

## ABSTRACT

### Social Justice and Spirituality in Rebecca Harding Davis's Early *Atlantic Monthly* Writings

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This thesis examines three of Rebecca Harding Davis's writings published by the *Atlantic Monthly* from 1860 to 1862. Davis begins with questioning capitalist claims of building a middle class in "Life in the Iron Mills." In less than two years, the censure of Davis's first work softens in a more merciful tone in her first novel *Margret Howth*. By the time Davis publishes the short story "David Gaunt" in 1862, her message of tolerance becomes more overtly political as it questions the necessity of the Civil War and foreshadows the trials of Reconstruction. The sole character type that escapes harsh reproach in these stories manifests in the plain female who is not merely tolerant but without prejudice regardless of race, class, gender, or politics on the basis of attempting to follow the teachings of Jesus. Followers of Jesus, Davis posits, can practice social justice without turning into zealots or Pharisees.

Social Justice and Spirituality in Rebecca Harding Davis's  
Early *Atlantic Monthly* Writings

by

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I still hear you every day

## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction: Davis as Woman, Artist, and Activist

Rebecca Harding Davis (1831-1910) grew up an American Southern woman whose family owned slaves, but she often identified with Northern causes of abolition and women's rights. As a writer, she challenged the principles of the United States, a country she believed to value the growth of industry in lieu of the welfare of its citizens. With more than five hundred identified published works, Davis's corpus contains pointed and daring criticisms of "American" systems in the last half of the nineteenth century. In forming her literary style, Davis developed a realism that acknowledges Hawthorne's romanticism rooted in Puritanism, while drawing less from fairy tales and more from her own experience. Davis's fascination and reverence for Hawthorne's interest in ordinary people, however, encouraged her to create characters inspired from her own life, leaving behind idyllic creatures of virtue and exploring the intricacies of highly flawed characters.

Since Tillie Olsen revived interest in Davis's work in the 1970s, the scholarship on Davis has been tremendously unbalanced with American Literature survey courses frequently teaching her most famous work "Life in the Iron Mills," but knowledge of the author's work often stops there. In fact, several of Davis's shorter works remain uncollected from their first editions printed in periodicals like *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Peterson's* and *Scribner's*. In addition, her letters have remained uncollected and unpublished, kept in the University of Virginia Library. Through the study of Davis's

son, the journalist Richard Harding Davis, scholars have traced biographical information about the author who worked tirelessly to separate her public and private life.<sup>1</sup>

Writing on the heels of the transcendentalists of Concord, Davis carefully invested her interests in daily affairs rather than the spiritual abstractions of Emerson or Bronson Alcott. Although the young writer initially admired the intellectual coterie of Concord, after she met Emerson she identified him as “Uncle Sam himself in ill-fitting brown clothes” in her memoir *Bits of Gossip* (42). Davis found that Emerson and many of the members of his Transcendental Club lacked “some back-bone of fact” (*BOG* 40). She criticizes them throughout her career, regarding their treasured individual growth as too self-focused and philosophically vague to be of use to society. On the other hand, Davis abhorred any dogmatism, be it patriotism or religious “creed which rated honor higher than life” (56). Even preaching tolerance bothered the author because it watered down the differences between the parties involved and much worse, it usually masked their real prejudices instead of eradicating them. Whether it concerns class, gender, religion, race, or education, Davis’s writing seeks to warn readers about the dangers of becoming too much of an obtuse aesthete or a religious zealot.<sup>2</sup>

Scholars have had trouble classifying Davis’s writings in a genre because while many female writers of the nineteenth century were writing conversion narratives and

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<sup>1</sup> Critical studies of a broader range of her works have been revived due to the attention of The Feminist Press, Tillie Olsen, and literary critics Sharon Harris, Jean Pfaelzer, Janice Milner Lasseter, and Jane Atteridge Rose. Authors who have written extensively on Davis’s include Harris canvassing her career in *Rebecca Harding Davis and American Realism* (1991), and Pfaelzer primarily focusing on the feminist strains of the author’s works in *Parlor Radical: Rebecca Harding Davis and the Origins of American Social Realism* (1996).

<sup>2</sup> Sylvia Jenkins Cook, who has studied the working class and the American South disagrees with this point, claiming that “Educated and more affluent women, like Rebecca Harding Davis...recommended Christianity and its otherworldly rewards rather than the mental and artistic subjectivity they were themselves trying to assert” (11). Davis may have doubted that people would listen to her insistence of expressing faith in a practical manner, but nevertheless, she advocated for social reform on the basis of Christianity for her entire career.

other sentimental plotlines, Davis appealed to high and low brow audiences with her tales of the “commonplace” (*BOG* 37). Critics have lauded the author as pioneering in her approach to blending elements of naturalism, romanticism, and realism to form daring stories that escape some of the stereotypes of female authors of the day like Harriet Beecher Stowe and Catharine Maria Sedgwick. She wrote strong, convincing male leads, and she uncovered the corruption outside the woman’s sphere of the home. Even though Davis highly regarded Margret Fuller as a pioneering career writer, she was not interested in writing the same kinds of “sublime guesses at the eternal verities...so dissected and pawed over and turned inside out...by Margret Fuller and her successors” (*BOG* 30). In method, Davis’s didacticism comes across as sentimental at times, but the imagery has been regarded as having prototypical naturalist tendencies (Harris 76, Pfaelzer 58). If Davis were like any writers of her day, she could be compared to Mark Twain in her literary use of regionalism and satire, but where Twain makes use of humor and tall tales to confront and question deep-rooted ideologies of American citizens, Davis clearly appeals to empathy to affect her readers’ viewpoints when she focuses her early work on characters stuck in squalid working conditions, whether in the war or the mills.

Merging activism and art, however, does not always work in Davis’s favor with more contemporary readers. Because Davis was more interested in impacting her audiences, she is often accused of falling prey to sentimentalist strategies stereotypical of female writers of the day. According to *Atlantic Monthly* historian Ellery Sedgwick, Davis’s “style awkwardly combined naturalistic detail with melodrama” to prove her point (96). In writing about sentimental fiction, Herbert Ross Brown acknowledges that in the mid-nineteenth century, “although critics were generally silent upon matters of

technique, they were fond of affirming that the primary function of the novelist was to teach” (169). Works that are blatantly intended to “teach” (particularly when written by women) have been considered degradations, or second-class art instead of works of potential political impact. Lyde Cullen Sizer offers a mid-lining evaluation of this stance, and in writing about the political interests of female authors during the mid-1860s, she succinctly classifies Davis’s first two *Atlantic Monthly* pieces as tales that “bridge the gap between the domestic novel, with its careful rendering of emotion, and the emerging tradition of realism, with its careful attention to even ugly detail” (138).

The rise in professional writers and widely circulated periodicals in the nineteenth century also contributes to the notion that serialized publications primarily were driven by a profit incentive alone. In *Women’s Fiction*, Baym supports her claim that female writers of the era were not high-caliber writers, stating that “literary women conceptualized authorship as a profession rather than a calling, as work and not art” (32). Davis wrote serialized novels and short stories to support her family, but the messages driving her hybrid of didactic fiction and literary journalism can be traced to the author’s spiritual convictions. Elaine Sargent Apthorp attributes Davis’s spiritual motivation for this “bizarre complex of tones and appeals...crying out...and posing accusing questions to the reader like an evangelist preacher” and while also acting like a “muckracking journalist” at times (6). Davis’s career, however, explores themes that were important to her. In her biography of Davis, Jean Atteridge Rose quotes a letter from the author to her husband where she states “[s]top writing. God forbid. I would almost as soon say stop breathing, for it is pretty much the same thing” (68). Almost unanimously, critics often blame Davis’s choice to prioritize her domestic duties above her art as the primary reason

why the author did not become a better writer during her half-century career. Yet, had Davis not viewed writing as a “calling” that demanded that she balance her time as a wife, mother, and artist, she would not have written at all.

Regardless of all the praise regarding the author’s humanitarian aims in her fiction, contemporary critics find fault with much of Davis’s work because the message comes off as too lukewarm in punishing the antagonists of the text. To modern readers, Davis’s stance may not come across as nearly daring as it was originally perceived; but in comparison to other female writers of the day—either those who wrote political propaganda or domestic fiction, Davis pushed her editor to diversify the representation of the nation’s opinions in his periodical. By writing for the *Atlantic Monthly* in the early 1860s, Davis found a temporary outlet to challenge the myth of the moral North while building her career. After Davis had left the magazine, she wrote the editors of the *Galaxy*, “encouraging their creation of ‘a national magazine in which the current of thought in every section could find expression as thoroughly as that of New England does in the *Atlantic*’” (qtd. in Sedgwick 77). Long before Davis had begun to publish in the *Atlantic Monthly*, she was already aware of the sharp tensions between the North and the South and she vehemently wanted to share her remarkably evenhanded critical message in a time when partisanship ruled all periodicals. Davis respected Horace Greeley’s *New-York Tribune*, but she was keenly aware that “the most important newspaper in antebellum America” was responsible for spreading the myth of a moral North (Tuchinsky 2). Adam Tuchinsky, in a recent study of the history of the political philosophy that guided the *New-York Tribune*, points out that the Greeley in particular, wavered on his stance about the war, with his “pacifism reemerg[ing] in moments of

crisis and defeat,” which exposes him as more of an opportunist and businessman than a moralist (162). On the other hand, Sarah Josepha Hale, who edited *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, which was the most widely circulated magazine in the United States, shared many of Davis’s social and religious beliefs (Finley 177). Hale, however, “printed next to nothing about the war” in the magazine because she believed that freedom for African Americans would take place without bloodshed when more educated southerners would eventually emancipate their slaves (193). Ruth Finley, who renewed interest in Hale’s work in the 1970s, claims that this editorial decision derailed the magazine’s popularity and cultural relevance until its demise (194).

Davis, in a way, positioned herself in the center of these artistic responses. According to Harris, Davis wished to “replace anger with an understanding of the causes of individual and grand-scale corruption” (185). When Davis makes a case for social reform, she hesitates in making hard and fast judgments about her villains. Wishing to avoid dogmatism, but not wanting to appear too wavering, Davis struggled throughout her career to fashion a rhetoric that preached a practical kind of love modeled by Christ. For Davis, the personal and political realms must be couched in something much stronger than doctrines. Despite this message of love, Davis does not dismiss her characters (or her readers) from stern evaluations. *John Andross*, published in 1874, chronicles the “political jobbery” of a Pennsylvania Whiskey Ring wielding power in the senate (*John Andross* 77). This novel ends mysteriously with Andross’s death unclear, and although there has been a marriage, its happiness has been compromised by Clay Braddock’s sins of self-righteousness and passion. “The Promise of Dawn,” published in the *Atlantic* in January 1863, forthrightly mocks the “erring Church” that ignores the prostitutes on the

streets—prostitutes whom the founder of their religion never turned away (100). Lot Tyndall, the main character of the short story, dies from an unknown disease—probably a sexually transmitted disease or consumption that related to her social position—because her Christian aunt Jinny and uncle Adam refuse her request for charity on Christmas Eve. The short story characterizes the couple as concerned about converting Native Americans and supporting abolitionism, but they do not care for their own kin (104). Other short stories come down hard on hypocrisies that Davis would not allow to carry on without comment: she carps on die-hard abolitionists who exploit blacks by using them for entertainment in “Blind Tom,” and in “John Lamar,” she accuses abolitionists of awakening violent (albeit understandable) spite in the slave population. Being nearly alone in her decision to bring both camps to task during the war situated Davis in an “uneasy state,” but her judgment serves her purpose of questioning the ethics of political systems and the sincerity of a religion (Sizer 140).

To set up further research into her later writings, it would be advantageous to reexamine the political role of characters that practice personal faith, beginning with her earliest works. In less than two years of writing, the harsh censure of Davis’s fiction gained a more complex, and at times, more merciful perspective of the camps in question. The sole character type that escapes the harshest reproach in these stories manifests in the plain, female who is not merely disinterestedly tolerant but genuinely without prejudice regardless of race, class, gender, ethnicity, or politics. While all the other characters display some fundamental flaw of soul, these characters bear salvation through their gentleness and practical kindness. The Quaker of “Life in the Iron Mills,” Lois Yare of *Margaret Howth*, and Dody Scofield of “David Gaunt” function as exemplary, self-

sacrificing Christians who contrast the deliberate, incisive tone of the narrator. This thesis surveys Davis scholarship, and provides close readings for previously unexamined areas of the texts that connect how Davis was building a message of social activism through Christianity that is shown outside the church walls in her early works.

Counteracting the secular humanism of the Transcendentalists, Davis reworks the importance of individualism while refusing to return to the pastoral moral tales. Davis's exemplar individuals recognize and experience suffering, yet they find transcendence not through philosophy but through cultivating relationships with people within their immediate surroundings based on the principles of Christ.

In a succinct, successful portrait of the industrial landscape, Davis outlines the trouble of defining and striving for "progress" in the United States in the mid-nineteenth century in "Life in the Iron Mills." Packed with criticism of racism, and capitalism, and aestheticism, the novella exposes the insularity Davis hated and wished to expose as problematic for building a robust American economic system during her lifetime. The seminal "Life in the Iron Mills," launches Davis's attack on the high brow culture created in the North that tirelessly supported the Union and promoted abolitionism and socialist ideals of free labor and class equality while continuing to buy goods produced in the mills.

A more conciliatory narrative voice in *Margret Howth* departs from the broad, overarching condemnation of the types that Davis creates in "Life" and the author spends more time developing the humanity of *Howth's* characters. This chapter demonstrates how the narrative voice of Davis's fiction changes registers and espouses an even more intimate kind of activism than what is found in "Life." While many of the same general

themes of alienation, misguided philanthropy, and greed pervade the novel, Davis builds on the message of the Quaker of “Life” while she also primes readers for her message of pacifism in her Civil War era stories.

The last chapter considers how Davis’s spiritual views become politicized during the Civil War. Davis sets “David Gaunt” in a contemporary backdrop in the midst of war when it was published in 1862. Davis subtly endorses the North in this short story, but she maintains the viewpoint that “the real villain is the war itself” (Sizer 138). Although Davis confronts problems of economic infrastructures, political systems, and the cultivation of self-interested intellect in her previous works, she primarily focuses on the fidelity to a deeply personal faith in “David Gaunt.” The main character, Dody Scofield, commits to pacifism on the account of faith as continuation of Davis’s definition of the most optimal religious and social disposition through her fictional works.

Throughout her career, Davis wrote about battles of all kinds, targeting class warfare first. Davis focused on the suffering whites who “needed no words of wisdom to stir their patriotism; they needed a frank reassessment of their condition and a fair redress of it” (133). Awakening capitalists to their complicity in the demoralization of the disadvantaged people in the nation, however, only introduced Davis’s interest in how the struggles of the soul manifest in social problems. From “Life in the Iron Mills” onward, Davis writes about how all life’s battles—whether political, interpersonal, or spiritual—deserve to be reassessed with the willingness to seek “a deeper justice than law” and Christ’s mercy in mind (*MH* 210).

## CHAPTER TWO

### Fashioning Artistic Principles Amidst “Life in the Iron Mills”: Groping for an Answer to Solipsism or Squalor

After more than 150 years, scholars are still deciding the central focus of Rebecca Harding Davis's<sup>1</sup> “Life in the Iron Mills,” whether it primarily comments on the plight of the class system, gender roles, or the political infrastructure in the United States. Moreover, the consideration of Davis's literary influences as well as the historical context of the story positions the text tenuously somewhere among romantic, realist, and domestic sentimental traditions. Despite Davis's early admiration of the transcendentalists, her style in “Life in the Iron Mills” has been aligned with Hawthorne's style of romanticism. Jean Pfaelzer regards the novella as “...the first major American work to represent in explicit detail the painful conditions of the American mill system” (158). Within an oppressive social structure, Davis reveals how the emerging industrialization of the U.S. not only exploits women but all human life—a charge that challenges Nina Baym's claim that literature produced by females between 1820 and 1870 “does not partake of the more obviously advanced thought of its day” (19). Despite Baym's dismissal of the quality and artistic achievement of female writers of the time, she recognizes female authors' stylistic commitment to realism as a means of achieving a didactic rhetoric (34). Feminist critic Elaine Showalter expands this concept, contending that this adoption of the novel was “to bring political ideas to life, to investigate the

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<sup>1</sup> Even though at the time of the publication of “Life in the Iron Mills” Rebecca Harding Davis was known as Rebecca Blaine Harding, I choose to use the name scholars most commonly use that is also the name under which the work is attributed when re-published.

human psyche” (83-84). Although Davis relies on constructs of some other female writers in her later works such as employing tidy happy endings of marriages and rendering the home as an unhappy place of restriction, “Life” displays a message of pervasive “social corruption” that transcends the narrowness of focus of other works of female writers of the nineteenth century (Baym 12). When Baym outlines the form and ideology of woman’s writing in the mid-1800s, she assigns to female authors certain attributes of fiction from which Davis deviates. For example, in “Life,” the setting hardly “transcends the pain and crudeness” of the reality of the mill; Deb’s longing for Hugh does not deny a female a sexual voice; and the tale is entirely void of a “happy home as the acme of human bliss” (Baym 25, 26, 27).

In order to write a story with aims that extend beyond the domestic sphere, Davis adopts a form unprecedented in female works in the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> Jane Atteridge Rose and Tillie Olsen before her, view the story of Hugh and his korn woman as a thinly veiled analogy of Davis and her writing (Olsen 63, Atteridge Rose 18). Whether or not Davis uses Hugh as a projection of herself, “Life” stands out among previous works written by women in the United States because in this work, Davis dares to write a story outside the domestic sphere in order to push the limits of advocacy in art. Walter Hesford argues that her focus on “a richly symbolic work of art” through the korn woman in the text categorizes her as a socially conscientious romantic writer (73). Regardless of the technical classification of the story, this artistic symbol has been invaluable to understanding the text’s function as a piece of social commentary. As a method of critically approaching the text, scholars have examined the symbolism of the korn woman,

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<sup>1</sup> Because Harding Davis was writing anonymously in the *Atlantic Monthly*, she also likely expanded her audience in addition so that men would not read her byline and preclude any “covert feminism” in the piece (Baym 18).

and much scholarship interprets the central artistic creation as an attempt to express an intrinsic desire for beauty.

