# Broken Silence: Teaching Deborah's Untold Story in *Life in the Iron Mills*

Is it conceivable that a mystery could remain hidden in Rebecca Harding Davis's best-known and most carefully studied story? The answer ultimately must be decided by examining the story from a perspective of doubt that the narrator is telling the entire truth. The inadequacies of the narrator's account may be interpreted in different ways; perhaps the character is hiding the truth from herself; perhaps she is concealing wrongdoing from people she knows. There is certainly a disparity between the narrator's version of events and the interpretations that readers may reach. Davis's story, though, succeeds on several levels, as social realism, working class literature, even an unrequited romance. Perhaps there is still another layer for readers to discover. Davis is today underappreciated, yet her work deserves a closer look, and it is time for Deborah's story to be told.

*Life in the Iron Mills* was an "instant sensation" and "literary landmark" when it was published in 1861 and considered a "work of genius" (Olsen 88-89), its success made real for Davis by a letter of congratulations from one of her favorite writers, Nathaniel Hawthorne. Davis's story, at least in its broadest outline, would have presented to him a most familiar image, one he had put forward himself in stories and novels ranging from "The Birthmark" and "Rapaccini's Daughter" to *The Blithedale Romance*: that of woman as the victim of the male quest for power. Davis's story, though, provides counterpoints to Hawthorne's image that students should be made aware of. *Life in the Iron Mills* ends with the heroine, Deborah, very much alive.

When I ask students to characterize the narrator of *Iron Mills*, I pose questions: what is the narrator's identity? Is the narrator reliable? What story lies beneath the surface story? In reading Hawthorne, Melville and Poe, students have been made aware of narrative duplicity, so

when they get to *Iron Mills* they believe they will readily determine the answers. They think the narrator is a woman; I tell them most critics agree; they think the narrator must be unreliable, or why would I ask? And they freely admit that they do not know what has been left out. Part of their confusion, I tell them, is because the narrative frame is complicated, and readers must be careful to identify the separate strands of storytelling. What follows is the process the class goes through to come to a story that makes sense, one that accounts for narrative lapses, and answers some readers' questions.

Before deciding what is being concealed, the question of narrative identity must be addressed. Some students guess that perhaps she is the Quaker woman who helps Deborah at the end or Janey, the young woman who sometimes stays with the Wolfes, who tells the story. But there is compelling evidence in the narrative that points to someone else. Only one person from the story so well knows the town and the house she is in, since early in the story she tells readers that she remembers the view from "when I was a child" (12). We know also that the narrator is familiar with the mills, intimately so, for in referring to the heaps of iron refuse she says "Korl we call it here" (4), her "we" linking her directly to the inside of the mill. Students wonder why she would try to hide her identity by eliding all signs of her sex and at times seem even androgynous or male? Her educated voice establishes another distance between herself and the characters. But what, I ask, if she is creating a distance for a reason, and the mystery of gender proves in fact to be a narrative strategy of concealment? What if the narrator is Deborah?

It would at first seem curious to link the narrator to Deborah when the two do not seem at all alike. The narrator shows bias in the way she depicts Deborah referring to her as a "weak and wretched" passive victim, but a careful reader will note that the only person to identify her as such is the narrator

I suggest that since the narrator is our guide, she is leading us astray in her portrayal of Deborah and that if we look more closely we will find that the text includes abundant evidence that this characterization of Deborah as wretch is more imagined than real. Her strength is apparent in her similarities to the Korl Woman. One of the visitors to the mill, Kirby, makes the connection when he sees the statue and points to Deborah as its model, and the narrator herself ties them together when she describes the statue as "a woman, white, of giant proportions, crouching on the ground, her arms flung out in some wild gesture of warning" (31). The description "crouching" is used only one other time in the story, in the jail where Deborah can be found "crouching" on the wall between herself and Hugh (58). It is thus hard not to indentify Deborah as the subject of Hugh's statue—yet the depiction of the Korl Woman is anything but passive: "a nude woman's form, muscular, grown coarse with labor, the powerful limbs instinct with some poignant longing" (32). The narrator repeatedly returns to this description of power, and a reader soon sees that the powerful one is Deborah. Once the statue is identified with Deborah, it is but a short leap of imagination for students to realize that Deborah is the narrator and that she may be concealing something.

