I look now on the slow stream of human life creeping by…. masses of men, with dull, besotted faces" (1707). The narrator even warns the reader of the confusion of the multitudes: "a reality of soul-starvation, of living death…. I can paint nothing of this, only give you the… life of one man" (1712). This loss of humanity shared by both stories supports my claim that "Life in the Iron Mills" is, indeed, realist in its depiction of human life through the narrators.

The second aspect of realism that both stories share is the application of Darwinian concepts into the story. Charles Darwin, author of *On the Origin of Species,* heavily influenced academic thought after its publication in 1859. No longer did divine creationism monopolize human thought, and authors like Bierce and Davis took notice. "Chickamauga" drips with Darwinian ideology in its descriptions, and, according to James Baltrum, "Bierce's connection of animal traits to those of humans…illustrates the scientific influences and cultural impact of Darwinian thought" (227). War has always been considered a time when man loses some humanity, but Baltrum takes this thought to a deeper level in connection with Darwinian ideals. The framing of the boy as a product of his heritage, and the framing of the story as a description of conflict and struggle for survival all connect to ideas presented by Darwin in his book (228). Specifically, Bierce uses "animalistic imagery" (Baltrum 228) when describing the characters in "Chickamauga." Bierce uses words like "dog," "pig," and "bear" (407) to show how the boy first perceives the men in the story. Once they are recognized as men, Bierce stays with the animalistic imagery. He removes their human qualities and degrades them to the instinctual movements of a "swarm of black beetles" (408). Baltrum explains how this is connected to science by saying that "Darwinism's link between humanity and the animal kingdom suggest[s] that men and women realize their beast, their most animalistic selves when making war with each other" (229). Baltrum also connects the idea of social Darwinism to "Chickamauga" as well." When the little boy recalls playing with his father's slaves, the story describes "negroes [that] creep upon their hands and knees for his amusement—had ridden them so, 'making believe' they were his horse" (408). This degradation of the negro as less than human exemplifies the social Darwinist action of "dehumanizing another race by not only the language used to refer to (i.e.; 'horses') but also through the treatment of them (i.e., riding upon their backs)" (Baltrum 230). Both scientific and social Darwinism play a large role in Bierce's realist story, and both can be found in Davis' "Life in the Iron Mills."

For Davis, the influence of Darwinist thought is a little more opaque, but it appears and is prominent nonetheless. When describing the men on the way to the mills, Davis uses words like "creeping," "skin and muscle" (1707), "skulking," (1710), and "half-clad men" (1711)—all of which conjure images of beast-like men, barely passable as human. These descriptions, combined with the fiery atmosphere in which they toil, bring about images consistent with war. This war may not be between men per se, but rather between men and the new, evolved, mechanical beasts of industrial burden. More transparently, Davis describes Hugh as a "dumb, hopeless animal" (1715) and even his surname, Wolfe, could be seen as a hint of his less-than-human qualities. The more stark and direct comparison to "Chickamauga" is Davis' implementation of social Darwinist ideals of natural selection. A group of rich men tour the mill and observe the lesser men at their work. The incredulity of the rich men, and their obvious superior attitude, exemplify this animalistic food chain. Caroline Miles notes that when Mitchell looks upon Hugh "he becomes 'a mirror' that reflects the connection [socially] between Wolfe's 'puny' body" and his own "social refinement" (92). This social pecking order shows that Mitchell and the other rich men are in a "higher and better class" (92). These reflections of social and scientific Darwinism directly correlate to the same aspects of Bierce's story, buttressing my argument that "Life in the Iron Mills" is a work of realism.

The last connection I will describe between the two stories to demonstrate Davis' realist credentials is the embodiment of white male labor. In "Chickamauga" this specific subject matter is a bit obscure, but some historical context reveals intersections between the story of war and the story of labor. Almost all battalions in both the Confederate and Union armies were exclusively white. There were a few black regiments, but they were not very common. With this in mind, the mass of soldiers in "Chickamauga" can be seen as a large pool of white labor. The whiteness of the labor is the realist convention that I am concerned with. Prior to realism, labor in American

romantic fiction focused on the unskilled, usually black, slave variety or the sexualized white male variety. "Chickamauga" provides a platform for a new visibility of white male labor, something that was anathema to the romantic ideal of the gentry. Bierce's description of the soldiers I described above exemplifies what Miles calls the "transfigu[ration] [of] white men into corporeal machines" (91). The representations of white men in "Chickamauga" are "antithetical to the eroticized, quixotic site of labor disseminated in the first half of the nineteenth century by writers and artists of the picturesque" (Miles 89). This convention is explicitly realistic, and "Life in the Iron Mills" was on the vanguard of this new portrayal of white male labor.

The entirety of Davis' story is concerned with the representation of white male labor. The protagonist, the setting, the comparisons, and the eventual denouement occur within the paradigm of white male labor. Miles states:

> Davis's text provides one of the first unsettling literary depictions of the non-African-American male worker, an unnerving delineation that attempts to combat the picturesque displacement of the working classes and register the historical conditions of a laboring, largely immigrant, class (90).

This aim of the text is explicitly realist and decidedly not romantic. The prior works of romance always made the laboring white male body (if it was described at all) erotic and idealized in order to reinforce the picturesque goals of the Romantic Movement. Davis' story does all that it can to dispel this unrealistic view. According to Miles, "Davis's text…both reflects a middle-class dominant rhetoric of masculinity that excludes the worker and at the same time resists this rhetoric by making the worker visible" (92). Even though Davis uses a middle-class narrator, and could be considered removed from the subject matter of her story, she can still "provide significant commentary about the place of, or the lack of a place for, the worker in the national/middle-class imagination" (91). That commentary comes down squarely on the dark side of industrialized labor and many of the words she uses to describe the labor of Wolfe and others is couched in animalistic terms that dehumanize the men. Hugh, for his part, cannot escape the mechanization of his body and his "physical labor and exploitation not only prevent Wolfe from self-narrating such a body but also tie his identity inextricably to the visible flesh and muscle of the biological one' (93). Davis is leading a shift in the rhetoric of white men from one of romantic idealism to realistic portrayal. Not only does this shift corroborate my claim that "Life in the Iron Mills" is a piece of realism, it further implies that Davis' story is one of the first stories ever to have this realistic device of the laboring white male.

I have given three reasons why "Life in the Iron Mills" is a piece of romanticism and three reasons why it is a piece of realism. The middle-class narrator, transcendence, and allegories suggest the story is romantic while the depiction of white male labor, Darwinistic imagery, and the lower-class protagonist point to the piece being realism. For my binary worshiping readers, this conclusion may be unsatisfying or unconvincing—it was for me at first as well. But what I have discovered is that the story itself is not the problem, the problem lies with our need to stuff a piece of literature into our pre-made boxes and label them as immovable and stagnant. We are undermining our potential understanding if we do. For all those scholars for whom "Life in the Iron Mills" is a work of romanticism, it is necessary for all the realistic conventions to be understated. The same is true for the proponents of Davis being a realist. "Life in the Iron Mills" is not a work of romanticism or realism, rather it "rides a unicycle down the middle, touching feet down on both sides" (Ali, "Shadows of the Sun"). "Life in the Iron Mills" doesn't land on one side of a border between realism and romanticism; it threads a seam that interconnects these two movements of American literature.

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