Writing more like Hawthorne or Poe in constructing a story around an image, Davis delivers a story in need of decoding. Davis forms her arguments around an image and the conversation that it inspires. The questions embodied in the korl woman pose the question of both society and the individual: “What shall we do to be saved?” (“Life” 55). Like any noteworthy piece of art, the conversation it inspires and the legacy it leaves asks the audience “questions of God” (54). The work’s conversation of aesthetics indicts wavering philanthropists like Dr. John May, corporate moguls like Kirby, artists like Mitchell, and questions even the great democratic-capitalist experiment of the United States. By examining the exchange of the three mill visitors who examine the korl woman and its maker, readers discover a complex answer to “who is responsible” for her perpetual groping that persists even at the close of the story (54).

Using each of these characters as a means of assessing the moral pulse of the young country, Davis evaluates the failures of capitalists, reformers, and intellectuals, exposing the inhumanity of their philosophies set in motion. Through each man’s aesthetic critique of the korl woman, Davis categorizes and cross-examines contemporary responses to these questions both relevant to the self and the society. To connect the importance of liberty in spirit and flesh, Davis’s characters offhandedly allude to France’s attempt to reform their socio-political infrastructure during its revolution in 1789 as well as quote Latin phrases and scripture in respect to personal, spiritual culpability. Davis introduces a foil to these characters with the unnamed Quaker woman who cares for the bereaved cousin of Hugh Wolfe at the end of the text, offering Deb an alternative to a life of

physical and spiritual darkness through her idyllic life of simplicity and quiet piety outside city limits. By the close of narrative, the story's chronicler, who has exhorted her audience throughout the text, remains dissatisfied with this lone episode of true charity. This chapter will serve a two-fold purpose: first, it will outline and explore the scope of Davis's criticisms of problematic ideologies; and second, it will address the author's views of how spirituality and individual agency can work together through voices of the Quaker and the narrator. Together, these voices provide the only alternative to perpetuating the irresponsibility of the three men who visit the mill.

Before analyzing Davis's treatment of the discussion regarding the kohl woman, scholars must first grapple with how the piece of art has been critically classified as both an object and symbol. Pfaelzer notes that when Davis was working with editors at the *Atlantic Monthly*, she was trying to defend her choice of the story's title as "Life in the Iron Mills" in order to preserve its intention. While her editor wanted to affix a more fetching headline to the text to sell more magazines, the author wanted to use something "suggestive of the subdued meaning of the story" (32). She suggested "The Kohl Woman," which the editor used. In her suggestion, Davis designates the image of the kohl woman as central enough to the purpose of the text that it could substitute for the first title. The commonly printed title addresses one aspect of the text in its setting and its concern with socioeconomics, while the other proposed title accesses the loftier aim of the story that "universalizes experiences across gender and class, encouraging the reader to envision working-class life as a species of common suffering" (Pfaelzer 29).

Despite the popular method of decoding the kohl woman as emblematic of Hugh's suffering, scholars have not agreed on the meaning of the piece of art. Eric Schocket

aptly describes the korl woman as “multivalent—never reducible to one meaning and never exhausted by one reading” (56). Atteridge Rose states that Davis “transposes her anxiety about literary achievement” onto Hugh and that this story serves as a method of making her own “hunger to know” visible (165). She and Pfaelzer also consider the korl woman as synecdoche for “Life in the Iron Mills” itself: both are products of oppressed figures trapped in hegemony. Watson, who agrees with this metatextual aspect of the korl woman takes the analogy one step further as “the korl woman signifies how the process of class formation and literary creation overlap” (128). According to Watson, because the korl woman represents “a set of ideas on the role of the author in an industrializing society,” the object itself threatens Davis (128). If workers like Hugh do upset the narrator’s concept of civil order by achieving equality from the burgeoning organization of unions and lobbyist groups, the author and narrator would be rendered incapable as a privileged onlooker and a dilettante recorder. In his article, Watson debunks the text that has been typically understood as sympathetic to the working class as a work that “both documents industrial barbarism and disguises literature’s role in maintaining it” (129). By contextualizing “Life in the Iron Mills” as a work written by a journalist who would have known that mill workers had already begun to peaceably organize and support temperance, Watson contends that Davis actually perpetuates the image of Welsh and Irish immigrants as hopeless sots. This reading of the text, however, assumes Davis incapable of satire and wholly unsympathetic to the working class.

Because the object of this art is a woman, scholars also tend to center on concepts of “gender masquerading as class” (Pfaelzer 36). Pfaelzer focuses on the gender implications of the korl woman demonstrating the pliable roles of male and female as

Hugh is described as weak, and one of the “girl men” whereas the korl woman is “muscular” with a “wild, eager face” (“Life” 47, 53). As an oppressed artist, Hugh acquires feminine qualities in order to demonstrate his subjugation. According to Pfaelzer, through creating a woman, Hugh can do two things: he can appeal to the masculine egoist as a classical artist by objectifying the female figure while he can also project his actual feelings of being objectified himself as a marginalized worker. Because Hugh, as a creator, stylizes a piece that expresses more strength than he possesses, the work is also viewed as an idealized attempt of creating a better version of himself that is “freed from any social constraints” (Morrison 251). This reading becomes problematic if Hugh has such a “fierce thirst for beauty,” as the narrator describes because the narrator relays that the woman does not have “one line of beauty or grace in it” (“Life” 48, 53). Earlier in the text when the narrator claims that some of Hugh’s carvings were “hideous, fantastic enough, but sometimes strangely beautiful,” it seems Davis contradicts herself in describing the korl woman as totally void of beauty because readers must question why Hugh would create a sculpture of a woman who has no trace of perfection within it (48). Also, if the korl woman were “all that Hugh was but could never become,” as Shocket claims in his essay, it would not make sense for her to be carved still languishing in the state of spiritual hunger (55). Moreover, if Davis had intended the korl woman to represent an ideal image of womanhood, the three men would have perceived her to be beautiful and at rest. Yet, had Hugh carved a classically attractive woman, the work of art would have prompted an altogether different conversation, both in and out of the text. It may be that the carved figure is not supposed to represent one feeling or isolated concept but instead, ongoing clashes seething inside Hugh’s body and soul (“Life” 48).

All his life, Hugh's lot has been hard and virtually incompatible with escaping the mundane focus of meeting the needs of his wasted, starving body. He longs to create and expand his knowledge of higher arts, but Hugh hardly scrapes by as an iron puddler. By straining so much to meet his physical needs, he never has anything to satiate another type of appetite within him. Consequently, when he comes into contact with images of beauty in nature and other human beings, he becomes simultaneously enthralled and enraged because of the sharp disparity between his own known world and the imagined one that he has never experienced. The korl woman, then, becomes the object of Hugh's "mad cry of rage against God, man, whoever it is that has forced this vile, slimy life upon him" as an artful form of emotional release when none other is available to him (49). His emotions are so strongly rendered in the korl woman that those who see the sculpture sense it, but they do not venture to identify with its true meaning.

As the three men contemplate the sculpture, Davis depicts them as connoisseurs, who objectify everything they see. In no other aspect of the text does Davis bring up "thingness" more than through the korl woman. Questioning the "thingness," or what a thing in itself *is* calls to mind the Kantian philosophy prized (and often misappropriated) by the transcendentalists. Davis alludes to this concept when the narrator asks readers to see Hugh "as he is" apart from knowable, external facts they would have as mere onlookers or observers (49). Again, Davis brings to the surface this issue of "thingness" after Hugh has opted to keep the money, which is "nothing in itself" (63). Joe Fulton's article names Johann Gottlieb Fichte as Davis's primary influence for "Life in the Iron Mills" and reminds readers that the author is not necessarily writing in response to transcendentalism but to its sources of German romanticism and philosophy. These

concepts of transcendence and defining the self disturbed Davis because the exaltation of the self discards responsibility to society. Unlike her literary predecessors, however, Davis carefully avoids drifting into philosophical abstractions and chooses a mode of communication more easily comprehended in the conversation of the three visitors of the iron mill (“Life” 54). Here, the men discuss the repercussions of employing self-serving philosophies by trying to figure out just what the korl woman is. Once the korl woman emerges in the text, Hugh’s problems of purpose and value reach into the depths of theology and philosophy, no longer waiting for definition or resolution in the ether of remote debates of Congress or polite socialite dinner parties. Davis confronts readers with an arresting image, and beckons them to enter the conversation about this thing.

When the exchange about art begins, the group of visitors is just gathering to leave the iron mill and the face of the korl woman startles Mitchell. This product of the “curious fancy” in Hugh conveys profound emotion so remarkably that it momentarily convinces Mitchell that the crude sculpture actually lives (48). As the three remaining men in the visiting crew inspect the piece, the narrator describes it as a “starving wolf,” a creature with “poignant longing,” and most memorably, she repeats the word “groping” (53). All of these descriptions imply a kind of torpid and stifled motion transmuted in the korl woman. Fulton deciphers this motion found in the korl woman as a “*soul in process*” and a means for “the *working class* to access romantic ideals of selfhood” (49).<sup>2</sup> Lucy Morrison describes it as an illustration of Hugh’s “undefinable feelings” (249). Throughout Morrison’s examination of the text as a statement about the need for artistic fulfillment, she employs nebulous phrases of improvement as the object as a depiction of “a yearning for more from life,” “an indefinite improvement or alteration,” and a “search

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<sup>2</sup> The emphasis in these statements is Fulton’s.

for something better” (246, 250, 251). Justifiably vague, these interpretations of the physical object permit the kohl woman to assume a universal “groping” toward perfection or self actualization. Davis never resolves for readers whether or not this ideal can even be achieved, but under the mindsets presented by Kirby, May, and Mitchell, it is impossible.

Of all the characters, Kirby arises as the obvious materialist who suffers Davis’s critique of capitalism without limitations. As the owner of the factory, Kirby is the enemy of equality even though he supports democracy because he is more concerned with his steady position in capitalism. Due to the industrial boom in the United States in mid-1800s, Kirby is able to live in economic security because of paying a vast number of impoverished workers just enough to keep them returning to work the next day. As Caroline Miles acknowledges, Davis may not have seen the mill industry so different from plantation operations in the South that depended upon slave labor for their wealth during the same time. Miles, along with many others, recognizes this as a form of white slavery at the time and he states that “[b]y the middle of the nineteenth century, Americans found it more difficult to ignore the ways in which European industrialism had transfigured white men into corporeal machines” (91). Kirby substantiates this observation when he states that it would be better if “the lowest part of the world’s work should be machines—nothing more—hands” (“Life” 54). Already in the text, the workers have been referred to as “some of the hands” so that even though Kirby declares they would be better off as nothing more than tools or soulless body parts, they are actually already viewed that way (53). Alexis de Tocqueville notices this attitude as strategic business ploy in *Democracy in America*, which was printed almost thirty years

before “Life in the Iron Mills.” He remarks that “[e]ach day [the worker] becomes more skillful and less industrious, and one can say that the man in him is degraded as the worker is perfected” (530). In this short essay that is part of a much more comprehensive report on the functionality of the U.S. government and society, Tocqueville warns of the nation’s industrialization that “could well lead men back to aristocracy” (530). Kirby claims that he is “[d]rift[ing] with the stream” when it comes to running his business, which makes way for the return to a governance structure that the country was, arguably, built to dispel (“Life” 55). Although he does not view this as a dangerous problem, Tocqueville comments that the rich of the United States feel absolutely no responsibility to the lower classes.

When he faces the kohl woman, Kirby must decide how to view Hugh when one of the “hands” becomes more than a mechanism to puddle iron, and too close to being a person expressing deep misery. Kirby ultimately ignores the sculpture and its meaning. Even though Kirby values his workers as capital or votes, he cannot account for the creativity of their humanity without condemning himself as inhumane. He excuses his apathy by stating that he “do[es] not think at all” about their welfare, or much of anything else (55). His lack of concern for humankind is impartial because he does not worry about any “social problems,—slavery, caste, white or black” (55). Kirby carves out his individual purpose as a consumer and his sole personal responsibility as a paymaster. Despite this claim, even he admits “there’s something wrong that no talk of ‘Liberté’ or ‘Égalité’ will do away” (54). Appropriating words from the motto of the French Revolution, Kirby’s stance undergirds Tocqueville’s criticism of the rich when he omits the last word of the motto—*fraternité*. Instead of combining the three, he mentions

liberty and equality in relationship to each other, alluding to an ongoing debate of the correct balance of the two values during the formation of American culture. He, however, fittingly leaves out “brotherhood,” strengthening Davis’s focus on Kirby’s lack of feeling for his fellow man. By referencing the French Revolution, Davis suggests sociopolitical infrastructure as a potential culprit and without John May or Mr. Mitchell, “Life in the Iron Mills” could be read as a text solely concerned with the clash of classes.

Kirby’s admission that he does not “think” about any of the preoccupations of guilt or progress shifts the subject of examination to the other two men because although Kirby may represent a corporate enemy that takes advantage of capitalism, his sins against the working class also reveal an operative ideological difference between him and men like Dr. May and Mr. Mitchell. At the very least, Davis presents Kirby’s unabashed coldness in his views about the mill workers as less vulnerable to an accusation of hypocrisy than the views of his companions. Readers may grant Kirby a moral pardon because he does not dare to notice and dismiss problems of the body or the soul like May or Mitchell do. Kirby is simply a product of his society’s chosen economical operative structure. Also, when Kirby states that he has “no fancy for nursing infant geniuses,” Davis sardonically employs the buzzword of transcendentalists to hurl an insult from one ideological camp to another (54). Types like Kirby, the big, executive controllers, were exactly the kinds of men whose enterprise threatened the interpersonal development of the individual—a view perpetuated by writers like Tocqueville and Henry David Thoreau—but they were not blind to the shortcomings of their naysayers either.

Kirby represents the new American aristocrat, and May, as Hesford describes as “naïve and ineffectual,” stands between Kirby and Mr. Mitchell in his mores and

sentiments; yet he fails to rise above either of them in his actions (83). Dr. May sympathizes with Hugh and is more obviously emotionally affected by the hunger of the kohl woman than Kirby is, but in the end he refuses to help Hugh because he claims it would be a futile economic investment. Dr. May's dual role as a philanthropist and doctor serves the purpose of evaluating the complexity of assigning too much or too little attention to the body. May's specialization in bodily health as a doctor should portend that he values the preservation and functional optimization of physical well-being; but in fact, May never addresses the needs of Hugh's sickly body at all. Davis builds May's characteristic obsession with the physical realm first by making him a physician and second, giving him the critique that the flaw of the piece is not having any physical "sign of starvation in the body" (53). Kirby, who practices good business sense when he sacrifices the welfare of other people to preserve his comfort, differs from May in his trade because May's trade requires that he cares for the health of others. Yet, even in May's profession, he fails to demonstrate good form.

When Dr. May judges the kohl woman as "the very type of her class," he comes to his conclusion because of the figure's wasted physical state portrayed in her "strained sinews" and "bony wrist" (53). This surface-level observation implies May's understanding of differences in class as evident in body, but he still sides with Kirby because he is shallowly "critical" and "curious" about the woman while he remains aloof (53). Gustave Flaubert satirizes this kind of man of science in *Madame Bovary*, which was first published just five years before "Life in the Iron Mills." In a comical presentation, Flaubert sketches Monsieur Homais, the town druggist, as an outspoken atheist who adheres to the religion of "duties as citizens and family men," like a good

philanthropist would, yet Homais is just as terrible as a medical practitioner as May is as a philanthropist (68). John May is too concerned with empirical evidence, wanting the assurance of a tangible proof of a return for his philanthropic labors. After all, “Why should one be raised when myriads are left?” (“Life” 56). Just as Homais rejects any potentiality for metaphysical answers to Emma Bovary’s alleged illnesses, May’s cannot remove himself from thinking in a strictly practicable sense, which renders him ill equipped to judge the intent and effect of Hugh’s art. He cannot decode the symptoms of artistic expression because he is unwilling to question any matters of soul.

May’s role as a philanthropist similarly hones in on health because the primary focus of philanthropy should, in theory, address the welfare of a society beginning with making improvements on an individual basis. For both occupations to remedy a set of symptoms, a proper diagnosis must be made, and with the right amount of money, most problems can be cured. For the philanthropist, the right number of programs, work houses, and public policies might do the trick, whereas for the doctor it might be the most practical procedure and the correct mixture of chemicals. In the post-enlightenment sense, the philanthropist and the doctor become scientists who view cause and effect as empirically discernible. Through May’s failures in both of these roles, Davis criticizes how strict humanism is less concerned in abetting the trials of humanity and more centered on sustaining self-interest.

May, regardless of his deficiencies in deliberating on metaphysics, demonstrates the potential to affect positive change in Hugh’s life when he is prompted by a sense of injustice to ask Kirby how he could possibly keep one of his “hands” busy “puddling iron” when a man like Hugh could be doing something far more creative (54). How

could he ignore such talent? Dissecting May's accusation exposes several convictions about the value of art in society and also, the artists who make it. First of all, May's concern is not for the improvement of Hugh or his class but of a materialist's conception of society because he fixates on the object of the kohl woman and Hugh's ability to create a thing. Morrison states that "Wolfe fails to see that his talents could be his route to change," but in this regard, both May and Kirby measure Hugh's value in his ability to produce (247). Their opinions only truly diverge in the types of objects they deem praiseworthy. May's esteeming the classical arts over the production of iron for building railroads, ships, and skyscrapers indicates that he may have ideological qualms with progress as defined by capitalism and industry, yet he still thinks like a businessman when it comes to the arts, focusing on how to better use Hugh's production capabilities. All May's philanthropic inklings fail when Kirby keenly perceives the doctor's critical remark and returns the question, asking May if he would really be willing to give up "all the social ladders" in place in the United States in order to establish a more equal standard of living (54). Schocket would classify May as one of people who "continued to stress the exceptional social mobility of America" despite the plight of the working class who were treated as white slaves (51). May's insistence that the American system of that time could offer those like Hugh so much more brushes its shortcomings aside, constructing a façade of prosperity and goodwill where it does not actually exist.