Ordinarily, we adopt toward a first-person narrator a stance roughly like that we would take to a speaker in real life. We start with the supposition that she will tell the truth mainly. We may expect her, like real people telling about themselves, to describe events in the most favorable light, but we take her basic story as true. Specific information must intrude to cause us to question her account. Suppose, to use Tzvetan Todorov's example, a book begins by telling us that John was in his room, lying on his bed, but on the next page reports that there is no bed in John's room. This becomes an issue for which the reader must account. We find ourselves trying to decide whether we are in the presence of the supernatural or whether there is a natural

explanation. Should we learn that the narrator is in a mental hospital, Todorov points out, we are apt to explain the contradiction in terms of madness.

We successfully structure a succession of causes and effects when we search the narrator's accounts for signs of deliberate deceit. These signs, which I call "telltales," are of two types: first, behaviors that are characteristic of dishonest speakers in real life; and second, apparent violations of literary convention. This is an ideal way to teach students about the pitfalls of believing everything a narrator says. It is possible to categorize the most common of these telltales, which readers will recognize at once.

*Contradictions.* These are statements that contradict either our own experience or other claims the narrator makes. In *Life in the Iron Mills*, Deborah, as discussed above, is described as a "weak, flaccid wretch," but this description seems out of keeping with her description by others. It is Deborah who takes Hugh his food, who pushes him, prods him; robs for him and forces the Quaker woman to give him a burial place. Internal contradictions are among the most compelling telltales, for other than narrative deceit (or confusion) there seems no way to recuperate them.

*References to one's own credibility.* The popular prefatory disclaimer, "You won't believe this, but . . . " typifies false narration;. *Life in the Iron Mills* begins by saying "I am going to be honest" (13). Usually when someone says they are going to be honest, they are in fact lying. The narrator says of the events that they are "only what [she] remember[s] of the life of one of these men" (14).

Led to suspect the narrator of deceit, we seek clues to the nature and purpose of the deception. In this way the telltales become a significant structuring force, coloring our organization of the text. We examine the narrator's circumstances in order to determine what

motive she may have to lie. In *Life in the Iron Mills* the motive is found in the narrator's tacit admission that she was responsible for Hugh's incarceration and death.

An early indication that the narrator of *Iron Mills* may not be relating Deborah's true characteristics becomes apparent when Janey, a young, pretty neighbor, tells Deborah that Hugh Wolfe invited her to stay. At this news a "vexed frown crossed" Deborah's face and Janey, quick to appease, assures her that she has not recently seen Hugh. Janey's immediate and telling response suggests that Deborah often gets "vexed." Deborah is described as having a "dead, vacant look. . . . and the vacancy had time to gnaw into her face perpetually," and she is thus not equal in looks to the "dark blue eyes and lithe figure of the little Irish girl" Janey (22-23). On the night of the story, realizing Hugh has had not food, Deborah sees an opportunity to be with him by taking him his dinner. Deborah watches him eat with "painful eagerness" and with a woman's "quick instinct" sees that Hugh was eating only to please her at which point the narrator asks:

> was there nothing worth reading in this wet, faded thing, half-covered with the ashes? No story of a soul filled with groping passionate love, heroic unselfishness, fierce jealousy? Of years of weary trying to please the one human being whom she loved, to gain one look of real heart-kindness from him. (21)

The reader realizes that Deborah loves Hugh and her vexation toward Janey is in fact jealousy. "Little Janey, timid, helpless, clinging to Hugh as her only friend: that was the *sharp* thought, the *bitter* thought that drove in the glazed a fierce light of pain" (emphasis added 23).

