

Life in the Iron Mills, and Other Stories Study Guide

**Life in the Iron Mills, and Other Stories by Rebecca
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Life in the Iron Mills, and Other Stories

Summary

"Life in the Iron Mills" begins in the house where Hugh Wolfe and Deborah once lived. The house was a boarding house in those days but is now a single family home. The narrator stares out the window on a cloudy day, thinking how dark and gloomy an iron mill town always is, even when the sun is shining. The narrator begins her story with Deb, who has just returned to the house after working in the cotton mill all day. The other ladies from the mill want Deb to go out drinking with them, but Deb does not drink. Instead, Deb goes down into the basement rooms Hugh Wolfe shares with his father and a young girl named Janey. Deb begins to eat a dinner of boiled potatoes when Janey wakes and tells her that Hugh is working the night shift at the iron mill. Deb quickly puts together a meal for Hugh and rushes to the mill.

Hugh is working hard and is not hungry, but he takes the meal and eats it to please Deb. Hugh feels sorry for Deb because she has a hunchback. When he is done, Hugh instructs Deb to lie down on a pile of ash and take a nap as he and his fellow workers often do. As Deb lies there, she hears a group of men coming toward the fire where Hugh is working. These men include the son of the mill owner, his brother-in-law, and a doctor. These men sit down close to where Deb is lying and talk about the mill and the workers as though the workers are not even there. After some time, one of the men spots a female figure. The men get up to look at the figure and discover it is a woman sculpted out of iron, a remnant of the iron-works process. The woman is strong and healthy, her body showing well-sculpted muscles as she squats and reaches out with her hands. The men are amazed with the sculpture and admire its detail. When asked what the woman is reaching for, Hugh explains that she is hungry. When the doctor points out that the woman appears too healthy to suggest starvation, Hugh explains that it is not a physical hunger but an emotional hunger. The woman wants what these men have, wealth and security.

The men tell Hugh that he is a talented artist, but they cannot help him. It would take money to take him out of the iron mill and help him make a success of his art. They simply cannot afford to take the chance. Hugh realizes at that moment that he will always be a puddler out of no fault of his own and is saddened by this realization. The visitors leave and Hugh returns to work until morning comes and he and Deb can leave. At home, Deb shows Hugh a money purse she took from one of the men. Hugh is outraged, telling Deb she should not have taken the money and that he will give it back. Hugh goes looking for the visitors, but as he is watching the upper-middle-class people go about their business that Sunday, he begins to become angry at all he will never have because of the circumstances of his birth. Hugh is angry and he decides he has every right to keep the money. Hugh goes for a walk, looking at all the familiar landmarks of his life, saying goodbye.



The narrator refuses to tell the reader how Hugh was caught, but tells the reader that Hugh and Deb were tried for the theft of the money and Hugh received nineteen years, which is a lifetime for a man of his class. Deb only received three years because it is believed she was only an accomplice. Hugh tried to escape twice and has not resigned himself to his situation. Deb comes to see Hugh, thanks to the kindness of a jail guard, and sees in his face his decision to end his pain. Deb cries and tries to talk Hugh out of his decision, but he is deeply depressed. Hugh looks down on the market taking place below them and knows that he will never walk among them again. Deb is escorted back to her cell where she sits close to a crack between her cell and Hugh's, waiting for what she knows is inevitable.

Hugh uses a piece of tin he has sharpened to kill himself. Hugh waits to die. When it is over, the coroner comes along with a Quaker woman who watches over Hugh's body. Deb asks the woman where Hugh will be buried and is assured he will be buried on a hill overlooking the city, away from the smoke and the grime. The woman then invites Deb to come live with her when her sentence is over. At the end of the story the narrator implies that Deb did that and she told her story to anyone who would listen in order to keep Hugh alive in her heart. The narrator now lives in the same house where Deb and Hugh lived and has the korn woman that began the entire saga.