May's belief that he actually sympathizes with Hugh disarms any of his altruistic compulsions. The narrator grants May an arguably redemptive aspect in his prayer "that power might be given these degraded souls to rise," but his well wishing to Hugh as he gives a gentlemanly handshake as the group finally exits the mill does not expunge his

greed or passivity (“Life” 58). This open criticism of philanthropists contemporary with the publication of “Life in the Iron Mills” emerges particularly in *The Blithedale Romance*, published in 1852 and written by one of Davis’s chief literary inspirations, Nathaniel Hawthorne. May, like Mr. Hollingsworth, the philanthropist of Hawthorne’s tale, becomes an inadvertent agent of death through Hugh’s suicide because he fails to see the true heart of a matter and respond to an individual. Readers can see in May what Miles Coverdale says of Hollingsworth’s occupation of philanthropy because although it is “often useful by its energetic impulse to society at large, it is perilous to the individual whose ruling passion, in one exclusive channel, it thus becomes” (Hawthorne 243). Hollingsworth, who is characterized as more proactive than May in his philanthropic exploits, still is similar to Davis’s Dr. May as his opportunistic behavior overshadows the potential activism of his compassion. Philanthropists, Davis argues, possess the capital wealth to help; but artists retain an altogether different currency. They value what cannot be bought but what can be robbed and destroyed by greed.

Hawthorne and Davis declare through Coverdale and Mitchell that artists possess more potential to spur long-term transformation in the power of their interpersonal insights and social criticism. They, more than anyone else, have such privileged access to both realms because they are dually interested in society and individuals through their aspirations and interactions. From this vantage point, Mitchell fails the most miserably as a facilitator of social and interpersonal change. As Dr. May claims he “cannot catch the meaning” of the kohl woman, Mitchell stands aside, knowing perfectly well “the soul of the thing” (53, 54). Unlike May, Mitchell recognizes Hugh’s “groping” toward eternal significance transfigured in his art. While the other two men focus on the physicality of

the woman, Mitchell expresses total “disgust” for the condition that prompted the artist to create in the first place (54). Mitchell is so perceptive, in fact, that he is the one to guess correctly Hugh as the creator of the sculpture without having received any other clues provided in the text. William H. Shurr, who designates Mitchell as the narrator of the text, posits that this insight could only have come from a “converted possessor of wisdom” (para. 5). Shurr boldly suggests that Davis intended this short story to be a conversion narrative featuring Mitchell as “a seriously committed Transcendentalist” because only he, of the three men present during the conversation about the korl woman, is transformed by the experience (para. 10). Shurr’s assertion that the tale rehashes the Good Samaritan found in the tenth chapter of the Gospel of Luke also provides an interesting lens through which to view Mitchell’s great fault. Shurr views Mitchell as a modern adaptation of the Good Samaritan, claiming he is “the only one who is moved to practical action” through telling the iron puddler’s tale (Shurr para. 24). If this were true, then it becomes hard to reconcile Mitchell’s criminal prosecution of Hugh or his inconsequential lectures in Hugh’s jail cell shortly before the protagonist’s demise. Mitchell’s recognition of Hugh as an “equal” after all his moral posturing about the value of working class revolutionaries falls flat because he fails to adopt an instrumental intellectualism in his dismissal of the body (“Life” 58). He does not actually empathize with Hugh’s situation that the narrator calls “a real thing” (41).

Like a proper cosmopolitan academic, Mitchell fancies himself an independent thinker, casually observing deplorable social conditions and challenging the alleged facilitators of the situation. Meanwhile, he also washes his hands of the responsibility of improving Hugh’s life. Mitchell snidely questions May’s motives as a philanthropist in

typical transcendentalist fashion, but readers must wonder to what end Mitchell exposes Hugh's "right" to rise (57). Although Mitchell accuses May of being a lousy philanthropist in passing up an opportunity to help Hugh, his censure does not hold up to his own preaching of universal rights to autonomy because directly after Mitchell tells Hugh that it is his "right" to create of himself as he wishes, he laughs and silently watches May reject Hugh's request for help in doing so (56). Mitchell's silence shrugs off his responsibility onto the noncommittal philanthropist, preserving his role as a sanctimonious commentator. By drawing May and Mitchell together as irresponsibly apathetic, Davis stresses the failure of both kinds of people—the ones whose occupations and interests involve the health of the body or the expression of the soul. Before the three men leave the mill, Mitchell and May accuse each other for not using their roles as "the heart of the world" and "its head" to reach out to Hugh. Mitchell ignores May's jab at his preoccupation with "refinement" and redirects the conversation to the potential for improvement as something "born of need, not pity" (53). Although May is the "heart" of the earth, Mitchell is designated as its "head," yet he stands by disingenuously detached from the man (57).

This antipathy toward the chasm between the intellectual and the working class is something Atteridge Rose notes in her biography of Davis as a career-spanning criticism of Emerson, whom she was shocked to find in "lack of human sympathy," which is Mitchell's greatest sin (34). According to *Bits of Gossip*, when Davis was staying with the Hawthornes in 1862, Emerson had once entranced her as "the first of living men" (42). Her view changed when she met him and other transcendentalists, whom she believed "thought they were guiding the real world, [but] they stood quite outside of it,

and never would see it as it was,” which Kristen Boudreau also notes this disenchantment in Davis’s 1864 short story “The Wife’s Story” in her article “‘The Woman’s Flesh Of Me’: Rebecca Harding Davis’s Response To Self-Reliance” (32-33). Even before *Margret Howth* or “The Wife’s Tale,” Davis seems to have struggled with balancing the responsibilities of self and society in “Life in the Iron Mills” through Mitchell’s character who she describes as a keen but detached observer of culture ultimately interested in his own self-culture. The short story was written prior to Davis’s trip to Concord, so she may not have purposely affected Emerson’s traits in developing Mitchell, but the terms Davis uses years later in *Bits of Gossip* to describe the perceptions of meeting those most “memorable ghosts” nearly match her characterization of Mitchell (32). Mitchell seems to embody the American Scholar: he is the prototypical transcendentalist as “all-knowing, all-seeing, crowned by Nature” (“Life” 59). In *Bits of Gossip*, Davis describes Emerson as “listening, his head sunk on his breast, with a profound submissive attention” while Hawthorne stood listening nearby with his “laughing, sagacious eyes...full of mockery” (34). These observations nearly match descriptions of Mitchell’s “cool, probing eyes...mocking, cruel, relentless” as well as his sulking demeanor when he is “leaning against a brick wall” of the factory after talking with the other men (“Life” 54, 57). Also, one cannot help making a farcical parallel of Margret Fuller’s visits to Sing Sing or Thoreau’s multiple eco-sociological studies and Mitchell’s visiting the factory simply for his personal enlightenment. By seeing himself as altogether different from the working class, Mitchell excuses himself from becoming personally involved and only brings lethal words of encouragement to Hugh. In effect, “Davis used transcendentalism, a discourse of the self, against itself to create a discourse of the ‘commonplace’” (Pfaelzer 25).

Pfaelzer writes that as Davis was writing “Life in the Iron Mills,” she was blending stylistic elements of romanticism with the progressivism of transcendentalism. Because of its “male egotism,” the strains of transcendentalism were balanced with “sentimentalism” and “vernacular fiction” (25-26). By forging a style that blends these elements, Davis handles the problem of “knowing and responding to the needs of another,” which is something she found lacking in intellectual circles of Boston (Pfaelzer 26).

Mitchell, whom Davis portrays as a perpetually inquisitive sort, proves how damaging it can be to treat individuals’ lives as peculiarities. “Life in the Iron Mills” does not recoil from the sordid details of mill life, but Davis was not interested in creating shock value for the sake of creating an artistic curiosity. Mitchell’s casual encouragement also proves detrimental to Hugh because it inspires him but feigns sympathy for him, leaving Hugh aware of both his stymied artistic potential and his impossible situation. When Hugh senses that Mitchell as a sort of gatekeeper to the metaphysical answer he was looking when he sculpted the korl woman, he perceives the answer to be a “harmony with all he knew of beauty or truth” (58). Miles recognizes how the caricature of Mitchell allows his “autonomy to transcend the biological, material body, and fashion and form a new one” while Wolfe is confined by hard labors that “tie his identity inextricable to the flesh” (93). Miles’s article stresses how mid-nineteenth century masculinity had become “disembodied” and so ethereal that the condition of the body had been ignored by at least two classes of people: the economically privileged intellectuals and heartless capitalists (94). As a member of the poor working class, Hugh is held captive by the needs of his body. Hugh, however, holds the potential of individual

transformation and social revolution because although he longs for spiritual consciousness, his experience has been so physically oriented that he does not debase or forget the corporeal element of life. As an uneducated artist and one of the oppressed, Hugh encapsulates Davis's definition and purpose of the artist more completely than Mitchell, or any of the other scores of unresponsive gentlemen just like him. When Hugh realizes that he has actually "made this hope a real thing" and could "raise these men and women working at his side up with him," he has surpassed Mitchell in greatness ("Life" 59). From this point of view, the tragedy of his suicide is not only personal but also global because as Molyneaux indicates, "Harding Davis implies that this 'light-bringer' might have been Hugh" (171).

Because Davis sets Hugh apart from his fellow workers by designating him as an artist, his responsibility of self-creation has individual and corporate implications. Fulton asserts that Hugh ascribes to the Egoist philosophy of Mitchell and he "selfishly chooses individual growth over the 'lifting up' he had imagined himself performing in his earlier vision of himself" (56). As Fulton notes early in the article, Davis was interested in testing the "Fichtean philosophy and its effect upon the self made man" (41). Through Davis's perspective, the philosophy that Mitchell exhibits encourages the elevation of the individual above the improvement of society and any talk of reform becomes a topic of discussion, evincing but not invoking action. According to the text, the lofty claims of the self-cultured man may preach rights to "rise," the barrier between the working class and the privileged cannot be breached: the message is trapped in class. The gift of "genius" and the creative instinct may be indelibly human and indiscriminate of economic status, but the expression of it is by no means inalienable. Ultimately, any

condemnation of Hugh must be viewed from the perspective that, as Atteridge Rose observes, “Harding Davis insists that the artist’s task is not merely to seek aesthetic satisfaction but to solicit social change” and he shirks this responsibility (172).

Davis solidifies the harm Mitchell causes when he awakens Hugh to his artistic abilities through Hugh’s sudden interest in self-reflection. As Hugh leaves the mill with Deb, he questions the extent of his agency in his state when he demands of her “Is it my fault that I am no better?” (“Life” 59). He asks about his “fault” three times after asking about his “worth”—a word that implies his price as an economic commodity and his value as an eternal being (59). For a man in Hugh’s position, the practical implementation of these self-centered concepts inevitably creates an impasse because although he has the inklings of an artist, he does not live within a social structure and pliable class system that would support his enactment of self-improvement as Mitchell does. During the return to his grimy hovel, Hugh experiences his brief moment of transcendence as he rises above his financial duress to consider a purpose for himself, but he is quickly reminded of being tethered to the same line that commands his obedient daily trudge to and from the mill. Thoreau viewed these moments of self-realization as proof of life and hope because “to be awake is to be alive”; but once Hugh has been pressed into awareness and belief in his potential, his ambitions are almost immediately squelched (*Walden* 61). At this moment, Hugh is “awake” but still not so much *alive*. A century after the soaring idealism of the New England transcendentalists, Albert Camus would define this sort of moment as the one, agonizing night of terror when Sisyphus realizes he is chained to a rock, destined to roll it up and down a hill for the rest of his life. Camus contends that a quiet acceptance of meaninglessness provides the only means

of happiness in this short essay that reflects on the question of tragedy in the ancient myth. Davis writes the story of Hugh Wolfe and his korl woman suspended in the balance of transcendental elusive optimism and absurdity. Through Hugh, Davis asks, “What are rights without means?” (Olsen 49). While keeping the hope of individual fulfillment and social progress, she deftly demonstrates that without tangible means to support these goals, Hugh’s life, like the “myth is tragic, that is because its hero is conscious,” and until Hugh encountered Mitchell, he had yet to know the actual hopelessness of his situation (Camus 76). As an individual, Hugh makes the decision to adopt this position of desperate otherness, so his misery seems to be his own fault; but he never would have known he had the option had Mitchell left him to chip out crude korl figures.

The text’s hope in the artist’s “power to rise” and ability to fall unite when that “bit of tin” that Hugh uses to construct his struggle becomes the tool that ends his life (“Life” 67). Davis creates a dual image of art that demonstrates Hugh’s capacity to use the representation of his anguish constructively or destructively. Miles interprets his destitution and resort to suicide as the only kind of claim he has at “re-authorizing himself” because he cannot live like Mitchell with the choice to transcend his physical body (99). While Miles views the suicide as a form of redemption, Fulton states that “Hugh’s failure has less to do with the theft of the money than with the philosophy that comes with the money”; but Hugh’s loss of faith in creating another life for himself—spiritually or economically—takes place before he even knows about Deb stealing the money (55). The narrator reveals the shard of hope he once had flickers and fades from his heart upon seeing young Janey, whose white body aligns her with the whiteness of the

korl woman. If the korl woman embodies Hugh's materialization of his struggle, Janey encapsulates the living vision for the end of that battle. Upon seeing the epitome of that same beauty that he craves when he sees "the sun glinting on purple thistles," Hugh's rage finally turns to despair because those who have the power to change his status have seen the expression of his plight through his korl woman and still they have turned him away (48). To them, the korl woman is a peculiar product of a bizarre hobby, a provocative illustration, and at most, a portrait of a soul in want. But it is not "a real thing" to anyone but Hugh. Because the men at the factory fail to recognize Hugh's korl woman as requiring a proactive response, as Tocqueville states, the rich allow the working class to be "nourished by public charity in times of crisis" (532).

With the strongest members of society removed from the welfare of Deb or Hugh, Davis draws on the two remaining sources of help: the "charity" found in the Quaker woman that surfaces to help Deb bury Hugh after his suicide, and the sympathetic and socially minded artist-narrator who shares the story. These two characters address different aspects of the problems of Hugh's class: while one delivers immediate physical relief and spiritual guidance, the other takes on the mantle of social advocacy through literature. Both characters play vital roles in the text, and their necessity further critiques the American capitalist system.

Davis venerates characters like the Quaker in her fiction because they notice and address problems in the physical world that affect the state of the soul without passing judgment on others, but they are typically exceptions. The Quaker's role in the text does not offer a global answer to suffering through adopting a specific kind of spirituality as much as it demonstrates that help must come from beyond the most immediate resources.

In keeping with contemporary literary portrayals of this peaceful and tolerant religious sect, Davis's Quaker is the most effective in alleviating Deb's pain because she balances concern with humankind's metaphysical and earthly needs. This woman, whose countenance reveals "the stuff out of which murderers are made" does not pretend sympathy or offer any social commentary about Deb's occupation as a mill girl ("Life" 72). She acts, imparting few words, granting Hugh's wish to be united with the beauty of nature when she buries him. Admitting she "came too late" for Hugh, the Quaker reaches out to Deb to share her quiet life with her (73). It would appear that Davis presents her audience with another conversion narrative akin to Catharine Maria Sedgwick's *A New-England Tale* that ends with a selfless Quaker saving the day, or, according to Watson, another typical domestic tale where the woman is finally subdued and made "doubly silent" in her removal from influencing revolution (125). If Davis had truly thought silencing Deb was a good thing, she would not have continued the story after Deb was rescued and left the audience with the narrator's unsettling image of the unfinished koral woman. The change in location when Deb is removed from city life and placed in the country, however, suggests that it is not Deb who is unfit to inspire change, but that it is society that is unwilling to support change, which reinforces what has already been demonstrated through Hugh's rejected plea for help and his subsequent suicide.

Although the Quaker woman helps Deb, religious institutions do not escape Davis's scorn in the text, and Davis hardly suggests any one religious sect as a liberating cure-all for class oppression and artistic desperation. The Quaker woman, however, represents the rarity of finding a person who lives in such a way that their faith is not measured by the amount they drop in the offering plate or by the rules they keep but by

the way they love their neighbor—a theme that pervades much of Davis’s writing for the rest of her career. In writing “Life,” Davis was more interested in bringing churches to task for their complacency or participation in social issues. In 2003, Janice Milner Lasseter published an essay about an excised paragraph of “Life” (that has yet to be published in a collected edition of the text) that reveals Davis’s harshest institutional criticism directed toward the Christian church. Fields had eliminated the paragraph in fear that “Davis’s text would arouse the same kind of attack on the *Atlantic* which ensued in the *Boston Quarterly Review* after Brownson’s treatise [about the labor conditions of mill girls], in the *Dial*” (Lasseter 178). In “Life,” the Quaker practices the everyday charity that Davis was criticizing the Protestant churches for lacking. Choosing a Quaker to carry out the text’s message of the “promise of the Dawn” emphasizes the shortcomings of the church with its impractical and impersonal messages that fail to save Hugh, and it also draws attention to the potential impact of an individual who practices a faith compatible with the kind of social justice that Davis believed followed Christ’s example (“Life” 74).

