

The Rusted Heart: An Ecopsychological Perspective on the Double Alienation of Environment and Mind in "A Life in the Iron Mills"

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Abstract: Rebecca Harding Davis is known for her direct depiction of the dramatically changing realities of industrialised American society, particularly in *Life in the Iron Mills*. This work was written in the first half of the 19th century at the height of the wave of immigration, urbanisation and industrialisation in America. The changes Wheeling experienced in a short period of time directly altered the lives of the people at the bottom of the social ladder during that era, causing dramatic upheaval in the social hierarchy and bringing about corresponding changes in the environment. From an ecopsychological perspective, the interaction between the environment and humans is a complex and dynamic process that reveals the inextricable link between human behaviour and the external world. Changes in the environment trigger a series of chain reactions at the social and individual levels. The purpose of this paper is to analyse from an ecopsychological point of view the environmental pollution, the difficult situation of the workers at the bottom brought about by social division, and the physical and mental alienation of the workers under this series of drastic changes, all of which indicate the negative impacts of the wave of industrialisation in the United States brought about by the people at the bottom. Thus, it reveals the physical and mental oppression of a natural person who is swept away by the wave of society and is unable to control himself, and explains its corresponding practical significance.

Keywords: Rebecca Harding Davis, *A Life in the Iron Mills*, ecopsychological

1. Introduction

Rebecca Harding Davis (1831-1910) was an American writer known for her realistic novels and short stories. Her work holds an important place in mid-nineteenth-century American literature, and she was known for her keen social insight and her critique of the unequal status quo of industrial society. Davis's literary insight can be traced back to her upbringing. Born in Massenburg, Pennsylvania, she grew up in a literary family; her father was a journalist, and her mother a schoolteacher. This strong literary foundation paved the way for her later writing career. She was home-schooled in her early years and later studied briefly at Washington College (now Washington and Jefferson College) but did not earn a degree.

Davis lived at a pivotal time in American history, witnessing the American Civil War (1861-1865) and the Reconstruction period that followed. She lived for a time in Wheeling, one of the townships

most affected by industrialization, where she witnessed the dramatic transformation of a rural idyll into an industrial town. This history had a profound effect on her personally, so her work often explores themes such as the social changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution, labour issues, gender roles, and race relations. She depicted the darker aspects of society during the period of industrialization with direct, sharp strokes, challenging and rebelling against the Romantic literature that was popular at the time. Davis's own deep concern and criticism of social issues, as well as the contradictions and injustices of 19th-century American society that she revealed in her works, paved the way for the later realist literary movement. Although her works were not fully recognized during her lifetime, her literary status has gradually increased over time. She is now regarded as an important figure in the history of American literature, and her work, "A Life in the Iron Mills", is of great significance to the understanding of the changes in American society in the 19th century.

The oppression of the environment and the underclass by industrial society in Davis's work has been one of the most popular views in the academic world. This paper integrates relevant ideas and re-examines the macro and micro spheres of what the impact of rapid industrialization has been on the author and her characters, especially from an ecopsychological point of view. It systematically collates the alienation of the underclass, the drastic social stratification, and the pollution of the environment in both the objective and subjective worlds. The introduction of the concept of ecopsychology and the elaboration of how this branch of psychology focuses on the interactions between individuals and their environment can reveal the deeper motivations behind the characters' behaviour and the influence of the social environment, thus enriching the understanding of the text.

For Davis, an "accurate history" of the present can only be recorded if there is an accurate understanding of history and how and to what extent the ideologies of the past influence the present. From an ecopsychological perspective, the real environment directly influences perception or behaviour by treating the perceived 'object' as one with the environment. The first half of the 19th century was the peak period of immigration, urbanization, and industrialization in the United States. All the drastic changes experienced by Wheeling in a short period also directly changed the people at the bottom of that era, resulting in a drastic upheaval of the social class and the disparity between the rich and the poor, which also directly affects the characters in "A Life in the Iron Mills."