Analysis

The theme of poverty is illustrated from the opening sentence in this story to the final period. The story begins with a description of the town, a description that focuses on the smoke and grime from the iron mills, as well as the clouds that hang heavy over the town on the day in which the narrator begins her story. From this description of the setting, the reader is alerted that this is not going to be a happy story. This implication continues when the story begins and the narrator introduces the readers to Deb, a woman who spends her evening eating boiled potatoes instead of a hearty meal of meat or stew or fish. This also establishes the class of the characters as well as the education and the period in which the story takes place.

The theme of poverty continues as Deb takes Hugh his dinner and ends up taking a nap in a pile of ash, a place that appears to be preferable over the walk home to a lumpy bed. When the visitors come and admire Hugh's art, it seems that some optimism might be injected into the plot, some hope. However, this hope is dashed when these men decide that they do not have the money to give Hugh the help that would be required to change his life. This leaves the reader frustrated, but not near as frustrated as poor Hugh who for a minute saw his life lifted out of the slums and a happy future for himself and those he loves. Instead, Hugh is forced to recognize the futility of his life. This causes Hugh to make a mistake, to decide he is worthy of the money stolen from one of these men simply because he is a human being. It is this that illustrates the theme more than anything else, showing how poverty in this setting defined who a person was no matter how smart or talented that person might be.



The story continues as Hugh and Deb are arrested for their role in the theft and punished much more harshly than the crime would suggest. It is a sad ending that leaves the modern reader angry and frustrated at the antiquated legal system of the setting. Hugh gives up, no longer strong enough to fight for what should be his for being a human. Hugh kills himself, leaving Deb alone and burdened with the guilt of bringing him to this place in his life. It is a difficult ending that leaves the reader saddened and happy that at least some things have changed, that poverty is no longer a death sentence in this country.



Life in the Iron Mills, and Other Stories

Summary

Rebecca Harding grew up on the Ohio in Wheeling, Virginia. Rebecca's father was English and believed the last good writer was Shakespeare. The oldest of five children, Rebecca was not close to her father as a child. Rebecca was not well educated; she was not allowed to attend college because there was only one college open to women at the time. Rebecca did teach herself, however, when her brother attended college and would bring his college textbooks home. Rebecca attended finishing school in Pennsylvania where she met Francis LeMoynes, a social activist who would influence some of Rebecca's early writings. In fact, those years after finishing school were exciting years of social change, the years of Dred Scott and women's rights, years that would both influence Rebecca and cause stress in her household because of her father's objections to their messages.

Rebecca writes "Life in the Iron Mills" when she was thirty and send it to ATLANTIC MONTHLY because she knew of no other publications that might publish something of its kind. Atlantic's publisher, James T. Fields, accepted the story immediately, excited to find such a talented writer. This began a long friendship that would include a long term correspondence between Rebecca and Fields' wife, Anne. In fact, Fields was so impressed with Rebecca's work that he asked to have first rights with everything else she wrote as well. Rebecca refused but began work on a novel that she hoped to sell to Atlantic for a serial. This book, MARGARET HOWTH: A STORY OF TODAY, would be Rebecca's second publication.

About this same time, the Civil War began. This forced Rebecca to set aside her writing for a time. It also postponed a planned trip North to visit the Fields as well as other admirers of her work, including Nathaniel Hawthorne, the writer of several stories that had inspired Rebecca as a small child. Eventually Rebecca was able to make the trip where she met many people, including Hawthorne and Louisa May Alcott. However, Rebecca also met other people she had long admired and discovered to be more shallow and less honorable than she had believed, causing her to become somewhat jaded, something that shows in her later works. On the way home, Rebecca stopped to meet L. Clarke Davis, another admirer of her work and an editor for another publication with which she occasionally worked. Rebecca and Clarke hit it off immediately and decided to marry even though Rebecca was already thirty-two and Clarke was only twenty-eight.