The Quaker and the narrator work together in providing a potential solution to Hugh and Deb’s problems because while the Quaker points to Christ’s model of mercy as the best example for affecting interpersonal and social change, the narrator reinforces the need for readers to refrain from judging Hugh’s crime. In order for readers to gain compassion, they must suffer like the Quaker suffered the loss of her loved one. They also must not become so damaged or so pious that they forget to relate to others by remembering their own pain (73). For Davis, “slow, patient Christ-love” is the only thing that will be able to “make healthy and hopeful” the world that needs it (73). The narrator

supports this viewpoint by pleading for an especially empathic reading of Hugh. Before relaying the story of Hugh's "crisis," the narrator asks the audience to "[b]e just" and "see him as he is" not for the sake of "man's law, which seizes on one isolated fact, but like God's judging angel, whose clear, sad eye saw all the countless cankering days of this man's life" (49). The narrator posits that when Hugh is so deprived of what he needs physically and spiritually, he will tend to think "that a true life was one of full development rather than self-restraint" because he has never been bestowed with enough to restrain (63). The narrator continues to petition for this grace from the audience, asking again later who would "dare say" what was said in heaven after Hugh killed himself in jail (71). Despite requesting that readers reserve judgment for Hugh, the narrator does not merely appeal for pity: the narrator advocates for self-examination from the audience. In a rearrangement of Matthew 7, the narrator claims that the point of the story is "to show you the mote" in Hugh's eye so that "you can see clearly to take it out" (62-63). The actual scripture that reads, "And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye? Or how wilt thou say to thy brother, let me pull out the mote out of thine eye, and, behold, a beam is in thine own eye?" (*King James Version* Matt. 7.3-4).<sup>3</sup> Reading the referenced scripture and Davis's rendition together, in order to "see clearly," readers must first make sure that they do not have anything obstructing their vision. Second, they have the responsibility to help their brothers. As the narrator suggests before, the correction of folly will not stem from "man's law" but God's, which readers learn from the Quaker, it can only come from "the Spirit of Love" (73).

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<sup>3</sup> When Davis quotes the Bible, she refers to the King James Version, so to maintain context, it will be used for other quotations in this thesis.

Readers who view the text's narrator either as a surrogate for the author or a converted Mitchell (as Shurr does) must surmise that at last the responsibility of social revolution rests upon the artists. The narrator's wry, direct address to readers forms "immediacy" as Fulton notes, and also an implication of emotional investment (38). Baym cites this urgency as a trait of mid-nineteenth century female writing that categorizes it as a dutiful didactic tool instead of a piece of literature (32). In contrast, Richard A. Hood discusses Davis's approach as a "rhetorically antagonistic relationship between narrator and reader" that entices readers to permit their being judged in exchange for satiating their voyeuristic tendencies (74). Although condescending in tone, the attitude of the narrator supposes that readers of the tale fit into one of the classes of people that she outlines in the text as responsible for Hugh's misfortune. According to Hood, with the narrator taking an active role in exposing the problems of the working class, the readers are "linked implicitly to these visitors—especially to Mitchell" because readers are, like him, outsiders to the situation the narrator claims to have known from a young age (77). Instead of viewing the narrator and Mitchell as the same voice as Shurr does, Hood's reading of them as "linked" seems more probable because the narrator serves as a correction of Mitchell's lackadaisical and impersonal approach to reform.

Without the narrator, "Life in the Iron Mills" would not be altogether different from a sentimental novel of the day because despite the gloom, there would be a spiritual remedy that overrides pain. Davis, however, does not employ that kind of syrupy solution. In her fiction, Davis writes about characters that are products of their situations, but she does not defend this notion to the extent that she overlooks the impact of individual choice. Without the narrator taking an often-accusatory position, the text

would lose its strong criticism of how privileged Americans neglect to act on the behalf of others who are less fortunate than they are to ensure that all people will be treated as equally as possible. If the story had concluded with Deb being restored in the country on the behalf of the Quaker's good nature, readers could finish the story relieved that someone else could take care of the country's most dejected people. Together, the narrator and the Quaker create a contentious feeling in the text, with the Quaker offering the audience a bit of hope, but the narrator keeping the message of the korl woman cryptic. Personalizing the pain of Hugh and all of his class, the narrator comprehends the actual product of its struggles by telling the story of the korl woman.

In the text's concluding scene, "Wolfe is presented as the artist here as opposed to the mill-worker and the soul of the artist something better" because he has wrought a thing more valuable than iron (Morrison 250). He has manifested an unnamable feeling within himself by using the very substance that keeps him chained to it; but even though his struggling spirit haunts the korl woman's image, by the close of the novella, the korl woman continues "groping" toward the "promise of the Dawn" in the narrator's library ("Life" 74). Again, the korl woman that is described as an artist's "unfinished work" reinforces the object as a work stopped amidst progress (74). Unlike all the figures of korl Hugh has carved and destroyed, this statue's stasis requires the finishing touches of another artisan who has been empowered by a society that supports and practices egalitarian principles the United States claimed to promote through capitalism, democracy, and religious freedom. If the sculpture were finished, it would "allow the free growth of the soul" (Fulton 50). The survival of the korl woman found in the narrator's library reinforces the author's intention to draw attention to a still-present

reality, as it is an artifact that is both indicative of pain and hope still demanding the attention of the masses, and principally, of the artists.

Instead of exciting aimless feelings, Davis's narrator pointedly asks for action from her readers. "Life in the Iron Mills" calls for a holistic reconsideration of the value of a life from the perspectives of all types of people. No one kind of person or system is to blame for the problems of oppression and the objectification of humanity. On the contrary, all who submit to stagnation are guilty, and have become as filthy as the "yellow river" framing the setting of the story ("Life" 39). Despite this widespread admonition and call to arms, Davis particularly reproves the aloofness of the intellectuals and the aesthetes. As an artist herself, she volleys a new charge to the era of intellectuals borne of self-focused philosophical musings. With all of their insight "falling like the sceptre on other men," they have more power to expose injustices and yet, also awaken suffering and without any assistance to "rise," the subjugated will not only remain browbeaten and soul-starved as well (59). From this breakthrough work onward, Davis dedicates her entire writing career to searching for a way to use her voice to convict and motivate her readers, encouraging interpersonal reflection and potentially, a subsequent conversion—a conversion not to a particular denomination but to a way of life that addresses physical and spiritual needs on the most fundamental level with Christ serving as the model.

### CHAPTER THREE

Reviving “unpopular angels” in *Margret Howth* through the Faith of Lois Yare

After publishing “Life in the Iron Mills” in the April 1861 edition of *Atlantic Monthly*, editor James T. Fields offered Rebecca Blaine Harding (soon to be known as Rebecca Harding Davis, after marrying Clarke Davis in 1863) an advance for her next story (Atteridge Rose 24). Davis had not written anything yet, but she agreed to the offer and began to write her first full-length novel most commonly known as *Margret Howth*. According to Davis scholar Jane Atteridge Rose, during the 1860s Davis struggled to maintain creative control over her works printed in the *Atlantic*, and when she sent the manuscript that was originally entitled *The Deaf and the Dumb* to Fields in 1861, he rejected it because he deemed it too dark for an anxious public at the beginning of the Civil War (24). Atteridge Rose writes that despite Davis’s frustration with Fields’s request for plot changes, she acquiesced to them and submitted another draft that was published as a serial novel under the new name “A Story of To-Day,” beginning in the October 1861 issue of the *Atlantic Monthly* (25). In 1862, the novel was collected and renamed *Margret Howth*. The novel received mostly positive reviews at the time of its publication, yet most scholarship on Davis remains extremely lopsided with the majority of peer reviewed articles focusing on “Life in the Iron Mills.” In the fall of 1990, *Legacy* printed a short biography about Davis written by Jean Pfaelzer wherein the author suggests that “[o]f Davis’s full-length novels, *Margret Howth* (1862) and *Waiting for the Verdict* (1868) most deserve critical attention” (42). Since *Legacy* published the piece and brought this omission to the attention of the academy, some critics have examined

the work, but it largely remains in obscurity because although scholars state that the text warrants analysis, the novel has been judged as a forced departure from Davis's pioneering realism of "Life in the Iron Mills," and altogether weak in comparison to its predecessor.

Most critics writing after Gerald Langford published *The Richard Harding Davis Years* in 1961 dismiss the text's literary merit almost entirely, categorizing Davis's agreement with Fields to revise the ending of *Margret Howth* as artistic suicide. Critics blame Davis's position as a woman and a new writer in the industry for her timidity in challenging Fields. Although these factors may have contributed to the reshaping of the novel, it is most likely that wartime politics played a major role in Fields's editorial choices. Fields records in his 1871 memoir *Yesterdays with Authors* that even though the well-established Hawthorne disagreed with his editorial discretion, Hawthorne "complied with his request without a murmur" to the revision of Hawthorne's article about meeting with President Lincoln (98). Fields admits to being too "squeamish" about printing potentially controversial material in the *Atlantic Monthly* when he edited Hawthorne's essay that was published only three months after Davis's very litigious short story "John Lamar" (April 1862) and three months before "David Gaunt" (September 1862) (98).

Due to the text's alterations and "incongruous insertions of 'full sunshine' into an otherwise stridently realistic work," Sharon Harris labels the novel a "failure in artistic terms" (62). Jean Fagan Yellin contends that Davis permitted the "feminization" of the text in order to appeal to a broader readership, which consequently, according to her, produced a more disjointed and diluted narrative than "Life in the Iron Mills" ("Feminization" 203). In one of the earliest known evaluations of the text (1962), James

C. Austin accuses Davis of “evok[ing] tears for tears’ sake” when she kills off her heroine Lois (47). Langford, however, marks the novel as Davis’s last serious and successful work before all the “sins she had committed in *Peterson’s Magazines*” that led her into a less serious career as a pulp fiction writer more interested in making a comfortable living for herself than creating art (51). Although Langford praises *Margret Howth* as a novel of “such genuine promise,” he declares that the novel’s significance rests in its historical place of an early work of Civil War fiction (21). Tillie Olsen echoed Langford’s sentiments when she revived Davis’s works at The Feminist Press in the 1970s, claiming the work “justifies re-evaluation, perhaps resurrection,” but that *Margret Howth* is also “awkward, sometimes embarrassingly bad” (71). Louise Duus agrees in labeling the novel as “standard sentimental fare” (277).

When contemporary scholars push past more stylistic problems of the novel, they still disagree about what the novel is actually about. In comparing *Margret Howth* with “Life,” critics tend to focus on Davis’s continuing criticism of industrialism, empty-hearted philanthropy, and the problematic aspects of fanatical abolitionism (Harris “Introduction” viii; Pfaelzer *Parlor* 75; Yellin “Feminization” 217). In keeping with her thematic concerns in “Life,” Davis exposes the downside of dogmatism, hyper-spiritualism, and American capitalism in *Margret Howth*. In *Parlor Radical*, Jean Pfaelzer marks the publication of Davis’s first full-length novel *Margret Howth* as a text greatly influenced by the “egoistic and solipsistic tendencies of transcendentalism” (12). Yellin identifies the novel’s central theme as a consideration about “whether or not American democracy can survive the effects of urban industrialization”; and although this analytical question arises in the conversations between Dr. Knowles and Samuel

Howth at the beginning of the novel, it takes a secondary role to the work's spiritual questions ("Feminization" 203). Pfaelzer, who classifies the novel as a hybrid of sentimentalism and realism, astutely remarks that the attributes of the text that are more sentimental "account for the considerable dissonance between the modern and contemporary receptions of *Margret Howth*. Nineteenth-century reviewers received the book enthusiastically, specifically praising its social concerns" (57). This "dissonance" between how the text was read initially and how it is reviewed now emerges from reviews. Harris's research refers to a review that has been identified as written by Henry James in the *Continental Monthly* from April 1862 that touts that "[t]he immense popularity which [*Margret Howth*] has acquired and the general praise awarded by the press, proves that it has gone right to the hearts of the people—whence it came" (qtd. in Harris 75). Considering the novel to have a broader scope than other critics, Pfaelzer writes about how the two literary approaches work together; but she also glosses over the spiritual aspects of the text by classifying any language that pays attention to spirituality as "affectional discourse" instead of treating the rhetoric as if it were a viable approach to affecting social change (56). Atteridge Rose gives the novel the fairest examination when she chooses not to focus on the work's idiosyncrasies, and she notes that Davis's interest in complicating her characters and their interdependence with each other in order to achieve redemption (ix 30).

Although Davis's works provide avenues for exposing social problems, the primary focus of *Margret Howth* shifts Davis's artistic statements from criticizing destructive schools of thought to suggesting an answer for the problems they create. Instead of attempting to impose social improvement from the top down by appealing to

the government, Davis esteems approaching progress by means of transforming the heart, viewing the advancement of society as an issue that works from the inside out. The “key” to solving Davis’s answer for a call to social justice in *Margret Howth* demands the Sunday school answer—Jesus—but the text does not pledge that following his example is so easy when the Self gets in the way (*MH* 264).

With shades and variations of the types she created in the characters of “Life”—the philanthropist, the deformed and subdued female, the selfish artist-intellectual, and the struggling factory worker—Davis enlarges the purpose of the exposé feature she used in “Life” by combining the narrator’s and Lois’s perspectives. Davis humanizes and complicates the characters of *Margret Howth*, baring all their flaws and good intentions so that readers gain privileged access to the sources of each character’s actions while they also receive a charge to show them compassion. While one voice reserves the right to challenge readers about their viewpoints, the other displays mercy without hesitation to every character she interacts with in the novel. Together, the narrator’s ridicule and Lois’s kindhearted actions forge a social directive rooted in the spiritual realm, calling readers to think critically and compassionately about people of different races, classes, and sexes. Davis unifies her characters in suffering and sin, and even though the causes for their miseries vary, the text pledges that Christ can heal them all.

While the narrator of “Life” serves as a guide into the unseen world of the mills, the narrator of *Margret Howth* changes the direction of Davis’s fiction, shifting the focus to the inner state of its characters. The narrator introduces the novel as having a singular purpose of exposing the “great warfare” of the soul (*MH* 6). When addressing the audience, the narrator affirms that the purpose of the work is “narrow in its scope and

aim,” promising to deliver an accurate portrait of how the individual’s “hand-to-hand struggle” with the Self affects others (3, 7). Davis makes the narrator self-aware of the fact that more graphic news from the battlefield would attract additional readership, but *Margret Howth* tells a tale from the borderlines of the Civil War when “[m]en ha[d] forgotten to hope, forgotten to pray” (3). In effect, the narrator anticipates criticism from the audience for her “dull, plain bit of prose” that relays a “stale and plebian” tale of common people (6). Davis’s interest in writing about the common, however, allows her to veil a political tale in the guise of a religious one because *Margret Howth* appeals to “less partial truths” than the sundry political dogmas coming from both North and South, redirecting readers from the need to develop their public opinion all because “[t]here is no need that we should feebly vaunt and madden ourselves over our self-seen rights, whatever they may be, forgetting what broken shadows they are of eternal truths” (4). Diehard partisanship, Davis realized, threatened the safety of the nation, but also the lives of the kinds of people she wrote about. At the beginning of the novel, this voice that cries for tolerance requires the surrender or suspension of the readers’ perceptions of their developed Selfhood so that they might be willing to consider a less popular point of view. The text suggests that the principles that have shaped its characters and the world around them elevate “Patriotism and Chivalry” above “the God-man,” who is Christ (4). Inherent in the narrator’s claim of objectivity lays the right to condemn any one character (or reader) that works against the text’s message of “Mercy and Love,” and throughout the text the narrator confronts each of them (4).

In “Life,” one-dimensional characters draw attention to the destructive effects of egocentric ideologies, but in *Margret Howth*, Davis balances the admonishments coming

from her narrator with the gentleness of the novel's only truly sacrificial character, Lois Yare. To moderate reproach with mercy, Davis positions her narrator's censure with Lois's inexhaustible kindness so that *Margret Howth* stresses the necessity of Christ's love (6). Contrasting the narrator, Lois does not speak of her gentle message as much as she demonstrates it through constant acts of service. Lois, whose practice of Christianity that is both practical and transcendent, provides a possible solution to the obsession with all the "creed-mania" and the individualism of the mid-nineteenth century (217).

Through Lois, readers see that faith and "social concerns" are inextricably linked; however, because the author conveys both profound disgust and deep respect for the Christian faith throughout her career, it has been extremely difficult to pinpoint the kind of faith Davis's writing condemns and the kind it espouses. Davis grew up Episcopalian, but throughout her life, she attacked various forms of Christianity that she believed to be more interested in polishing their doctrines than practicing Christian virtues like charity and mercy (*BOG* 30). Margret's mother is described as wearing "a Quaker cap" in the first chapter, but Davis never reveals anything else about the religion the family practices except that they were familiar with the Bible (*MH* 37). Davis chooses to use a Quaker for her heroic figure in "Life," but in *Bits of Gossip*, Davis accuses Quakers, Presbyterians, and Baptists of mistaking "dogmas for religion" and bringing much more harm to society than good (*BOG* 69). In fact, in *Bits of Gossip*, Davis would eventually blame the Quakers for fueling the fires of fanatical abolitionism during the Civil War that gave way to violence and undermined their pacifism (69, 109). At the beginning of *Margret Howth*, Davis draws together "Arians, Calvinists, [and] Churchmen," depicting them as insincere Christians who publicly announce their dedication to charity by printing their

alms in the newspaper while they refuse to address the actual plight of the needy in their city (17-18). In *Bits of Gossip*, Davis also writes about “[t]he mad craze for money” that took place during the mid- to late nineteenth century, which she believed to wreck simplicity and to stifle intellectual growth of Americans (70). In the same chapter of her memoir, she also writes that the secularized businessman who was “[t]he grandson of the Bible worshippers, still nominally a Christian,” was a much better person because he was less distracted with abstractions and church attendance than his forefathers and more concerned with humanitarian interests (71). Later in life, it seems that Davis came to believe that prosperity “softened” religious fanatics; but in the first decade of the twentieth century, she was writing after the Civil War and before World War I when society was more stable than it had been for most of her life (72).

At the time Davis was writing *Margret Howth*, she had not yet seen past the Civil War and the fate of the United States stood tenuously before her. To provide readers with a character of hope, Davis puts forth a character from the middle ground, borrowing tragedies coming from both sides of the war. As a biracial woman who has been crippled by the industrial system, Lois represents the damage suffered across the color lines as a product of a former slave and a drunken mill worker. She was born free, but still lives a life of insufferable poverty. Because Lois displays faith that overcomes her situation, she symbolizes the hope that can emerge from a broken and desperate situation. Modern readers of *Margret Howth* could classify Lois as a gross exploitation of race used to fashion a predictable saint, and although she may be rather pathetic, her character demands sympathy and expresses the sort of kindness that none of the rest of the characters is willing to show to others when they are more fortunate in their social and

economic statuses (Pfaelzer 58). As Yellin aptly states, “Lois exemplifies the Christian faith, hope, and charity (as well as the Christian suffering and transcendence) that are to save the nation” (“Afterword” 282).