2. Theoretical framework

Ecopsychology has undergone continuous development and evolution since it was pioneered by Levin, Barker, Gibson, Nesser, Brunswick, and others from the 1940s to the 1970s. Initially created as a critique and transformation of mainstream psychology, ecopsychology aims to rectify the artificial limitations of traditional experimental methods. It advocates for the ecological orientation of psychological research, emphasizing natural observation and field research. Ecopsychology argues that psychological phenomena can only be fully understood within their natural context. It asserts that the focus of psychological research should shift from laboratory behavior to real-life behavior and from individual organisms to the interactions between organisms and their environment. The term "environment" in ecopsychology refers to the actual surroundings functionally connected with the organism. This perspective considers the perceived "object" as an integral part of the environment [1].

This influence is particularly noticeable during times of significant social upheaval. Rebecca Harding Davis's novel "A Life in the Iron Mills" is set against the backdrop of industrialization sweeping across the United States, causing profound social changes. The story unfolds in Wheeling, a city in northern West Virginia, rapidly transformed from a rural idyll into an industrial center. Davis, a resident of Wheeling during that period, witnessed this dramatic change firsthand. Despite integrating elements of romanticism, sentimentalism, and realism in her works, realism remains the central tenet [2]. Davis faithfully portrays both the large-scale societal transformations and the

personal struggles in her novels. Readers witness the degradation of the natural environment in Huiling during the peak of industrialization—polluted river water, pervasive smoke, dust-covered skin, and perpetually sooty surroundings paint a bleak picture. The entire city is shrouded in a layer of soot, leaving an impression of relentless grayness. The novel also vividly portrays the widening gap between the wealthy and the poor due to overproduction. While some profit immensely from these changes, others become marginalized and oppressed. The harsh social realities lead to profound human alienation. Countless workers at the bottom of the social ladder suffer from poverty in both body and spirit. Their overwork causes physical deterioration, leaving them weak and malnourished, struggling to survive amidst the smog. This grim reality leaves them emotionally barren. These are the social conditions faced by the characters in "A Life in the Iron Mills", portrayed day and night.

3. Beneath the ashes: industrial ruins and ecological devastation

The first half of the 19th century marked the peak of the intertwining of immigration, urbanization, and industrialization in the United States. In industrial towns, massive machinery operated ceaselessly, their roar a constant presence. Alongside these mechanical behemoths, the working class found themselves swept up in the tide of industrialization. This surge of activity, characterized by its high energy consumption, naturally led to environmental degradation. Historical records from 1886-1887 indicate that the cities of Wheeling, West Virginia; Allegheny, Pennsylvania; and Des Moines, Iowa, pioneered the construction of the first municipal waste incineration plants to address this issue. Around the same time, waste treatment techniques were introduced from Europe [3]. Excessive waste incineration often darkened the city skies, with ashes from burnt waste falling on the urban landscape, coating everything in sight with a thick layer of soot. This environmental pollution is well documented in the book.

The novel opens with a direct question from the narrator to the addressee: 'Cloudy: do you know what it is like to be in an industrial town on a cloudy day?' In the first four paragraphs, the narrator 'I' addresses the reader 14 times, aiming to transport readers into the industrialized scene of the novel. The omniscient narrator directly faces the readers [4], urging them to endure the discomfort, disregard clean clothes, and immerse themselves in the fog and mud. Describing the town as 'characterized by smoke,' the author vividly portrays thick black smoke rolling down from towering ironwork chimneys, smudging muddy streets and puddles. Smoke from wharves and dirty boats, along with the greasy soot from the yellow river, adheres to faded poplars and the faces of passers-by. The author's descriptive language revolves around 'filth and soot,' offering readers a glimpse into the polluted environment of Wheeling. Alongside the soot, the thunderous roar of machines echoes incessantly. Massive machinery systems run day and night, groaning and screaming, with hot metal pools boiling and raging nearby. Local workers seem numbed to this environment, their nights punctuated only by the city's difficult-to-ignore roar.