After their wedding, Rebecca and Clarke moved in with Clarke's sister, who was often ill, which left the burden of the home and children on Rebecca. Rebecca became ill several months into her marriage and was forced to return home to her parents. During this time Rebecca learned she was pregnant with her first child. Rebecca remained with her parents, during which time Clarke asked Rebecca to return to her writing in order to earn some money for the struggling family. Rebecca did, writing "The Wife's Story,"



which appears in this book. Soon after this, Rebecca began devoting most of her writing time to writing for mainstream magazines and publications to earn money rather than the more literary publications like ATLANTIC MONTHLY. Also during this time, while raising two sons, Rebecca wrote a novel for one of these lesser publications, WAITING FOR THE VERDICT, a novel about the racial tensions of pre-Civil War America. The novel received such bad reviews that Rebecca never attempted such an ambitious novel again.

Rebecca's family grew and she devoted her time to them while continuing to write short stories and articles to help supplement the family's income. Just when the boys were old enough to care for themselves, Rebecca became pregnant again and gave birth to a daughter. Rebecca would continue writing her entire life, but her writing was overlooked and forgotten. Upon her death, many obituaries failed to note Rebecca's early contributions to literature with stories such as "Life in the Iron Mills" but instead remembered her because of her son, Richard's, writing career. Rebecca did, however, write about the working class people long before any other writer and she changed the lunacy laws in Pennsylvania with a story about the horrors that often resulted from the earlier, more lenient, laws. Not a feminist, Rebecca wrote an article speaking out against the women's right movement, but Rebecca was a pioneer in the writing field who changed the world with her words.

Analysis

The impact of Rebecca's life experiences on her writing is clear from this biography. Rebecca grew up near the iron mills she writes about in "Life in the Iron Mills," and she was a wife and mother like Hester in "The Wife's Story," as well as an older woman with a few regrets like Mrs. Palmer in "Anne." Rebecca had a talent she was unsure of, not unlike Hugh and Hester, and as she grew older and used her talent more for economic gain rather than literary fame, she began to question the use of that talent and whether the talent ever really existed in quite the way in which she believed it once did. These things are clear in her writing, both in these short stories and in her other works.

Rebecca wrote in a time when women did not write for a living. Rebecca's contemporaries were people like Hawthorne, men who made a statement with their words. Rebecca could have been a woman who made progress for other women with her words, who had the power to change the world like she did the lunacy laws of Pennsylvania. However, Rebecca saw herself as a mother and wife first and because of that she saw her writing as a hobby that she was allowed by her husband to indulge because of the support it provided to their income. In Rebecca's mind, this was all that her writing was; therefore, it was all her writing ended up being.

The theme of poverty does not reflect itself in Rebecca's life except for the fact that without Rebecca's writings her family would have struggled a great deal more than they did. However, the themes of duty versus dreams and lost opportunities do show up in her life. Rebecca chose duty over dreams, opposite to Hester's choices and was content to watch her family grow around her while she wrote novels and stories that she



knew were below her talent. As an older woman, Rebecca clearly began to wonder if she had wasted her talent and if her talent was ever as good as she believed it to be, an idea that also showed up in her writings, especially in the novel, *EARTHEN PITCHERS*. Rebecca's life deeply impacted her writing, making it essential for the reader to understand her experiences in order to understand her themes in her writing. With this understanding come comprehension and maybe a little grief for what could have been.



Life in the Iron Mills, and Other Stories

Summary

Hester is a young woman who was married a little over a year earlier to a widow with five children, four of whom are still living in his home. The first six months of marriage were happy ones with Hester and her husband, Dr. Manning, living alone in their new home without the pressures of family. Hester and Dr. Manning were happy, working together to make a home out of their house. However, things began to change when Hester became pregnant. Hester dreamed of a little boy whom she would teach all about her home in Massachusetts. However, the child was a girl and was more work than Hester ever dreamed possible. Eventually Hester, overwhelmed with the infant and four energetic boys, sent the infant to live with a nurse. As a result, Dr. Manning stopped referring to Hester by his special nickname for her and he arranged for Jacky, his ward, to come live with them. Hester watches Jacky with Dr. Manning and wonders about their affection for one another.