Even though Lois comes as close as the novel gets to a heroic figure, Davis never intended to concentrate on one figure, and her original title “The Deaf and the Dumb” more accurately reflects her creative objective of studying the consequences of spiritual problems of “commonplace” people (6). Bibliographical research on the novel regarding its two name changes demonstrates how the title *Margret Howth* places a focus on Davis’s least favorite character in the work, one she called “the completest failure” of all, and has since misled some critics to read the character as the central figure of text (qtd. in Pfaelzer 37). Atteridge Rose claims “[t]he original intent of the first novel becomes more accessible in the light of its two early titles,” but she also reads Margret as the central character of the novel (33). Yellin asserts that “[d]espite its name, the story centers on Stephen Holmes” (“Feminization” 203). In the search for naming a singular character the sole focus of the text, Pfaelzer cites a letter from Davis to Fields on August 17, 1861 and affirms “Davis always saw Dr. Knowles as the center of the story” (63). To fashion an effective message of tolerance, however, Davis needed trade spotless heroes of past literary traditions for more believable characters. The narrator cautions readers that if they are looking for faultless princesses or infallible knights, they will not find them in this story of To-Day because the kind of hope the novel wishes to inspire will not come from myth (*MH* 101). Forsaking even her own model Quaker heroine of “Life in the Iron Mills,” Davis employs clearly flawed characters to maintain the text’s goal of “show[ing] you men and women as they are” so that they must face the moral gray areas (105).

Despite all the critical bickering about identifying the novel's main character, the narrator names the complexly egotistical yet softhearted follower of Charles Fourier as the novel's "hero" (105). After apologizing in advance to readers for dashing any of their hopes for a more virtuous man, the narrator questions them if they, "being prepared for disappointment," will meet Stephen Holmes (105). When readers meet Holmes, he has already forsaken his romantic commitment to Margret, and instead, nurtured his love of money and his Self by proposing to the beautiful heiress Miss Herne to secure his fortune to afford himself the luxury of advancing his intellect. Later in the chapter, Holmes finalizes his business transaction with the novel's philanthropist, Dr. Knowles, using the money from his fiancé's dowry to purchase Knowles's share of the wool mill.

Davis uncovers the root of Holmes's selfish economical maneuvering when the chapter describes the fallen hero's ideological incentives: Holmes, like Mitchell in "Life," esteems the doctrine of the infallible "will" that subdues "all influences, such as beauty, pain, [and] religion" (105). Holmes tells himself that he "practise[s] self-denial constantly to strengthen the benevolent instincts" by giving away his own pocket money to cripples, yet underneath his charity lay "the American motto" of individual expansion and elevation—whether in regard to his intellectual faculties or his capital wealth (120-1). After Holmes has been established as a believer in the religion of the Self, the narrator draws a comical portrait of the selfish romantic in nature. Facing west, toward the unsettled American landscape, Holmes concludes that somewhere in the vast horizon, there lies a sense of "savage freedom" that awakens "the untamed animal man, self-reliant and self-assertant" (107). This quality of freedom he deems "good for the soul"; yet, only certain types of souls (his being one of them) can handle this liberty (107).

When he thinks of Knowles's "hobby" of redeeming "slavish beggars and thieves in the alleys," Holmes skeptically muses about whether or not they will ever "comprehend this fierce freedom" that Knowles wishes to teach them (107).

To measure the strengths and weaknesses of two popular ideological dispositions of her day, Davis pits the philosophies of Knowles and Holmes against each other: Holmes adhering to his motto of self-sufficiency, and Knowles championing the institutional approach to charity. The two of them discuss which will help Lois most: alleviating her physical problems or awaking her to the divinity of her Self (111-112). As the two of them observe Lois's deformity, they converse about her "artist's gift" for arranging her vegetable cart (110). They debate whether or not she possesses the strength to assume a position like Holmes has done—a scene that hearkens back to the three men watching Hugh in the iron mill. Here, Davis criticizes the dangers of solipsism inherent in America's "unchecked liberty" because although Holmes's ideology touts the elevation of Self and knowledge of truth, it also absolves him from any form of responsibility to others (108). Moreover, Holmes's belief in recognizing latent genius in the poor masks his pretentiousness and hesitation to interact with the lower classes.

Holmes claims that Lois only turns to religion because her "soul is so starved and blind that it cannot recognize itself as God" (111-112). Both men are cynical about religion, but Knowles, who is described as "unbelieving" early in the text, cannot agree with Holmes's conclusion because if each individual were to be wholly self-sufficient, then one could not account for Lois's extreme poverty and severe physical injuries that were presumably caused by her grueling work in the mill early in her life (46). Both Knowles and Holmes exhibit keen intuitions about the plight of others, but because they

have submitted to the dogmas of self-preservation and duty, they stifle their capacity to help them.

In pairing these two characters, Davis mediates the censure of these two men by curtailng Holmes's selfish disposition with his hidden charity toward the Yare family and polluting Knowles's humanitarian zeal with his cold-heartedness. Through the narrator's insights, readers find that a thirst for knowledge drives Holmes's snobbery and diminishes his kindlier nature. Despite Holmes's giving lip service to the laissez-faire approach to socio-economic concerns, he helps Lois by getting her away from the wool mill that has damaged her body by setting her up as a tinker. And although Knowles warns Holmes about dismissing the possibility of finding "some God outside the mean devil they call 'Me,'" Knowles later considers himself his own god when he reduces Margret to a tool for his own charitable plans (114). Davis depicts Knowles's drive to exorcise the world's "ghosts of Want and Hunger and Crime" with his philanthropy with dual imagery when at times his reformist actions appear almost demonic, while other times exaggeratedly sympathetic (116). In this respect, Knowles's character seems much like John May of "Life"—a known philanthropist sensitive to the social and economic hardships of others yet blind to the injustices of his own heart. Knowles and May's connection ends in their sympathies.

Throughout the text, Davis scrutinizes Knowles's misappropriation of Christianity for fulfilling his philanthropic exploits. Davis makes a ridiculous and almost humorous comparison of Margret's confinement to a life of soulless obligation with that of a "miserable pecking chicken" caged in the wool mill (11). When Margret wants to give the animal a happier life in the country, Knowles tells her to leave it alone because God

has created it with “work to do” (14). Just as Knowles applies this charge of godly duty to the chicken, he also pushes Christian obligation onto Margret after taking her to the seamy side of the city, convincing her that “God calls [her] to the work” he has set forth in his own workhouse (152). Knowles knows and disregards Margret’s desire to have a husband and a family someday, mocking her lowly dreams and assuring her that God reserved her for serving the less fortunate (152). Even though Knowles does not believe in God, he manipulates Margret’s sense of “religious duty” to accomplish his goals of social reform while overlooking her desires (189). In effect, as Deanda Little states, “[b]y aligning his purposes with religious ones, Dr. Knowles insists that Margret either conforms herself to his vision or admits that she is defiling the will of God” (35). When discussing Margret’s entrance into the House of Refuge with the Reverend Vandyke, the pastor accuses Knowles of speaking of her “as if she were a machine” that would “work on ‘the classes’” (*MH* 216). Vandyke responds to Knowles’s plans by asking him to proceed with his project with trepidation because he has begun to take on the role of God (217). Once more, the text compares Knowles with Holmes because both of them position themselves as gods—one as an aloof, disembodied deity, and the other, as a scheming redeemer—and neither of them possesses the conversional power of Lois’s devotion to the teachings of Christ.

Although Knowles’s philanthropy consumes him, the narrator also equitably interjects on his behalf, and pleads with the audience to grant him clemency because of his ethnic background as a member of “a despised race,” and some other unidentified sources sadness (50). Davis anticipated the demographics of the *Atlantic Monthly* readership to be full of those who prided themselves on their open-mindedness, but she

also knew that even the most tolerant and educated readers would want to categorize her characters in absolutes. For better or for worse, Davis draws Knowles closer to the audience so that he appears less villainous, and instead, more tainted by the “creed-mania” that corrupts his sympathies for the poor (217). The narrator labels Dr. Knowles as an “intolerant fanatic,” but assuages the insult by demanding that readers consider the man’s background before writing off his passion as purely one-dimensional (179). The narrator warns them not to “sneer at Knowles” because “[y]our own clear, tolerant brain, that reflects all men and creeds alike, like colourless water, drawing the truth from all, is very different, doubtless, from this narrow, solitary soul, who thought the world waited for him to fight down his one evil before it went on its slow way” (179). Later, the narrator assures readers that “we will forgive him” for his impatience about having his dreams actualized because surely, if anyone were to have their hopes “destroyed by some chance,” they too would be resentful of others who had gotten what they wanted (182).

Although the text does not indict Knowles for his glut of compassion, it exposes Knowles’s chief preoccupation with charity as incompletely developed. As the narrator criticizes the audience for wanting to judge Knowles’s myopic vision, she also pokes fun at Knowles’s dourness and his frustration with a God who “did not see how much His universe needed our pet reform” (181). Knowles is a “fanatic” about reform, but he misses what the text supports as the most elementary ingredient to achieving true charity: kindness. In the moments when “old-fashioned hymns brought the tears to his eyes,” Knowles comes closer to knowing the soul behind his impulse to spearhead his charitable projects, but the emotions evoked by the songs are only momentary because he remains hard-hearted toward Holmes (183). During Holmes’s stay in the hospital, Knowles fails

to adopt the most effective kind of “homely live charity” showed by the Catholic sisters for the love of “his abstract theory” (179). Because Knowles believes that “all reforms were to be accomplished by a wrench,” he cannot understand the approach of gentler sort of reform than his own (178). For a moment when he beholds the stars outside the hospital window, Knowles experiences “infinite love and justice” (184-185). But then, upon picking up a newspaper full of bad news, his moment of hope passes and he reverts to depending on his own faculties to save the world from itself (185). Without embracing the peace or promise of “To-Morrow” that comes from Christ, Knowles cannot subdue his troubled conscience of allowing people to suffer in poverty (262). Yet Davis shows that for all his drive, Knowles fails to improve the state of welfare in his city.

Unlike Knowles or Holmes, Margret does not live by any specific creed or standard of faith, so she does not fall into the same category of Knowles’s futile dogmatism or the Holmes’s conflicting abstractions. Her personal battle with her Self surfaces when she tries to determine her place among men when she gives up her dream of being Holmes’s wife. Aimlessly searching for fulfillment throughout the novel, Margret is the most lukewarm and underdeveloped of all the primary characters. As an “ordinary” female character who is neither angel nor temptress, Margret responds to others out of her own romantic disappointment and fails repeatedly in the attempt to find joy in her Christian duties (Atteridge Rose 32). Atteridge Rose views Margret as a stand-in for Davis, but if the author is inserting herself into the text, she draws a considerably unforgiving portrait of herself in doing so (27). Readers never gain access to Margret’s opinions through her voice. Instead, they must rely upon the narrator to reveal any of the character’s thoughts. Margret follows the lead of men who will use her, whether Holmes

or Knowles. Even when she finally agrees to marry Holmes, she does not answer him in the affirmative, but says only, "I'm tired" and dramatically lays her head on his chest to avoid having to speak (*MH* 239). In addition to her default reaction of silent obedience, Margret also actively spites Holmes. After Holmes's accident, Margret does not bother to help Lois while her former lover recovers in the hospital. She disregards concern of others to brood in her own pain of working a miserable job and living without romantic love. Instead of forgiving Holmes when he apologizes to her once he is well, she meets his confession and plea for a second chance with nothing more than "polite words" (229). When Margret denies her own physical and emotional desires of having a husband when she rejects Holmes for the second time, she withholds mercy from him not because she does not love him, but because she wishes to inflict emotional pain on him as he has done to her. She tells Holmes she is "contented" without him because she has found her life's work in public charity instead of in home making, but she does not demonstrate the kind of mercy to forgive someone in her own intimate circle (230).

Margret, quite opposite Lois, fails to demonstrate any "real" faith throughout the entire novel (201). In Margret, Davis establishes a more convincing character that struggles to "accept the work of each moment" because of her own disenchantment with romantic love (266). Even though Margret feels as if she should use her life to serve the needy, she only chooses to do so because her first desire to be a wife and mother was thwarted by Holmes's selfish ambitions to marry Miss Herne. Because she continues to grieve her loss of Holmes, Margret conjures guilt for people she never cared about before—not even someone she considers a friend. While she walks alongside Lois's cart early in the novel, Margret reiterates Holmes's distrust of Lois's ability to perceive "the

eternal laws of beauty or grandeur,” but she herself fails to grasp them (65). Margret may endure a hard lot, but she still cannot relate to those she views as lacking in character or resources. Lois displays genuine sympathy and calls on God’s mercy for people of “very lowest” state in society who are “starved ’n’ drunk into jails ‘n’ work-houses, that ’d scorn to be cowardly or mean,” but Margret considers this talk “heresy” (71). In sharp contrast to her early disgust for the city lowlifes, Margret throws all her passions into her so-called holy work after Knowles has transmitted his mechanical approach of reform onto her, turning her into an “automaton” (225). Once more, Davis exposes the problems of institutionalizing sympathy, indicating that such a guise of altruism conceals personal bitterness and ultimately undercuts the cause. Many scholars misread this, believing Margret has transformed somehow. For this, Langford describes Holmes as “unworthy” of Margret and his change as “contrived,” but this judgment ignores one of the prime purposes of the text in displaying mercy and allowing for personal redemption (10, 21). Holmes, who has experienced love transmitted by Lois’s care for his physical body, grasps the power of Christian charity while Margret avoids the giving or receiving of love altogether, which is also noteworthy because Margret professes to be a Christian while Holmes does not.

Along with the rest of the tainted characters in the novel, Margret also receives a conciliatory assessment from the narrator, who attributes Margret’s callousness to her poverty and loneliness. These reasons do not excuse her behavior completely, but according to the text, they account for her inconsolable and stubborn nature, particularly in regard to forgiving Holmes for abandoning her. Also, because her father cannot work any longer and she must work to provide for the family, she has limited economic options

if she does not marry. Even though Holmes claims he loves Margret, he leaves her to “become what [he] ought to be” (142). Had Margret married Holmes in the beginning, she could have taken the role of wife and mother without having to work outside the home. Without this domestic obligation, she searches for meaning in her work. Almost immediately after the estranged couple discusses their relationship for the first time in the text, Knowles appears and attempts to convince Margret that she should not think of such lowly dreams when so many others could use her help (149-151). The narrator discloses that even when Margret was not ready to agree to Knowles’s plan, “he knew that the struggle was yet to come; that, when she was alone, her faith in the far-off Christ would falter; that she would grasp at this work, to fill her empty hands and starved heart, if for no other reason,—to stifle by a sense of duty her unutterable feeling of loss” (157). Duty substituting for love eventually provides for Margret a passable excuse to keep living even if she tells Knowles that her love for Holmes “is the best gift God has given” to her (157). To accept Knowles’s new vision for her life, she must grow hard and forsake her dream of God answering her prayer that Holmes would someday return to her. Giving Margret privacy for bewailing the broken relationship, the narrator leaves out the details of the young woman’s anguish after coming home, claiming that “the story of the night is not for us to read” (159). While Margret mourns, the narrator mercifully draws the audience’s attention away from her, and conjures the image of a Christ with “human eyes that had loved, and not been loved, and had suffered with that pain” as well (159). Focusing on the human incarnation of the Christian God, Davis elevates instead of degrades humanity, representing Margret’s view of the relationship between God and humankind as vital and deeply individual.

Although Stephen Holmes is dubbed the hero by the narrator, the concluding paragraph in the novel points to Lois Yare as the most consistent and successful character in affecting positive change in others all because of her faith in the kind of humanity modeled by the “God-man” of Jesus Christ (266). Lois’s misfortunes and lack of intellect position her in exactly the place where modern critics will echo Holmes’s early sentiment that she naturally defaults to religion because she is helpless and uneducated. Christianity’s assurance of freedom, reward, and rest in the afterlife alleviates the pain of the current life, so it logically appeals to someone who is as downtrodden as Lois. At the beginning of the novel Holmes views this religious devotion as repressive, but for Lois, faith animates life instead of confines it. From the color and arrangement of her tinker’s cart to the modest decorations of her tiny apartment, Lois’s capacity to “drink every drop of [life’s] beauty and joy” takes on a physical nature given to her by God (266).

Even though “the slow years of ruin that had eaten into her brain,” Lois maintains “trust in the Master” that allows her to view those above and below her in moral and economic achievement as equally deserving and in need of God’s love and her service (69). Despite Lois’s hope for brighter days, her faith never keeps her from helping others in the present, and no complex set of sacred tenets restricts her. Davis purposely does not ever put Lois inside a church or mention a denomination that could be affiliated with her. By taking the Christian faith out of the church building and manifesting its purest form in Lois’s simple joy, Davis draws a parallel conclusion about the institutionalization of faith and labor. Both systems strip the human spirit from the experience, mechanizing worshipful service as well as work. Neither Knowles’s grim drudgery of obligation nor Holmes’s self-focused ethereal philosophy exemplifies the right balance of physical and

spiritual aspects as Lois's faith makes evident. One way of life suffers without the capacity for the freedom of soul, while the other does not acknowledge the needs of the physical body. Davis draws attention to the importance of keeping both aspects of humanity in proper relation to the other because otherwise, reality does indeed become "vulgar" as it invalidates one crucial facet of life or another (6). Lois's faith, in contrast with that of Holmes and Knowles, acknowledges both the physical and the spiritual needs of others.