The author presents a horrific scene, often describing pollution in grotesque terms, such as 'writhing sinuously' liquid metal and factory workers appearing as 'vengeful ghosts' amidst forge fires, which she labels 'the ghosts of revenge.' Referring to it as 'the devil's place,' she portrays mid-nineteenth-century industrial America. Although industrial pollution was gaining attention, discussions about its moral and environmental impact often linked it to poverty and moral decay [5]. Rebecca Harding Davis challenges this perspective in her book 'Life in the Iron Mills,' faithfully depicting not just surface-level environmental pollution but also the sharp social hierarchies and the physical and mental suffering of workers resulting from pollution.

4. Steel Walls: Class Divide and Survival Dilemma

In the early years of industrialization, the United States experienced rapid economic growth. Firstly, in the late 19th century and the early 20th century, US agriculture underwent a technological revolution. Science and technology were popularized, leading to dramatic increases in agricultural productivity. This surplus food production absorbed rural surplus labor into non-agricultural industries. In just forty years (1860-1900), the population engaged in manufacturing and construction industries increased fourfold. This rural-to-urban migration directly contributed to the rise in urbanization levels in the United States.

Secondly, the rapid development of productive forces brought about by the Industrial Revolution, along with products from modern industries, laid a strong material foundation for large-scale urbanization [6]. All of the above factors contributed to continued economic prosperity in the United States. During the "Gilded Age," capitalists and consortiums accumulated vast wealth while the working class faced lower incomes and poorer living conditions. The fissures caused by these class divides were masked by the jubilation of capital. This stark gap is poignantly depicted in the novel, culminating tragically in the death of the protagonist, Hugh.

Hugh, the protagonist of "A Life in the Iron Mills," is depicted as underdeveloped, yellow, and emaciated, weakened by consumption. Wolfe's personalized portrayal reveals the harsh reality of immigrant workers deprived of food, exposing the widening gap between rich and poor and the ensuing class conflict [7]. In this novel, the characters' appearances and physical conditions (e.g., soot and coal dust) symbolize their social status [8]. For instance, the clothes of the elite are always neat, clean, and wrinkle-free, while Hugh, a member of the working class, wears worn-out and dirty clothes year-round. The surface of his skin is stained with dust that can never be washed away. Not only is there a gap in physical appearance, but also mentally, the working class feels inferior due to the existence of the wealth gap between the rich and the poor. Late at night in the factory, Hugh and the other workers tirelessly repeat heavy tasks. Visitors often arrive at this time to inspect the mill—a symbol of elite collective power—comprising factory managers, doctors, journalists, etc. Among them, Mitchell, a member of this elite, looks at the disheveled workers with "amused" eyes. Their visiting attitude unconsciously conveys a vague sense of condescension.

From Hugh's perspective, Mitchell embodies an "elusive atmosphere of a thoroughbred gentleman," representing the vestiges of civilization absent in lower-class workers like Hugh, who toil endlessly with limited horizons. Hugh, possessing a naturally more sensitive mind, keenly perceives each nuanced indication of civility in Mitchell. Reflecting on himself, he sees a mirror image of his own soiled body and a soul even more tainted. He frequently discerns the concealed divide between the civilized elite and the uncultured working class, leading to a gradual self-deprecation and an active descent into the degradation of his spirit. He repeatedly torments himself with this enduring dilemma, ultimately realizing that individuals of his socioeconomic class have no viable path to upward mobility. In utter despair, he comes to terms with his predicament—a realization that contributes to his voluntary surrender to death, essentially murdered by the oppressive environment. The systemic injustices inflicted upon the laborers at the lowest rungs of society, stemming from deep-seated societal fractures, play the role of silent conspirators. This tragic outcome precisely embodies the principles of ecological psychology, where "the real environment directly affects perception or behavior."