Now Hester is told that Dr. Manning plans to move the whole family from New York to Newport because of some financial trouble. Hester is sad to leave the home they have built together and angry that no one else seems as upset as she. At the same time, Hester realizes that she will have to make a decision regarding her desire to be a singer and song writer. Hester has written an opera that she has given to a musical producer. Hester has also auditioned for a part in the musical. However, with the move, Hester will not be able to remain with her family and be in the opera. When Hester learns the producer wants her in the musical, she is forced to make a decision.

On the boat to Newport, Hester thinks about her choices. Jacky pulls Hester aside and tells her that Dr. Manning's first wife was an opium addict who was cruel to him and the children. Jacky and Dr. Manning's children are concerned for their father and concerned Hester will hurt him. That night, Hester watches Dr. Manning sleep and worries about his health. However, Hester does not let any of this affect her decision. The following day, once they arrive in Newport, Hester goes down to the harbor to join the ship for the return to New York. Hester stops first to see her husband one last time, happy to see him discussing the future with his eldest son, Robert.

Hester goes to New York and works on the opera. The night of the opening, Hester learns that her husband and Robert are in the audience. The opera is a failure with the uneducated audience laughing the actors off the stage. Hester leaves the theatre aware that she is now homeless and without income. When she passes a diner, Hester hears Dr. Manning's name. Hester enters the diner and discovers that Dr. Manning has died while sitting at one of the tables.

Hester wakes to find Dr. Manning standing over her. Hester has been suffering from a brain fever that has caused her to hallucinate. Hester is relieved to find her husband alive and well. Hester is also grateful for her family, including Jacky and the baby who



has been returned to her. When Hester learns that Jacky is to marry Robert, she is thrilled to make the child a permanent part of their family.

Analysis

Hester is a young woman who has come to realize that marriage and motherhood means the end to all her dreams. Hester wants to be a singer and a song writer, but she finds herself forced to make a choice between this dream and her duty to the man she loves and the children he brought into the world. While illustrating the theme of duty versus dreams, this also illustrates the setting of the story. Hester lives in a world where women did not work unless they had no choice. Hester is a proper woman, raised in a good family; therefore, it is expected she will get married and raise children, not write songs.

Hester believes God would not have given her a gift if he did not intend for her to use it. Unfortunately, using this gift means abandoning the man who loves her and who has already been through more heartache than a man should have to suffer. Hester hesitates, not sure she is strong enough to follow her dreams, but finally she does. However, it turns out that Hester's talents were not as good as she had thought they were. Not only this, but her choice has left her homeless and without means to care for herself. Also, her husband has died and it seems his death is her fault. This is all very tough for Hester to live with. At the same time, it seems many of these things seem to suggest that following dreams and leaving the family is destined for failure, as in bad karma, illustrating the belief system that was common in the era in which the story is set.

Hester realizes that her bad luck was just a dream, and she was prevented from following her dreams by an illness. In essence, Hester has been given a second chance to make her husband and children happy. It suggests that Hester's place, as all women, is as wife and mother, not on the stage entertaining strangers for money. Hester is happy with this turn of events and now she is content to be a wife and mother, no longer anxious to follow her dreams, but making her family her dream. Again this illustrates the belief system of the people living in this era, illustrating the setting of the story very vividly for the reader.



Life in the Iron Mills, and Other Stories

Summary

Anne is a young woman who is napping outside and sees George, the man she loves, walking toward her with his girl, Theresa. Anne watches them walk until someone wakes her up and she realizes she is not that Anne any longer. She is Mrs. Nancy Palmer, the wife of Job and mother of Susan and James. George married Theresa and became a poet, while Mrs. Palmer spent her life making a success out of her husband's plantation. Now Mrs. Palmer is supposed to help her daughter entertain her beau, Jasper Tyrrell, but her thoughts are so full of Anne and the life she had intended to live that she cannot concentrate.