In an outpouring of her faith, Lois nurses Holmes after he almost dies in the mill fire where she "perhaps, was the most real thing in life to him" (*MH* 177). Through Lois's attention to Holmes's ailing body, she also ministers to his spirit. As Christmas draws closer, Holmes marks how "real" and "beautiful" Lois's faith is so that he even begins to wish he could claim to have one that is so alive (201). While Lois cares for him, Holmes experiences the Christian faith in practice and for the first time, he understands the meaning of "*Love* coming into the world," which "pleased his artistic taste, being simple and sublime" (201).<sup>1</sup> In this respect, Lois's faith works on softening Holmes by grounding his artistic sensibilities in her actions, not by impinging on his "faith of Fichte" by debating with him (244). As a consequence, Lois, not Margret, gives Holmes the gift of physical healing and instills in him belief in spiritual redemption.

Despite Davis's many changes to the original manuscript to make the text more approachable and cheerier, not every character experiences a drastic change of heart by the end of the novel. If readers examine the text closely, the corny Christmas scene at the novel's close imparts Davis's most profound plea for mercy for her characters when it leaves their transformations unfinished, calling to mind the image of the groping kohl

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<sup>1</sup> Emphasis in original.

woman in “Life.” The narrator warns readers in the beginning of the text that the novel will “roughly outline” how the people in the novel “conquered or were worsted in the fight” against themselves (7). In the original text of “The Deaf and the Dumb,” Davis intended to kill off Knowles at the Battle of Manassas, but in rewriting the manuscript, she saved him from becoming cannon fodder, yet not from his own disappointment in his own unsuccessful attempts at philanthropy (Pfaelzer 74). At the end of the novel, Knowles’ sour disposition stands in opposition to Lois’s hope because he “doubts everything in the bitterness of wasted effort” (264). In addition, although critics like Duus and Atteridge Rose view Margret and Stephen’s marriage as an easy way to affix a sentimental ending to the novel, the narrator describes Margret as only minimally affected by the events that have taken place (Duus 277, Atteridge Rose 32). Margret comes to know “[s]omething of Lois’s live, universal sympathy” by the end of the novel, yet Davis leaves her only partially changed (*MH* 266). Margret emerges not as astoundingly victorious, but still struggling to comprehend how to practice Lois’s lessons of humble service and joy in the “common things of every-day” (265).

Langford’s claim that *Margret Howth* is rife with “promise” speaks oddly enough to the text’s goals of expressing a realistic yearning within the novel’s characters that unites them all in their distress (18). With the exception of Lois, each character’s progress freezes, unresolved by the end of the text. Langford uses the word “promise” to imply that the novel guarantees and does not deliver something essential, but that inconclusiveness at the end of the novel simultaneously unites its audience as well as its characters in the assumption that the search for truth begs them to consider how they will choose to live as they seek out an answer. Margret and Knowles in particular represent

those who have not yet “conquered” the battle of the Self that the narrator warns about in the first pages of the text. They, however, remain “voices of God” that offer insight into the lifelong struggle for the “hand-to-hand struggle all the sad, slow way” (*MH* 7).

Although the narrator supports the faith of the “Child-souls” like Lois, she acknowledges that many who read the novel would, like Margret, not know “the Helper yet waits near” (266). Not tidying up Margret or Knowles allows readers to view the text as one that chronicles the frustrated development of the soul. Instead of expecting the audience to take away from the text a simple answer, the narrator validates the labor of searching for this answer.

To draw disparate characters of the novel together in their searching, Davis associates various forms of the word “grope.” In different circumstances throughout the novel, the word describes the constant, unnamable longing in Margret, Stephen Holmes, Dr. Knowles, Mr. Howth, and the narrator. Each instance pertains to the most distressing areas of the characters’ lives. The word first appears in relation to Margret’s difficulty in getting used to working at the mill when she must “grope her way” to the office (15). Next, Margret’s nearly blind father engages in an unsuccessful conversation with Dr. Knowles about the need for political reform when he “tried to push the thin gray hairs out of his eyes in a groping way” (24). Then, in a harsh look at Stephen Holmes’s motivations “*to grow*,”<sup>2</sup> the narrator notes that Stephen’s Self “had forced him to grope his way up, to give this hungry, insatiate soul air and freedom and knowledge” at the cost of forfeiting his fellow-man (121). Again, Holmes is described as “groping” in a very different manner when he tries to “comprehend the sudden, awful change that had come on him” when he is no longer self-sufficient while Lois cares for him in the hospital

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<sup>2</sup> Emphasis in original.

(177). In relaying his reform plans to Reverend Vandyke, Knowles himself states that it “[s]eems as if I were to go groping and stumbling through the world like some forsaken Cyclops with his eye out, dragging down whatever I touched” (215). At last, the narrator of the tale claims to “strive to grope, with dull, earthy sense, at [Lois’s] freed life in that earnest land where souls forget to hunger or to hope, and learn to be. And so thinking, the certainty of her aim and her work and love yonder comes with a new, vital reality” (263). Lois, the only main character not pictured as “groping” toward anything, has ascertained the quality of being that has only partially entered the lives of the others where it “grows vague and incomplete” (264).

Connoting a clumsy, stumbling search, this awkward word expresses how those who “grope” suffer from a loss of hope in the power of Christ, and are consequently rendered blind. From the text’s point of view, they forfeit the power to affect lasting changes upon their lives or the lives of others. Visionless without Christ, Samuel Howth, Dr. Knowles, and Margret relate to each other because their blindness. The myopic secessionist Samuel Howth is paralleled with Knowles, who calls himself a “Cyclops.” The subtle difference in these characters comes from the causes of their blindness. According to the text, while one is impaired by his age and outdated theories, the other is limited by his monstrous ambition. The two men argue their positions on social systems, but their visions are too obscured to successfully communicate. Davis draws Margret into the imagery of blindness as she seeks to find her position in society through her work at the mill as she serves her family. Later, when Margret agrees to work with Knowles in his commune experiment, she is described as going “on blindly” (154). While the two men are blinded by rigid principles, duty blinds Margret, whether she is working for the

welfare of her parents or for humankind. All three of these characters fail to help anyone else in the novel: Mr. Howth must be cared for by others because of his literal blindness, trading his role of parent for child; Knowles loses all his money in his purchase of the mill so that the only way he knows how to help anyone is taken from him; and Margret barely falls into her “true work” as a wife by the end of the novel because she is weary of guessing her destiny through other avenues (243).

Neither Holmes nor the narrator is depicted as blind, yet in their states of groping throughout the text, these two voices exhibit very different approaches to attaining “determined truth” (264). For Holmes, freedom comes from the elevation of the Self, but his doctrine taken to its logical end nearly ruins him. On two occasions the narrator warns readers to “be just to him, stand by him, if we can, in the midst of his desolate home and desolate life” (117). Before the mill fire injures Holmes, the narrator shows his knowledge and success coming at the cost of constantly having to suppress his dreams of happy marriage and fatherhood. After leaving Margret so that he can “yield to self-reverence and self-growth,” Stephen trades the simplicity of his former life for one of constantly striving toward an abstract and unattainable ideal of himself (127). When Holmes remembers his father’s “weak ravings” from his deathbed, he recalls the phrase him saying “God was love,” but to him, only a God like that would be the Lord of “women, and children, and unsuccessful men” (138). Holmes views love as a childish fancy that hinders the growth of the all-important Self. Once Holmes changes heart under Lois’s care, the narrator again addresses her audience, preempting any conclusions that the selfish man has finally gotten what he deserves when he begins to see his life as a waste: “Wait until you go down so close to eternity that the life you have lived stands out

before you in the dreadful bareness in which God sees it” (194). At this moment, Holmes’s platform of Self-divination disintegrates, and the text reaffirms that those who might seek fulfillment by following this path will be ultimately disappointed in their transcendental pursuits.

From the moderating voice of the narrator also comes also an admission: her wrestling of spirit has not yet ended. Davis inserts the narrator into the text as an actual presence (much like she does after Hugh’s death in “Life), and the work of the narrator moves slowly. Although freedom is grasping Lois’s “freed life” and ability “to be” through her faith in God, the narrator has not attained it by the end of the text (263). The narrator exhibits a sort of moral privilege over the characters in the novel in the sense that she can relay their inner lives without romanticizing or demonizing them; however, when she confesses that she too yearns to be in Lois’s place of contentment, Davis infuses a troubled conscience and flawed nature into her own narrator. The narrator attempts to take the “certainty of [Lois’s] aim and work” into the earthly realm, but as the narrator speaks to incite change in the here and now—the “To-Day”—she cannot make sense of the injustice of Lois’s unnecessary death (263). As Harris states, Davis proclaims the disturbing effects of “Americans’ willingness to scramble toward the latest ‘ism’” through “Margret’s solidified Christianity or Knowles’s communism or Holmes’s Fichtan transformation of the Self” (67). Lois’s death does not save any one of the characters, and within the novel, “[t]here is no promise that God’s mercy *will* prevail” in transforming the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century American society (Harris 67). In the world of the text, the narrator leaves it for Margret to figure out, and for the audience to consider once the novel ends.

Regardless of extensive revisions, *Margret Howth* establishes Davis's uniquely nonpartisan but radical stance in her fiction—an approach she uses the rest of her life in order to make both political and spiritual statements in her work. Amidst images of warring brothers, Davis's narrator reminds readers of “the meek Nazarene, which we have deafened down as ill-timed,” in the daily lives of those away from the battlefields (4). Langford's comment about the historical importance of the novel deepens with this in mind because Atteridge Rose claims that Davis opted to write “nonpolemically” about the Civil War, but Davis develops rhetoric of peace and tolerance in this novel rarely heard at the time (Atteridge Rose ix). With the Civil War looming in the background of novel, references to “the storm that was to shake the earth” Davis prepares readers for showing them the consequences carrying unmediated personal conflict onto the battlefield (*MH* 197). As the next chapter concludes, Davis was certainly interested in writing about the War more explicitly in the *Atlantic Monthly*, but as she elects not to support the North or the South, she writes an overtly political argument from the middle ground (geographically and philosophically) for considering Christ's calls for pacifism.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### “David Gaunt”: Pacifism from the Borderlines of the American Civil War

After enduring the editing debacle of *Margret Howth*, Davis threatened to leave the Ticknor & Fields Company by reminding Fields that other publishers were pursuing her work and they were willing to pay her more money for her writing (Harris 82). According to Sharon Harris, Fields did not want to lose the talent of this promising author, so he paid Davis a lavish \$200 upfront for her Civil War story “David Gaunt” shortly after receiving her letter (82). Davis continued to write critically about American life, and in her Civil War stories, particularly “John Lamar,” “David Gaunt,” and “Blind Tom,” she chronicles the darkest elements of the war, indicting both sides for the prejudice and violence they justified because of political and personal convictions. Of these three short stories, “David Gaunt” deals least in overtly racial issues, and it primarily concentrates on confronting the misuse of Christian faith for fashioning a platform for war. Previous works directly contest the spreading of unrestrained capitalism, corporate philanthropy, and the veneration of individualism, but as Harris states, “Davis’s themes in ‘Gaunt’ echo those of ‘Life’ and *Howth*, but the battlefield has become a literal rather than a figurative scene” (93). Opinion regarding Davis’s use of her skill during the war years varies, with the repeated assertion that her talent was squandered on sentimentalism packaged for mass consumption instead of developed into a more impactful literary art form. According to Elaine Showalter, with “the requisite familiarity with both North and South, the appreciation of language and prophecy, the dual perspective of an insider and an outsider, [and] the willingness to deal with both

masculine and feminine experience,” Davis should have been “the ideal author of a distinguished Civil War novel” (136). Showalter, however, writes that despite all Davis’s potential, she missed her calling and instead chose to write “tepid and conventional” pieces for the *Atlantic Monthly* during the Civil War (136). When Showalter references these aspects of Davis’s work, she may be referring to Dody Scofield and Douglas Palmer’s marriage at the end of “David Gaunt,” but the short story’s message of pacifism could hardly be categorized as “conventional” for its day.

Davis, who was writing realistic fiction, differed from her literary counterparts in her method and message by maintaining the spirit of the exposé while confronting political and religious issues without the aim of creating more dissidents. As Harris notes, “few created the realistic depictions of war that Davis offered, and even fewer published them while the war was in progress” (81). During the 1850s and 1860s, writers like Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs were writing nonfiction that brought to light their incredible hardships and awakened empathizers to incite social change on the behalf their cause. Popular nonfiction accounts sensationalized and polarized audiences. Just a year before Fields published “David Gaunt,” Edward A. Pollard released a proslavery argument in *Black Diamonds Gathered in the Darkey Homes of the South*, claiming that extending slavery would benefit the world in upholding the empire of the South (*Cambridge History* 256). Alice Fahs outlines some of the types of literary interest during the war in her book *The Imagined Civil War*, and in her research of the “sensational,” she remarks that writers unconcerned with spreading propaganda worked with a nearly antithetical purpose to Davis as they were “drawing on melodrama,” they were “rejecting a ‘commonplace’ war” to turn tragedy into excitement (227). Davis also

departed from the more traditionally sentimental female fiction writers who told stories through nursing the wounded and lecturing about the importance of patriotism during the war. The action in Davis's Civil War-era stories takes place mostly away from the battlefield, and though David Gaunt becomes a nurse by the end of the text (also changing the gender stereotype of the literature), his role in the profession provides a symbolic meaning, not a setting.

To avoid writing too sentimentally about the war, Davis hybridized fiction and journalism without siding with the politics of unionists like New York Tribune editor Horace Greeley or Edward Pollard, who eventually edited the secessionist paper, the *Richmond Daily Examiner*. Davis, however, wanted to position herself outside both of these partisan positions to assess the repercussions of the Northern and Southern perspectives. Only a month before the release of "David Gaunt," Abraham Lincoln wrote to the *New York Tribune*, addressing Greeley and defending his political decisions, stating famously, "My paramount object in this struggle is to save the Union, and is not either to save or destroy slavery" (652). Davis and Lincoln are similar in the sense that they present their opinions as duties, one claiming to do right by God, and the other, by the country. Just eight months before "David Gaunt" opened the *Atlantic Monthly*, Fields had printed the famous "Battle Hymn of the Republic" in the February 1862 issue—a song that justifies the war with an appropriation of God's great plan of spiritual liberation and divine justice (Howe 10). Although heartening to a camp of soldiers, grieving widows or sonless mothers, the song's battle cry starkly contrasts the pacifism Davis promotes in her short story. Written at the beginning of the Civil War, "David Gaunt"

laments the fatal explosion of clashing doctrines from the North and the South while it also portends all the damage inflicted by eager activists with their bloody hands.

Transitioning from focusing on the interpersonal realm in *Margret Howth* and returning to address the broader, more political impact of systems of belief, Davis questions the dignity of the Civil War. She particularly attacks Christians who are willing to set aside what she deemed to be Christ's irrefutable call to non-resistance for the sake of an intangible notion of honor. In *Bits of Gossip*, Davis reminisces about how "[w]e all like to think the great national convulsion was caused by an outbreak of pure patriotism, of chivalry, of self-sacrifice in both North and South" (79). "David Gaunt," which was written almost fifty years prior to her memoir, demonstrates that Davis regarded the fanaticisms of both sides to be clearly out of line with Christian scripture from the very start of the war. The majority of the criticism on the text focuses on Davis challenging "the romanticization of the war," but none of it has really explored how Davis boldly confronts and convicts Christians who choose to enlist in the army on the basis of a religious belief (Pfaelzer 15). Davis recognizes that both sides fighting against each other bear the "heirship of opinion" of their upbringing and environment, but she reminds her readers that holding onto such inflexible dogmas leads to violence ("DG" 57).

All of the characters in "David Gaunt" respond to Christianity's teaching of nonviolence, and the commitment to or abandonment of pacifism on the account of faith serves as an allegory for how Davis predicts the United States will fare after the Civil War ends. Amidst the short story's classic themes of betrayal, romance, and redemption, Davis delivers what her narrator calls a "modern" tale that communicates some of her

most blatant political statements through the filter of her narrator and Dody Scofield's faith in "a living Jesus" (42). Dode, whom the narrator names the principal character of the text, draws from the unbiased kindness of *Margret Howth's* Lois Yare and she compensates for the mercy Margret Howth lacks. Davis closes the distance between her narrator and leading female character in "David Gaunt" as they frequently share the same point of view on the war. In this short story, Davis explores how Christianity can be misappropriated and used to destroy lives, yet conversely, when focused on the message of Christ, Christians can affect far more lasting influence than a legion of well-trained soldiers. Davis straightforwardly rejects any form of Christianity that regards patriotism or social causes in higher esteem than human life, especially American clergy like David Gaunt who "[p]reach peace by murder," and she invokes the pacifism of Dode Scofield to save others from spiritual and physical death (64).

Davis knew that her primary audience for "David Gaunt" was full of Federal army sympathizers familiar with stereotypes of the southern states, so she could choose a side, write a story as partisan propaganda, and still get away with it; yet she chose to form "David Gaunt" from sentiments that grew from her own experience and her conviction about the wantonness of both sides. In a letter to her Northern friend Annie Fields in August 1862, Davis wrote of her "irrepressible loathing" for the war and that she wishes her friend "could only see the other side enough to see the wrong the tyranny on both" (qtd. in Pfaelzer 95). Davis's own disgust with the war intrudes into the text, sharpening her critiques of nationalist tendencies of viewing the United States as infallible or as some kind of new Israel, justified in rampant slaughter as long as it was done in the name of godly duty. Later, Davis would recall the Civil War years as a time when war was

raised to the level of a “beneficent deity, which not only adds to the national honor but uplifts a nation and develops patriotism and courage. That is all true. But it is only fair, too, to let them know that the garments of the deity are filthy but that some of her influences debase and befoul people” (*BOG* 80). This witty remark could have been written on a press release of “David Gaunt,” with its relentless judgment visited upon all excuses made for committing violence under any banner.