If read through a lens of jealousy, the story takes on new meaning. There can be no doubt that Deborah loved Hugh as there is no doubt that he ignored her. For readers who are uneasy with Davis' intensity or consider the tale overwritten, would a jealous embittered narrator change how the story should be read? Can the narrative emotional swings be read as the wavering emotions of a woman who loved a man whose downfall she engineered? She is both nostalgic for the man but bitter at his dismissal of her, even these many years later. Deborah is

telling the story of how she was perceived, not what she was. To know the true Deborah, we need only look at the Korl woman who is strong, powerful and lasting.

Deborah keeps "trying to please the one human being whom she loved, to gain one look of real heart-kindness from him" (21-22), but his kindness was unthinking and unfelt because he was kind "even to the very rats that swarmed the cellar; kind to her in just the same way" (22). Deborah knows "that his soul sickened with disgust at her deformity, even when his words were kindest" (22-23). His kindness is dismissive, and she can longer abide it.

On the night of the robbery, Hugh looks with tenderness at Janey and laments that his future plan "in which she had borne a part" is now gone. Deborah notices the look and "her own grew deadly. . . . her eyes glowed." It is at this point that she presses the money she has stolen into Hugh's hands (42). In refusing to acknowledge Deborah's love, Hugh is a failure of Ethan Brand proportions. His heart is as much stone as the Korl woman he has carved. But unlike Hawthorne's women, Deborah does not conveniently die of a broken heart; she decides instead to get even with the man who does not appreciate her love. The robbery could not have been premeditated as the appearance of the visitors to the mill was not known in advance, but what follows is certainly calculated, if hastily. And many questions arise.

How does Hugh get caught? The narrator conveniently leaves out the circumstances of Hugh's arrest. Has he surrendered himself to the police? If he has, why would he implicate Deborah? It seems more likely that Deborah implicates herself and Hugh as a way to get revenge on Hugh for ignoring her these many years. Deborah wants the money to make Hugh happy who in turn, she hopes, will include her in his happiness. When he does not; when he stumbles off alone into the night, she finally turns against him. She could not, however, have expected the severe sentencing of nineteen years. In 1861, the year the *Iron Mills* was published, *The New York Times* reported a story about a man accused of assault and robbery who was "severely punished" with a sentence of three years and eight months in Sing Sing (*NY Times* Feb 7 1861). Such sentences were the norm. Hugh did not even steal the money much less assault a man, so Deborah might have expected a considerably lighter sentence.

Students are loathe to see Deborah as guilty of such a crime, but I point them to Deborah's, the narrator's, own words. She holds Hugh's head in her lap after he dies and the narrator notes there "was no meekness, or sorrow, in her face: the stuff out of which *murderers* are made instead" (61 emphasis mine). Another indicator of her guilt comes also from Deborah herself. After being sentenced, on his final day before his suicide, Hugh says "It is best, Deb. I cannot bear to be hurted any more." Deborah responds "humbly" by saying "Hur knows." This is a stunning and overlooked exchange between the two. Hugh knows what? The only thing he can know is that if he did not turn himself in, Deborah turned him in (57). Her preceding words offer further proof: "Oh Hugh, lad! Hugh! Dunnot look at me, when it wur my fault! To think I brought hur to it! And I loved hur so! Oh, lad, I dud!" These statements are characterized as a "confession" (5). One might argue that she is confessing her love, but coupled with the description of her as a "murderer" the admission can only be seen as one of guilt.

We are witness to Wolfe's pain, but only as it illuminates Deborah's. He thinks of his "squalid daily life, the brutal coarseness eating into his brain, as the ashes into his skin" (40). Yet what of Deborah with a hunchback and the undying fire of love in her heart? Should she, like Hawthorne's women, Beatrice Rappaccini and Georgiana die from love? Is she not allowed some justice? If Deborah tells a true story, many puzzles remain to be solved in the fiction of Rebecca Harding Davis.

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