When it is bed time, Mrs. Palmer locks the door to her room so her children will not interrupt her with their goodnight kisses and lectures about her health. Mrs. Palmer keeps thinking about George Forbes and decides she may not be able to marry him and live the life she had planned as a young girl, but she could go see some of the world and meet some of these great minds she has always admired. The next morning, Mrs. Palmer sneaks out of the house and takes a train to the city where she takes her bonds out of the bank. From there, Mrs. Palmer boards another train and is surprised when three of the minds she so admired board the train to ride along side her.

One of these men, a sculptor Mrs. Palmer has long admired, talks about the poor people at the train station to a female social activist. They talk with such scorn of these poor people upon whom they have built their reputations that Mrs. Palmer is shocked. A second man joins the conversation and Mrs. Palmer is shocked to discover he is George Forbes. Just as Mrs. Palmer turns to speak to him, discovering him to be a glutton who has been married more than twice, the train crashes. Mrs. Palmer wakes in her own bed at home and discovers that she is content to be there under the care of her overprotective daughter. Mrs. Palmer retires soon after, allowing her daughter to take over the plantation after she marries Mr. Tyrrell. Every once in a while Mrs. Palmer thinks of Anne, but now she believes her to be dead and gone, no longer dreaming dreams that should never have come true.

Analysis

Anne is Mrs. Nancy Palmer as a young woman, a girl who was beautiful and had a gorgeous singing voice and was in love with a young man who grew up to be a successful poet. Mrs. Palmer has had a contented life, but Anne had dreams that Mrs. Palmer begins to wonder if perhaps might have not made Mrs. Palmer's life a little more exciting. Mrs. Palmer, illustrating the theme of lost opportunities, wonders if perhaps she had not missed a few chances that might have been more than the life she lived. Mrs. Palmer strikes out to live some of these dreams only to discover that the people whose

lives she has always admired are not the great humanitarians she always believed them to be, but shallow people who used the poor and downtrodden to better their own lives.

Mrs. Palmer had regrets about the way she lived her life. Mrs. Palmer did not regret loving her husband and children or building their plantation into a successful business, but she wondered if maybe her life could have been different if Anne had been allowed to make her dreams come true. This explores themes from Rebecca Harding Davis' own life, questioning the pattern of one's own life and one's own experiences. Mrs. Palmer comes to realize that her life is exactly what she always wanted, whether they are what Anne wanted or not. It is a realization that the reader can only hope to come to in their own lives and hope for in the lives of those they love.



Characters

Deborah

Deborah, or Deb, is a young woman in the story "Life in the Iron Mills," who works in the cotton-mill and lives in the same boarding house as Hugh Wolfe, his father, and Janey. Deb is in love with Hugh and will often take him his dinner while he is working the night shift at the iron mill, even if it means missing her own dinner. The night on which the story takes place, Deb goes to the mill to bring Hugh his dinner and then lies down on a pile of ash to sleep. A group of men come to visit the mill because it is not as intolerably hot at night. Deb listens to these men as they talk, especially after they discover one of Hugh's sculptures and discuss its artistic merits. Deb is saddened when she hears them talk about Hugh's talent and the unfortunate fact that he will never be able to market his talent.

The next morning, Deb shows Hugh a money purse she took from one of the visitors. Hugh is angry that Deb would do such a thing, saying that they are better than thieves. Hugh intends to take the money back, but when he begins to dream of what the money could do for him and his family, he gets sidetracked. Hugh and Deb are caught. Deb is only given three years, but Hugh is given nineteen years, which is a lifetime for him. Deb knows that Hugh is depressed and plans to kill himself, but all she can do is sit in her cell and wait for it to happen. Deb is allowed into Hugh's cell after his death and she watches the investigation unfold and a Quaker woman watch over Hugh's body. The Quaker promises Deb she will bury Hugh on a hill where he will be in fresh air. The Quaker also asks Deb to come live there with them when she is released from jail. At the end of the story the narrator implies that Deb did this and remained with the Quakers for the rest of her life.