To challenge the valor of battle in her own story, Davis references John Bunyan’s *A Pilgrim’s Progress*, which had become “an established classic book for children” and adults alike (xiii). “David Gaunt” questions the tradition of depicting the Christian as a warrior. Davis, who admits in *Bits of Gossip* that she grew up on Bunyan’s exciting tales of this Christian myth, draws attention to the great harm of adopting an earthly soldier’s creed instead of following the nonviolent example of Christ (*BOG* 36). After reminding the audience about Bunyan’s fight against Apollyon, the narrator asks, “Where is Apollyon?” and, “does he put himself into flesh and blood, as then, nowadays?” (“DG” 24). The popular tale accounts for Christian’s battle against Satan that gives him entrance to heaven, but the narrator questions how the religious myth has provided a dangerously militant language and attitude to professors of the Christian faith. Adapting Bunyan’s language of justified war, the narrator of “David Gaunt” defines the Scofield family’s southern position: “they were Christian, and Rebellion and Infidelity Apollyon” (25). Just like in *Margret Howth*, the narrator compares the classic tales of chivalry—of queens and castles, battles and dragons—with the grim and common because “[i]n these Virginia hills,” the Scofields have met their own kind of devil in the war, their point of view needing to be defended to the death (25). By naming that opposing force the

“devil,” the narrator cleverly illustrates how utterly opposite from each other these forces perceive themselves to be. The narrator pledges to reveal “the different ways they chose to combat him; the weapons they used” in the fight (25). Some characters in “David Gaunt” choose weapons of metal and others fight with weapons brandished by the tongue. In her typical fashion, Davis will not allow her readers to stay one-sided by the end of text.

As seen previously in Davis’s fiction, the narrator cautions readers that in order to get into the psyche of the characters in the text, first they will have to be willing to suspend prejudice while confronting presumably different points of view. Before moving into the action of the story, the narrator reminds Northern readers that they adhere to “the creed, government, bit of truth, other human heart, self, perhaps” just “like a cuttle-fish sucking to an inch of rock” (26). In the place of a nobler image of a loyal dog or brave warrior, Davis inserts a degrading, lowly fish to connote the sentiment that showing allegiance has less to do with brains or respect, but more to do with habit and environment. Even the narrator, whom Davis aligns with the Northern perspective, cannot escape the predominant point of view of the region: when she<sup>1</sup> uses the pronoun “we,” the narrator owns the indicting pronouncement that

[w]e call this a narrow life, prate in the North of our sympathy with the universal man, don’t we? And so we extend a stomachic greeting to our Spanish brother that sends us wine, and a bow from our organ of ideality to Italy for beauty incarnate in Art, —see the Georgian slaveholder only through the eyes of the cowed negro at his feet (27).

Revealing the selective sympathy and the facile categorization of regions in the U.S. during the Civil War, the narrator introduces the Confederate sympathizer Joe Scofield to

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<sup>1</sup> The narrator identifies as female when she affirms that, “[n]ot being a man,” she cannot wholly and accurately describe Palmer’s sense of loss when Dode spurns him (“DG” 50).

test her liberal audience of their “sympathy with the universal man” when they learn that “Scofield was a rebel in every bitter drop of his heart’s blood” (27).

In contrast to her father Joe Scofield, Dode disowns a stubborn devotion to the South. According to Harris, the novel follows Dode’s “stifled life in the hill country of Virginia” and chronicles her repressed life as a female in her environment, but Dode exhibits the kind of freedom from restrictive cultural rhetoric that none of the rest of the characters possesses (92). Jean Atteridge Rose also discusses “Dode’s restlessness” in her father’s house, suggesting that Dode’s severe discomfort as a single woman comes from Davis inserting her own loneliness into her character as Davis herself was writing about desperation in the text before her engagement with L. Clarke Davis (259).

Langford recounts how Davis shocked many New Englanders with her frankness in stating that men and women could have the same sexual desires, and many critics since have noted Davis’s female characters having a restlessness or unexplained agitation they attribute to sexual frustration (28). Dode’s “passion-fits” have not escaped the same categorization, nor does the charge that Davis was imposing herself onto her character “[p]erhaps even more than she had in Margret Howth” (“DG” 28, Atteridge Rose 55).

The short story does bring up female issues like Dode being marginally educated and Joe relying upon his daughter’s prospects of marriage to ensure her financial stability and physical safety during the war. Yet, throughout the text, Davis focuses on how Dode’s practice of religion shapes her politics more than Dode suffering from patriarchal oppression or the hazards of parochialism.

Dode’s faith in God does not bring her absolute earthly satisfaction because she longs for the assurance of romantic love through much of the text, but Dode’s belief in

Christ's example of an unprejudiced attention to physical and spiritual needs provides her with a strength of character that separates her from the others in the text. Moreover, through Dode, Davis presents a simple person who opposes war not because of an inaccessible or abstract theory of justice, but because she follows the example of Christ's sacrificial kindness that surpasses pietism or legality. Dode's basis in pacifism cannot be manipulated by any political cause outside the context of Christ's commandments to love God first, and then, her neighbors as herself (*The Bible* Mk. 12.30-31). Dode's steadfast pacifism, unlike the unremitting patriotism of others, saves instead of kills. The narrator backs Dode's position as morally and intellectually superior, praising her as "the only creature in the United States who thought she came into the world to learn and not to teach" ("DG" 29). Dode refuses to discriminate with her "odd habit of trying to pick the good lesson out of everybody: the Yankees, the Rebels...God's creature's alike" ("DG" 29). In turn, because Dode so openly learns and accepts others, Davis privileges Dode with the right to teach the lessons of the short story as its exemplar citizen.

For her want of patriotism, it seems like Dode cannot get excited or that her sensibilities have somehow petrified when the text that reveals the opposite is taking place. Even though he defends his daughter's sincere faith, Dode's father tells others that she has "no public sperrit," when she refuses to choose sides in the war, never supporting North or South by attending public meetings ("DG" 29). Joe Scofield forgets that the war has wrenched his daughter's heart, and after she has seen "door-posts slopped with blood," she concludes, "no cause could sanctify a deed so vile, — nothing could be holy which turned honest men into thieves and assassins" (53). Although she holds to this belief, Dode does not spend her time opposing the war by neglecting to show charity to

anybody, whether they wear gray or blue. When the story takes place, she has already lost her Confederate soldier brother George, but she welcomes into her home her brother's friend and her lover, Douglas Palmer, who fights for the Federal Army. By dint of romance, their reunion illustrates how Dode's refusal to support either side of the war comes from her vision of the Christian deity is "a living Jesus to her, not a dead one" (42). For this reason, the narrator asserts, "[t]hat is why she had a healthy soul" (42).

Davis deftly handles the question of practicing the right religion in this time of war, again, never naming one Christian sect as blameless or responsible for the condition of Dode's "healthy" soul. In addition to refusing to support North or South, Dode does not strictly adhere to one denomination of faith. Instead the Quaker that saves the day in "Life in the Iron Mills," the heroine of "David Gaunt" professes a faith so individual and so personal that it does not answer to the traditions or expectations of any one church community. When talking with David Gaunt, Joe Scofield reminds Dode's suitor who is a Methodist preacher that his daughter "don't take sides sharp in this war," and that "she is n't keen till put her soul intill anythin' but lovin'. She's a pore Democrat, David, an' not a strong Methody, —allays got somethin' till say fur t' other side, Papishers an' all" (30). Here, Joe Scofield reveals that his daughter's lack of commitment to a particular sect reaches beyond her politics and into her religious views so that her ability to find decency in others seemingly clouds her judgment. Dode's undeniably Christian views stand independent of a particular church, perhaps because so many churches were prone to entangling with governmental causes, which Davis defines as a major problem with Gaunt's practice of Methodism. In *Bits of Gossip*, Davis mocks how Americans view their country in a godlike fashion, that "[t]he Union, to the American of that day, was as

essential a foundation as was his Bible or his God” (75). Davis underscores this mixture of ideals when Gaunt chooses to return to the church after the Federal army holds its meeting there because “he could not leave the house of God polluted all night,—opening the windows, even carrying the flag outside” (“DG” 59). Gaunt does not understand why, but he carries the flag, “the emblem of freedom,” away from the church because he senses something utterly incongruous in the *mélange* of nationalism and religion (59). Davis does mention that David Gaunt “would have made a good Episcopalian,” which she claimed as the faith tradition of her childhood (59). This could be an endorsement for her own familiarity with the denomination, but it appears that Davis is more interested in commenting about churches getting involved in causes as “[t]here were flags on every Methodist chapel, almost: the sect had thrown itself into the war *con amore*” (59).<sup>2</sup>

In comparing Davis’s early heroines Dode Scofield and Lois Yare, readers see that the author builds pious females that do not have to have book smarts, money, good looks, or even a catching spark of controversy hidden in them. Desired attributes for female characters of faith in Davis’s work exhibit service, humility, dedication, and just enough grit to stand against the sway of popular opinion. Like Lois, whose “trust in the master” gives her strength to deal with hardship while still giving joy to others, Dode embraces the gospel as the only means to improve the physical world (*MH* 69). Although Dode is not educated in popular culture like Douglas Palmer, who knows how to sing Mendelssohn’s or “Schubert’s ballads,” she knows her Bible and William Jay’s book of meditations (“DG” 40). Davis distinguishes between the empty piety of dawdling church

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<sup>2</sup> Davis also charges Calvinism harshly for affecting what she believes to be a detrimental worldview on its believers that decries the world as ugly, leaving churchgoers with an earnest sense of justice that they do not have the authority to enforce on earth (“DG” 34). Still in her usual manner of denominational critique, Davis does not support one, easily identified religious ideology, but chooses to uncover what she perceives as its problems.

ladies and the empathetic feelings of her heroine, who acutely feels the “wrongs of the slaves about her, her old father’s ignorance, her own cramped life” due to her familiarity with the living God (42). Dode’s wealth of sympathy for those who suffer from the “bafflings of the world” keeps her from “gloss[ing] them over as ‘necessity’” and ignoring the torment of both North and South (42).

Davis’s philosophy of how art should work in society emerges in Dode when Davis couples an acute awareness of pain with an unassuming artistic appreciation for ordinariness that simultaneously recognizes the tragic and the beautiful. The word “real” signifies non-negotiable authenticity for Davis so that when Dode’s impartiality comes across as symptomatic of her being “a time-server, or ‘a bit daft’” to others, her father’s assuring Gaunt that her faith “’s the real thing” supersedes all her alleged deficiencies (30). Readers recall Lois’s “real” faith that helps Holmes heal in his sickbed (*MH* 177). Dode and Lois who know the “living Jesus,” radiate an “awake, immortal” quality that attaches itself to bright colors and gives them an artist’s “taste” for arranging their modest homes (“DG” 38, 39). These characters’ “real” faith accounts for their ability to live in the present, not bound to outmoded or intolerant beliefs. As creators, these women pay attention to physical details in their homes, which outwardly expresses a wholehearted appreciation for life so that all things are alive in the mundane, allowing for contentment with simplicity and connectedness with others. In “David Gaunt,” Dode addresses her own difficulties while she is still awake to the fact that “the people around her needed many things, temporal and spiritual” (42). Dode’s sensitivity manifests itself when she considers the feelings of Bone, the family slave, in the home décor by placing the antlers of his “trophy” deer on the mantel “where he could rejoice his soul over them” just to

remind him of his hunting skills (38). At this point in the text, Dode does not have the liberty to free Bone yet, but she makes his life as full as possible until she allows him to choose whether or not he stays at the house after her father is killed (83).

Dode's faith also provides her an invaluable source of strength for asserting her opinions and making decisions against the will of men. Rejecting both Gaunt and Palmer on moral grounds asserts one of the only real powers that Dode has. With an aging father, Dode displays courage in assuming a "cold-blooded" stance when it comes to responding to her suitors. When Gaunt watches Palmer ride toward Dode's house after their discussion of his enlistment, he muses that "if she would but have been passive and happy," he could give her the love she desires (38). But Dode is not "passive" at all—not even with her beloved Palmer. After Palmer witnesses physical evidence of Dode's agitation, he coos at her, dismissing her distress as childish without even hearing her reasoning, and promises his love to her; but she resents his familiarity and assumed authority over her. She demands that he "not treat [her] as a child" and that he hear her explanation for breaking off their relationship (46). The narrator also counts Dode's belief that "her Helper was alive, and very near" as the chief reason she could brave in searching for Palmer after the battle of Blue's Gap (73). Later, when Dode insists that Bone accompanies her to retrieve Palmer from the battlefield, "something behind" her "[c]ommon sense" persuades him to search for a man he swore he had seen as "[g]one dead" (72). Not only that, but she insists that when they find him, they will bring the Yankee into their home and nurse him back to health at the risk of being labeled traitors and most likely killed for the crime (73). Bone reminds her that her aunt will not agree with her; but again, she persists in carrying out her plan, even if she has to do it alone.

Stating her opinions frankly to these men reinforces her attempts at obeying the tenets of her faith.

While Dode rejects the war on the principle of her faith following Christ, the eponymous character—a member of the clergy—accepts the war as a moral obligation requiring his immediate enlistment, distrusting the power of Jesus’ message of non-resistance in a time of war. David Gaunt is presented by Davis as a minister fallen into sin, but unlike Hawthorne’s Reverend Dimmesdale of *The Scarlet Letter* who gives into lust, Gaunt’s sin is not one of passion but of pride. He chooses to play savior by opting “to lay down the Bible, and bring the Kingdom of Jesus nearer in another fashion” by joining the Federal army (32). Instead of trusting in “this Love to underlie even these social riddles” of war, Gaunt prizes his set of ethics over Christ’s message of nonviolence (34). For this, Dode refuses his romantic advances because she accuses him for “not [being] true to yourself or to God” with his decision to enlist (33). Davis confirms Dode’s allegiance to Christian non-resistance through Gaunt’s resentful thoughts about how she would have rejected him regardless of which side he joined, even if “he had gone with her brother” in the Confederate army (33). Gaunt assumes that his declaration of Christianity provides him with a sense of propriety when he suspects that Dode may be rejecting him for the love of the “doubter” and “infidel” Douglas Palmer, who had joined the war long ago and had simply “accepted it, in all its horror” (36, 54). He cannot believe Dode would turn him down for such a crude man, but David’s pride of taking up battle as a spiritual and ethical duty blinds him to the fact that he has agreed to “[p]reach peace by murder” (64). Once Gaunt “took up his sword,” he cuts himself off from experiencing peace he longs for (32).

Davis blames Gaunt's particular interpretation of scripture for his easy adoption of the ethics of the moment. The text reveals that Gaunt is a poet-turned-preacher who abandons his "carnal nature" as a young man in order to know God better (33). In his search for developing his higher nature, Gaunt shuts out "beauty and love" because they too quickly render him susceptible to sins of passion (33). Gaunt fashions a harsh God to worship who is not so nearly "merciful in the Judgment as Gaunt himself would like to be," so the narrator reveals that in effect, "He [God] did not satisfy him" (34). Consequently, Gaunt becomes more disposed to accepting the appeals of culturally determined ethics, reasoning that "Christianity is not enough" to establish freedom for slaves (37). When he signs the enlistment roll, Gaunt attaches his motto, "For God and my right" next to his name, placing his name on par with God's and inserting his notion about individual rights that he believes to be derived from scripture (37). When Palmer reminds him of the slogan, Gaunt falters in embarrassment for his audacious confidence, but Palmer upholds it in the name of the great moral cause of the war that "gives you warrant to take life to defend your right—from the Christ you believe in" (37). Harris warns that "[t]his is precisely the blind Calvinistic patriotism that Gaunt brings to the war. Davis explicitly juxtaposes the image of Christian's battle as portrayed by Bunyan against the realities of the war as she lived it" (Harris 93). With promises of glory in fighting the good fight, Gaunt forsakes the gospel. Gaunt's struggles about joining the army worsen when he fails to tell Joe Scofield, "the only man that ever loved him," of his decision (65). In addition to his denial of the gospel's message of non-resistance, Gaunt's secretive entrance into the military affords him the leisure of killing Dode's father and maintaining anonymity.

Standing in contrast to Dode's hint of artistry, Gaunt fails to embrace his "birthright" of "know[ing] God through the mask of matter" (34). Dode, who recognizes God in concrete, earthly ways, finds God to be an intimate and relatable deity while Gaunt demonizes tangible and sensual avenues to interact with his God. Gaunt throws out his "birthright" to know his creator because the God he imagines is, at best, disinterested. The narrator lets readers know that Gaunt could have been like Dode, with his "poet's soul," in learning about "God through every voice of the world," but he chooses the "bitter mess of man's doctrine" instead (34). Davis describes Gaunt as having a "genial, childish temperament, given to woo and bind him, in a thousand simple, silly ways, into a likeness of that Love that holds the world, and that gave man no higher hero-model" (34). One might argue that Gaunt could have been even more effective than Dode in relaying Christ's message to others because the words attached to Gaunt surpass homely artistry and assign to him the natural talents given to only "a few men" who find God "through love, or color, or music, or keen healthy pain" (34). Divesting himself of these inborn qualities, however, Gaunt fails to reach his potential of inspiring others to take up a more admirable way of life. Before he became a preacher, Gaunt could have served God through art, and when he neglects that path, he chooses another that charges him with another task that he also deserts. Davis holds Calvinism responsible for teaching Gaunt to view the world as "the abode of sin" and himself as "the chief of sinners" so that he no longer enjoys life (34). His resentment for life prompts him to seek out a cause to alleviate his guilt and also to give him a sense of agency in his present world. By redefining his purpose with a hybrid of patriotism couched in religious validation, Gaunt reclaims the authority he professes to have submitted to God, while he

has also substituted his first duty of capturing and perpetuating the beauty of life through art for destroying it in war.