In conclusion, the relationship between urbanization and industrialization is causal, and one of the most important consequences of the Industrial Revolution was class division—the emergence of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat—and the fierce struggle between them. The bourgeoisie has always aimed to maximize surplus profits, so in early factories, little concern was shown for poor conditions, worker health, and issues like long working hours, low wages, and the plight of child and female

laborers, forcing the emergence of labor organizations [9]. Rebecca Harding Davis did, and her concern for the lower classes was almost rebellious and groundbreaking in the American literary scene at the time. This nuanced concern naturally led her to observe one of the consequences of class division: the alienation of human beings.

5. Mechanization: Labour's Loss of Identity and Spiritual Deserts

Under the high-pressure social environment, the working class, represented by Hugh, has been subconsciously alienated from body to heart, and they are undoubtedly also the victims of industrialization and private ownership and the "waste residue" of industrialization [10]. The mass production and standardized work processes brought about by industrialization have made workers' work on the production line monotonous and repetitive. It is a labour process that is seriously disconnected from individual creativity and autonomy, where the mind and limbs are alienated into machines without self-thinking, and underneath a rigid and solidified body is often a soul like stagnant water. In the novel, Hugh, who is only 19 years old, loses the pleasure of working in day-to-day compulsory labour, which also restricts him from giving free play to his artistic potential. So his only pleasure is to use his rest time to carve on the scrap iron slag of the factory, thus releasing the deepest yearning of his soul for beauty. The high intensity of his labour destroys his body and makes him sick. He is "a sickly, gloomy man, uneducated and unenlightened, who could only comfort his soul in the vulgarity, the harshness, and the intolerable toil".

In the novel, he carves a statue modeled on a female labourer, a statue whose "muscular, naked body, rough, powerful limbs, clenched hands and outstretched arms, and the crazed, hungry, wolf-like face of a mad, hungry man, left not a trace of beauty or elegance in the statue of the female form". The look of longing on her face seems to be asking God, "I have a right to know". It is hard to say that this statue, this interrogation created by Hugh, does not carry his own thoughts; he seems to use the statue as a vehicle to ask why he has never been able to get out of the predicament at hand. In fact, day after day, he also contemplates in his mind the reality of his class, searching for the ultimate answer to this riddle, longing for one day to be redeemed and to know the truth—why he could never have had the right to cross the class divide. His impoverished daily existence, marked by uncivilized crudeness, corrodes his mind just as the ashes erode his skin. The disparity between this harsh reality and his deepest dreams—of a pristine visage and lithe, robust limbs—is stark. In truth, his life consists of innumerable decaying days and endless nights plagued by hunger, where his spirit wanes, and his gaze grows rapidly dim. His countenance, devoid of vitality, becomes ashen and skeletal, resembling that of a "living corpse." Deborah, the woman who adores Hugh, symbolizes the suffering of the female class in the age of industrialization; she and Hugh are homologous in nature, both being devoured by class society so that little is left from body to heart. Deborah's body is deformed by long hours of labour, overworked to the point where she is hunched over at a young age, resting on the ashes like "a soft, ragged rag". Her brain could not be alive; only numbness and emptiness gnawed at her face forever. The metaphorical relationship between Hugh and the statue, as well as the symbolic link between Deborah and the rags, both illustrate their estrangement from humanity. This sense of alienation is characteristic of the industrial era, marked by the exploitation of the lower classes by the upper echelons of society. It is a time when the elite accumulates wealth and intellectual capital at the expense of the physical and psychological impoverishment of the working class. The ending of the novel, Hugh's death, also echoes the end of this mutation to a certain extent. Hugh, who is overwhelmed by both physical and mental torture, even feels relieved on the eve of his death and calmly looks back at the world in which he has lived for nineteen years.