Hugh Wolfe

Hugh Wolfe is a puddler at an iron mill in the story "Life in the Iron Mills. Hugh works hard over the hot fires but makes very little money to provide for himself and his family. During his free time at the mill Hugh creates sculptures out of the kohl left from the iron-works process. Often Hugh will destroy these sculptures when he is finished, disappointed with his efforts. On the night the story takes place, a group of visitors come to see the iron mill. While resting near Hugh's fire, these men see his latest creation, a woman whose body is hard with heavy work but whose arms are reaching out as though searching for something. Hugh tells them the woman is hungry. When these men complain that the woman's body does not look as though she suffers from starvation, Hugh explains that her hunger is an emotional one, that she is hungry for a change in her circumstances.

The men believe Hugh is incredibly talented, but they are unwilling to do anything to help him become an artist. Hugh is devastated by this, especially when he realizes that



he will never be anything more than a puddler because of a lack of money. Deb, however, has taken some money and she gives it to Hugh to help him pursue his dreams. Hugh is upset by this and intends to give the money back, but the longer he thinks about it, the more Hugh begins to believe that he has every right to keep the money. However, Hugh is caught with the money and is sentenced to nineteen years in jail. Convinced he will never be released, Hugh commits suicide in his jail cell.

Janey

Janey is a young girl in "Life in the Iron Mills," who lives with Hugh and his father. It is never explained to the reader who Janey is, but it appears she is either an orphan Hugh has taken under his wing or an illegitimate child of either his or his father's. Hugh feels responsible for Janey, and when Deb gives him the money, his first thought is of what it would mean for Janey. Janey is very young, but she is quickly reaching the age at which she will be expected to go to work either in the iron mills or the cotton mills. Hugh wants a better life for Janey and hopes the money and his talent in art will help give her a much better life. Janey is not mentioned again when Hugh and Deb find themselves in jail for the theft of the money.

Hester

Hester is a young woman in "The Wife's Story," who married a man who is much older than she. This man already has five children, one of whom is grown, but the others are young enough that they are still living at home. On top of raising these children, Hester gives birth to a daughter. Hester is not prepared for the work involved in having a small child and is quickly overwhelmed by her daughter. Added to this, Hester had wanted a boy, so having a girl just adds to her stress and unhappiness. Hester gives the little girl to a nurse and believes this action causes her to lose the love of her husband.

Hester learns that her husband has lost his money in a bad investment and has decided to move the family from New York to Newport. Hester is saddened by this because she has built up her home and she loves it, Leaving to go to a life where she will have to fight for every meal she is able to put on the table only adds to her sense of stress. On top of this, Hester likes to write music, which she has been doing in secret, but believes the move will make it impossible for her to continue this pursuit. Soon Hester finds herself forced to make a choice between pursuing her dream of song writing and staying with her husband. Having already lost her husband's love, Hester believes the choice is clear. However, an illness helps Hester to see the error in her thinking and she finds happiness in her marriage once more.

Dr. Manning

Dr. Manning is Hester's husband in "The Wife's Story." Dr. Manning is an older man who has five children before he marries his second wife. Hester is warned that Dr. Manning has been hurt in the past and will not allow another woman to hurt him again. Hester



believes that when she gives away her daughter she has caused an unforgivable hurt to Dr. Manning. Soon after Hester gives the infant away, Dr. Manning brings in a young woman to help take care of the children. Hester sees how close the girl is to Dr. Manning and she begins to believe that Dr. Manning is in love with this young lady.

As the story goes on, the reader learns that Dr. Manning's first wife was addicted to opium and that it caused her to have a sour personality. This woman was cruel to her husband and caused him a great deal of heartache even though he loved her deeply and attempted to make her happy. It is because of this experience that Dr. Manning's children are concerned about his future happiness and the effect Hester could have on him. It turns out, however, that Dr. Manning loves Hester dearly and understands her better than she understands herself.