In the short story's minor characters, parties less guilty than Dode and Gaunt still face moral dilemmas presented by the war. Two characters, Joe Scofield and Douglas Palmer, represent people who have been indoctrinated in the beliefs of their cultures and have yet to embrace a religion. These two men, according to the text, would benefit from experiencing the mercy of Christ shown to them by another person. Without personally experiencing faith through the extension of another person, however, Palmer has little hope for seeing the world as offering anything good for him and Joe literally endangers himself. Davis presents both of these characters as considerably more innocent (or, less guilty) than the more dedicated Christians in the text. To accentuate their need for a merciful and personal God, Davis attributes the causes of their patriotism to worldviews adopted as survival mechanisms: for Joe, it masks pain and replaces grief with honor, whereas for Palmer, it accounts for presumably unavoidable violence and numbs his compassionate disposition. Yet, Davis gives Douglas enough time to soften under love, and she kills off Joe pitifully with his last words mumbled to his slave about caring for the family dog. By contrasting their experiences in the war, Davis compares the profound effects of religion functioning in beneficial and harmful ways.

As a victim of the war, Joe Scofield suffers on behalf of his beliefs without being given the opportunity to change. First, he loses his son, and second, due to his hostility, he forfeits solace by abandoning his relationships. Joe Scofield's loyalties to the Confederacy alienate him from the men (at least the ones he does not own) in the text who offer him companionship. He nurses an understandable hatred for Yankees because

as a group, they are responsible for killing his only son. His pain is so great that even when he kisses his daughter, she senses his sorrow and that he is really “[k]issing, through her, the boy who lay dead at Manassas” (32). When they are together, Joe admits to Gaunt that he feels the “lonesome” air of the hills before leaving him, but his sadness takes on the guise of retribution (61). His desire for revenge influences his decision to adopt “[t]he work of blood” that leaves him “drained, loathsome, and bare,” longing for his daughter’s support in his chosen cause so that he can feel less isolated from her (35). Because of this pain, Joe resorts to dodging the uncomfortable subject of partisanship by avoiding his son’s friend, Douglas. He finds that he is also “suspicious as to Gaunt’s politics” (35). Joe blames his distrust of Gaunt on the preacher’s “leaky” brain and dismissal of “honor” as an indubitable virtue, but Joe ignores his instincts in order to keep at least this one man close to him, even with this misgiving between them (35). Eventually, Joe does meet with Palmer (although by accident). When he meets with Palmer, the two men reminisce about George and Joe instructs Palmer to take care of his daughter if he dies before the war ends (57). At first the meeting is not a happy one, but the two men part ways having been honest with each other about their beliefs and differences. Palmer, however, cannot reach out to Joe because George’s death and the difference between their allegiances gets in the way; yet, even though Palmer and Joe cannot restore their relationship to its pre-war status, Gaunt and Joe’s relationship suffers even more because it lacks openness. Despite his hesitation to share his plans to go to the Gap, Joe chooses to trust Gaunt and tells him. While Palmer dares to meet him face-to-face regardless of Joe’s colors being “[r]ed an’ white,” Gaunt cannot muster the decency to tell the man he has joined the military, let alone to warn Joe not to go to Blue’s Gap.

Palmer, in contrast to Joe Scofield, requires softening of heart instead of consolation for his part in the war. The text does not reveal that Palmer bears any outward signs of emotional suffering caused by battle even though he lost one of his closest friends. Though he does not deny the war's "worst phases," Palmer counts the bloodshed as part of moving forward a worthwhile cause (54). Even though Palmer does not accept the gospel as readily as Joe Scofield, he has general knowledge of it and he believes that he could be more open to it by learning about God through Dode, but she will not marry him until he converts to Christianity (49). After Dode rejects him, Douglas walks through the camp, thinking about how "[t]here was not much enthusiasm among the women" in regard to the war (52). Palmer considers how women "did not grasp the grand abstract theory on either side" and "had no poetic enthusiasm about it" (55). Dode, in particular, refuses to "accept" the war (55). Complaining of how "she talked plain Saxon of [the war]," Palmer doubts that her opinions come from "a humanity broader than patriotism" because of his dogged Americanism (53).<sup>3</sup> Without a God or any interest in spiritual transcendence, Palmer needs to find value in his occupation, so even if he does not care for the grim aspects of war, his commitment to his cause rationalizes his existence. Gaunt perceives this simplicity and superficiality of this conclusion, labeling Palmer as "[a] mere flesh-and-brain machine, made for the world, and no uses for him in heaven" (36). Because Palmer does not believe as Dode Scofield believes, and he does not profess Christianity like David Gaunt does, he fights for no great spiritual cause: his motives are decisively political, bound in popular social ethics.

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<sup>3</sup> Davis uses this construction elsewhere in her fiction to signify the superiority of the text's view of Christian faith over doctrines. In *Margret Howth*, the narrator calls for "a deeper justice than law," with the definition of earthly justice being Stephen Holmes's primary interpersonal obstacle throughout the novel (210). When describing the infamous family feuds of the south in *Bits of Gossip*, Davis blames deaths on "the outcome of the creed which rated honor higher than life" (56).

He approaches war as a “savage necessity” for preserving his individual rights and therefore, the text does not judge him as a victim of fanaticism or greed (54). Palmer avoids these follies typically lambasted by Davis in her fiction, but as a secular member of society, Palmer blends just enough patriotic and religious rhetoric to attract and inspire his troops to “secure the right of self-government for all ages” (37). This mixture of motives also manifests in the church where the Federal army has appropriated for its political purposes (37). From this perspective, Palmer deems Christian pacifism’s arguments against the war mere “cant” that actually inhibits the accomplishment of God’s “plans,” viewing God as the chivalrous and warlike deity of the Old Testament (55). Only after Palmer has been wounded in battle and Dode comes to care for him, does the narrator reveal that [t]he man wanted something to believe in,—a God in life” (77).

Douglas Palmer and Joe Scofield, paired with their friends Dode and Gaunt, have the opportunity to know God; but their Christian messengers struggle with their spiritual convictions that would enable them to relate to their loved ones. Davis details how the two fail in acting out their faith, Gaunt by joining the war, and Dode with her initial refusal to join Palmer in marriage. Both characters act according to their religious convictions, and at times, achieving results that counter their intentions. It may be easier to agree with Davis’s conclusion that Gaunt made an obvious mistake in becoming a soldier than to assent to Dode’s making an exception to marry an unbelieving man. Davis supports marriages like this in “David Gaunt,” *Margret Howth*, and also in her 1874 novel *John Andross*. Faithful Christian wives in Davis’s stories, however, do not convert their husbands immediately (usually not even in the range of the text) and they rarely attempt to influence them through argument; yet they influence them positively

and sustain a strong, individual faith that manifests in kindness and patience. Contrasting with Gaunt's espousal of violence as a means of doing God's work, Dode chooses love, and in this case romantic love, to profess her faith. In this regard, although Davis is considered progressive in several matters of social justice, she takes a more traditional and domestic approach to reform, hardly fitting the mold of a feminist.

Through two instances of romantic confessions, Davis suggests how Dode's religious convictions can work positively and negatively. Despite her love for Palmer, Dode rejects him on the basis of the differences in their religious beliefs. The divergence of Palmer's and Gaunt's rebuffs comes from the manner in which the two men have refused God: Gaunt has refused God because he has raised his principles above God's, while Douglas has never known God through the love of another person (50). The text supports Dode's reasoning for being disgusted with Gaunt and turning him away, but it requires concessions on the part of the reader for her choosing to marry Douglas Palmer. Dode seems to be concerned about being "unequally yoked" with her spouse while the text maintains that she should marry him for love and the rest will work itself out because if her faith is sincere, "...the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife" (*The Bible* 2 Cor. 6:14, 1 Cor. 7:14). Moreover, Dode's initial decision to give up on Palmer comes from Gaunt's flawed spiritual advising about associating with non-Christians, which the text generally discredits ("DG" 43). To convince herself that she is making the right choice, she recalls "the truth, as Gaunt had taught it to her, full before her, that it would be crime to make compact with sin or a sinner" (43). Palmer, nonetheless, judges after his refusal that although he cannot call himself a Christian, he knows that "Christ has been painted in false colors" to Dode by Gaunt in this subject (50). Exposing the "dull

heaven” of Gaunt’s gospel, Palmer prompts Dode to admit that even Gaunt’s version of paradise cannot match Palmer’s pledges of earthly love (48). These mocking words sting Dode, prompting her to question the legitimacy of the source of her spiritual instruction.

Through Gaunt and Joe Scofield’s relationship, Davis connects the stereotype of the uneducated southerner to the learned clergyman to demonstrate that both kinds of men pose threats to each other when they could be benefitting from each other. They take opposite sides in the war, one because of his moral convictions, and the other because of his unwavering provincialism and vindictiveness. Before leaving to join their respective forces, Joe eerily senses his impending death and requests that he and Gaunt pray together before parting ways (61). Even though Gaunt feels far from God by this point, he agrees to recite the Lord’s Prayer, but mixes the traditional prayer with a variant of Matthew 5:39, inserting the phrase “resist not evil” into it (61).<sup>4</sup> Neither Joe nor Gaunt fully grasps the gravity of this scripture in the context, and just before leaving “to warn the boys to be ready, an’ help ’em,—at the Gap,” Joe questions the gravity of the command (61). He asks, “Did He mean that? David boy? Did He mean His people to trust in God to right them as He did? Pah! times is different now” (61). Scofield’s ignorance and casual treatment of the scripture’s command renders him less guilty in this situation than Gaunt, who is tormented by his addled conscience. Just before he and Scofield meet for this last time, Gaunt remembers when Joe presented him a Bible as a gift of appreciation for his kindness, with the inscription on the flyleaf reading, “To my Dear frend, David Gaunt. May, 1860. the Lord be Betwien mee And thee. J.Scofield”

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<sup>4</sup> The scripture is taken from the Sermon on the Mount: “Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth: But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also” (Matt. 5:38-9). This verse, placed just before the command to love enemies, is considered the basis of Christian non-resistance movement.

(60). It is with this very Bible tucked inside overcoat pocket that Gaunt shoots the old man down just a few hours later (61).

Davis reveals Gaunt's one redemptive quality as a preacher because he has not totally failed to reach his parishioners for he had brought an "odd tenderness" to Joe Scofield that had not been there before (31). Readers never know if Joe responds to some unrevealed gentleness leftover from Gaunt's poetic nature, or if Joe's change would have come from hearing the Christian message from any mountain preacher. Occasionally, Gaunt muses about "some scheme of the universe where all matter and mind were rising, slowly, through the ages, to eternal life" and that "God was Love" (34). The only clue the text gives readers about Gaunt's ability to effectively spread the message of the Christian gospel comes from his practical execution of it when he nurses Joe's son George back to health from a serious case of cholera (60). This physical manifestation of the scriptures in Gaunt's caring for the sick reinforces Davis's career-long stress of selflessly addressing earthly needs as an undeniable sign of spiritual health.

With this poignant glimpse into Gaunt's potential to bring healing to others and to restore human life, his entry into the military becomes even more pronounced and disastrous. Honing in on the heartbreak of the avoidable guilt at the end of the text, Davis leaves readers with a scene of Gaunt working out his sin's penance as a war nurse at a hospital in Illinois. He now lives "[a] busy life, not one moment idle" and his patients observe "how real his God seems to him" as he attends to them (84). Knowing that his zeal had bested his conscience in the war, Gaunt reads that old Bible's inscription every day, and he hopes to be granted peace and grace from his God as an agent of healing. When the narrator describes the patients believing Gaunt to have a "real" faith

and to be “full of innermost life,” readers know that in his work in the war hospital, he has discovered the God he had not known before (84). Nevertheless, although he works to the benefit of others, “he cannot shut it out”—he still lives with the chilling memory of murdering Joe Scofield on his conscience (84).

This short story also exposes other problems of the Civil War through its peripheral characters when it points out that the war lends itself to promises of improving earthly or heavenly standing. Davis presents these characters’ decisions as understandably attractive without endorsing them. Each type that Davis outlines reminds the audience that the culture created in wartime can be used as a means of justifying behavior that would be considered damnable at any other time. In Dyke, Davis illustrates the economical appeal of joining the military (particularly the Northern army) with the Dykes families that “had quit the hog-killing for the man-killing business, with no other motive than the percentage” (51). And with Aunt Perinne, who comes to visit after Joe Scofield is killed, Davis mocks how the old matron concludes that “the civil war had been designed for her especial trial and enlargement of Christian grace” (70). For an unnamed set of females, Davis creates another category, for those who turn to mindless “sleazy lives” in order to create excitement for themselves (52, 53). Pfaelzer posits that Davis wrote “David Gaunt” so that “[f]or men and women alike, the war has less to do with slavery and regional loyalty, freedom and union, and more to do with poverty, tedium, isolation, ignorance, and repression” (97).

Of all the secondary characters, Dyke displays the most admirable sense of conscience about his views on the war. As he has joined merely for money, he observes how the men with a moral cause differ from those who simply want to send home a

paycheck to feed their families. In Dyke's muttering and seemingly mindless chattering, he challenges Palmer's point of view about war being just one more inevitable aspect of social reform. In a way, joining the army is just another form of meeting death or paying taxes to Palmer. Admitting he "a'n't a purfessor" of Christianity, Dyke still knows enough about the plot of the Christians' New Testament to counter Palmer's claims about treachery being an instrument of God ("DG" 55). He sarcastically quips that from that vantage point, Judas was equally justified in betraying Christ to fulfill God's design (55). Later, when Dyke takes Gaunt with him to show him the lay of the land before battle, the two men talk and again, Dyke provides a discomfiting insight into war life. With clergy "mixin' with other folks" in the camp, Dyke claims that at last, preachers can show the others what "original sin" looks like on the battlefield instead of talking about it from behind the pulpit (63). At these words, Gaunt conjures the noble faces of Cromwell and Hedley Vicars who fought for "[f]reedom," but before he can think of them too long, the visage of a suffering, thorn-crowned Christ confronts him (63). These two conflicting ideals of heavenly and earthly freedom plague Gaunt's conscience, but he ignores the conviction of his faith and clutches his pistol as he rides along until he sees Joe sneaking to the Confederate camp, and thinking he is a spy, he shoots him. Dyke's words about the war being the one thing that "[m]akes 'em, or breaks 'em" comes into play when he encourages Gaunt to shoot (63). Dyke curses Gaunt for recoiling and pausing when he shoots at Joe Scofield, but because Dyke does not know about their relationship, Joe is a faceless enemy and a threat to the Federal army (65).

Through Aunt Perinne, Davis condemns the showy laments of Christians who bear the effects of the war by excusing bloodshed as a kind of ordained period of

suffering. By parading their suffering as an extension of God's personal attention to their lives, these types of people gain holiness points so that although they may not be benefiting from the war financially, they rack up their rewards in heaven by enduring the deaths of their sons, uncles, fathers, and husbands. Davis's reproof of this behavior extends beyond chastising the absurdity of Aunt Perinne's dramatic appeals for sympathy, and reaches into the greater effect of a body of people supporting this belief. When she speaks with her companion, she reminds her "[w]e'll not talk of our individual sorrows when affliction is general," and instead of grieving for Joe, she turns to wanting news from Bone (70). For this kind of Christian, the war turns into a national exercise of faith sent from God so the goal turns into persevering through it instead of actively doing anything to reduce the suffering. For them, the virtue of persistence justifies the pride of piety. Aunt Perinne's exclusivist religious beliefs also further separate her from her enemies because when she experiences tragedy, she considers it an increase of her store of heavenly reward while she views her enemies' pain of losing loved ones as personal retribution for her grief. In addition to viewing the war as her own spiritual "dispensation," Aunt Perinne determines it "a judgment" for "[t]hem as is carried off by tantrums, 'n' consorts with Papishers 'n' God knows what" (70). Mentioning those who think kindly of "Papishers" echoes Joe Scofield's earlier remarks to Gaunt about Dode's acceptance for Catholics, and instead of viewing the act as benevolent, Aunt Perinne inadvertently wishes for judgment on her own niece. Not only does Aunt Perinne upset Dode's period of mourning for her father with her obnoxious self-sanctification, she also threatens the safety of the soldiers left alive on the field by imposing her fear upon Dode and Bone (73). Aunt Perinne, carrying the "staring,

malicious world” in her face, at last does not hinder Dode’s resolve to search for Douglas in the snow; but perhaps if Dode were less like a heroine and more like Margret Howth, she would have stayed in the house and would have never been reconnected with Douglas.

Another disturbing type of female comes to life in the “cant of patriotism” that the “blue-eyed, gushing girls” adopted in order to add some “color and substance” into their lives (53). The war offers a macabre sense of excitement to these women while demoralizing them, loosening their morals and disconnecting them from the reality of the bloodiest and most devastating aspects of the war. Davis bitingly recounts the details of “helmets of sugar” that these women decorated with “after the fashion of the White House,” criticizing how easily the tradition of war can be accepted and designed as a lighthearted party table centerpiece, used by the chief executive officer of the nation down to the small-town floozy (53). By associating these women with the White House, Davis blames the government for celebrating military victory in an archaic fashion that does not set a good example for its citizens. Through supporting war-related festivities, the women assume soldiers to be brave or noble instead before thinking about the outcome of exercising their supposed virtues with the brandishing of a bayonet or sword. Under the ruse of patriotism, these women know nothing about the grimness of war, and they unwittingly enable the violence with their fervent support of it.

Emphasizing the destruction of the war throughout “David Gaunt,” Davis charges both sides with unnecessary slaughter all in the name of it being a “savage necessity” (66). As the Federal army retreats from the battle, the narrator poignantly records how the troops burn down all the farmhouses along their way, but she concedes that they did

not “think it would strengthen the union sentiment, but what could they do? As great atrocities as these were committed by the rebels” (65-66). Neither North nor South will go home with their hands clean, and through their equal complicity, Davis draws attention to how the cycle of violence, vengeance, and regret unavoidably thwarts the message of the gospel in war. Davis most powerfully illustrates this point when Palmer changes his mind about clergymen who enlist after the two men endure a battle together. He approaches Gaunt, reminding him that “[t]his war may be needed to conquer a way for the day of peace and good-will among men; but you, who profess to be a seer and actor in that day, have only one work: to make it real to us now on earth, as your Master did, in the old time” (80). Palmer’s point of view does not echo the text’s altogether pacifist stance, but it reinforces the incompatibility of Christian gospel and violent military endeavors.

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