On one level, Rebecca Harding Davis's novel can be linked to the liberation theology of the twentieth century. Both deal with social change and concern for the oppressed. Liberation theology advocates political liberation and social justice by combining Christian and Marxist theories, while

"A Life in the Iron Mills" reflects the impact of social transformation on individuals and groups through literature that portrays the living conditions and psychological changes of ordinary people during industrialization. It foreshadows the idea of liberation theology against class, racial, and gender oppression. The suffering and injustice in the novel are seen as revelations that ask the reader to reflect morally and politically on society [11]. The author's unapologetic attitude towards the reality of oppression also demonstrates her bias towards realist literature.

The Wheeling in the text is covered by ubiquitous smoke and dust; the roar of huge machines resonates day and night in the middle of the city. The polarization of the rich and poor brought about by overproduction has caused the alienation of both the body and mind of the workers at the bottom of the hierarchy. Their bodies increasingly turn into machines, and their minds slowly into deserts. Unable to cope with the oppression of their class and aware of the downward spiral of their souls, they are ultimately powerless in this sweeping social upheaval across the country, unable to find a real way out, desperate to survive.

However, as the end of the novel depicts Deborah's quiet life in the green fields of the countryside, it also seems to express a ray of hope for overcoming the various shortcomings of industrial civilization. This work also reflects the Romantic attitude towards social reforms in mid-nineteenth-century America, emphasizing spiritual transformation and redemption rather than merely economic reforms. This notion is also reflected in the literature of slave emancipation and workers' rights [11].

To sum up, all the "environments" depicted in the novel, whether it is the damage of environmental pollution to the health of the workers on the external surface or the alienation of the social environment to the human mind on the internal surface, visually describe how the environment directly affects the individual. From the perspective of ecopsychology, the interaction between the environment and human beings is a complex and dynamic process that reveals the inseparable link between human behavior and the external world. The environment profoundly shapes an individual's psychological state and behavioral patterns through its physical characteristics, socio-cultural context, and the overall condition of the ecosystem. This influence is not only reflected in people's perception, emotional response, and value judgments of the environment but also in their lifestyle choices, health status, and sense of well-being. Changes in the environment, whether natural or not, can trigger corresponding adjustments in people's psychology and behaviors, thus creating a chain reaction at the individual and social levels. This is what the novel "A Life in the Iron Mills" reveals.

6. Conclusion

Through an in-depth analysis of Rebecca Harding Davis's work "A Life in the Iron Mills", this paper reveals the phenomenon of the dual alienation of the environment and the mind in the process of industrialization in nineteenth-century America. From the perspective of ecopsychology, it explores environmental pollution, social stratification, and the alienation of the working class, showing the far-reaching impact of the wave of industrialization on society and individuals. Environmental pollution has not only changed the natural landscape but also caused direct harm to the physical health of workers, while the sharp polarisation of social classes has exacerbated the gap between the rich and the poor, leading to the existential dilemma and loss of identity of the working class. Against this background, the spiritual world of the working class is gradually desertified. Their minds lose their vitality through endless labour and oppression, alienating them into a part of the social machine.

"A Life in the Iron Mills" is not only a sharp critique of the social reality of the industrialized era but also a profound reflection on the alienation of human nature. Through delicate strokes, Davis depicts the suffering of the working class and, at the same time, hints at the hope of overcoming the ills of industrial civilization. Her work foreshadows the idea of liberation theology against class, racial, and gender oppression and calls readers to engage in moral and political reflection on society.

Thus, “A Life in the Iron Mills” is not only a work of literature but also a mirror reflecting the complexity of society and the inner world of individuals in the process of industrialization. It reminds us that the interaction between the environment and human beings cannot be ignored and that we need to pay attention to the impact of environmental changes on the psychology and behaviour of individuals and how to seek individual redemption and social justice in the midst of change. Through such literature, it is possible to better understand history, gain insight into reality, and provide inspiration for building a more harmonious social environment.

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