Jacky

Jacky is Dr. Manning's ward in "The Wife's Story." Jacky is a young woman, a few years younger than Hester. Jacky is an enthusiastic woman who is always happy, trying to see the good side of everything, even the decision to move from New York to Newport. Hester comes to believe that Jacky is in love with Dr. Manning because of her overwhelming affection toward the older man. When Jacky tells Hester about Dr. Manning's first wife, this only seems to prove to Hester Jacky's affection for her husband. However, at the end of the story the reader learns that Jacky is actually in love with and plans to marry Dr. Manning's oldest son, Robert.

Anne

Anne is a young, beautiful girl in the story "Anne." Anne has a gorgeous voice and believes she can have any man she wants. However, the one man Anne wants is in love with another woman. Anne ends up marrying a different man, but in her heart she will always love George and will always wonder what her life would have been like had she married George.

Mrs. Nancy Palmer

Mrs. Nancy Palmer is an older woman in the story "Anne," who has a dream recalling her younger days that leave her sad and wondering what would have happened if her life had taken a different direction. Mrs. Palmer and Anne are actually the same person, but Mrs. Palmer is the older version of Anne who has lived a lifetime and begins to wonder what her life would have been like had Anne had her way and married George. George became a poet whom Mrs. Palmer admires greatly. Mrs. Palmer decides to run away from her children who are overwhelmingly protective of their mother and to meet the intelligent people with whom she had always wanted to surround herself. However, Mrs. Palmer encounters George and a couple of other humanitarians on a train and discovers they use the misfortune of others to increase their own fortunes. Mrs. Palmer



discovers that she made the right choices and that Anne would not have been happy with the life she had wanted for herself.

George Forbes

George Forbes is the man in the story "Anne" that young Anne wanted to marry. George was a good looking young man who charmed young Anne and made her happy. However, George was in love with another woman who was older than both he and Anne. Anne always wondered what her life would have been like had she married George. After having a vivid dream in which she is Anne once again, Mrs. Palmer decides to run away and meet some of the intellectual people she has always admired. On a train, Mrs. Palmer encounters George along with two other humanitarians and discovers they are not the people she always imagined them to be. George is a fat old man who overindulges in everything and has been married multiple times. Mrs. Palmer discovers that George is not the person she always imagined him to be and that she really had the better life with her husband, Job.

Susy Palmer Tyrrell

Susy Palmer is Mrs. Palmer's adult daughter in the story "Anne." Susy lives with her mother as she is being courted by a local man whose biggest concerns are the social advantages a marriage will make for him rather than love. Susy adores her mother and believes her to be a strong woman but believes the business decisions her mother has made over the years that have made them all rich were just luck. Susy does not believe her mother is an intelligent business woman. Susy worries about her mother and often treats her like a small child, reminding her to take her coat with her whenever she leaves the house. Mrs. Palmer resents Susy's concern until she runs away and discovers the world is not as she had always imagined it to be. Mrs. Palmer returns home happy to have Susy continue to fuss over her as she has always done in the past.



Objects/Places

Korl Woman

The Korl Woman is a sculpture Hugh Wolfe created out of the korl, the byproduct, of the iron mills. When the visitors see this sculpture they recognize Hugh's great talent, but decide they do not have the money it would take to bring him out of the slums and into the art world.

Money Purse

Deb steals a money purse from one of the visitors to the iron mill in order to help Hugh escape from the poverty of his life. Hugh intends to return the money but changes his mind and is caught in possession of the money. Hugh and Deb are both put in jail, but Hugh receives a nineteen-year sentence, a virtual life sentence, as opposed to Deb's three years.

Tin Scrap appears in Life in the Iron Mills

Hugh sharpens and uses a scrap of tin to kill himself while in jail.

Cell Window appears in Life in the Iron Mills

Hugh looks down on the market place from his cell in jail and marvels at how close it all is but that he will never be able to walk down there again.

Iron Mills appears in Life in the Iron Mills

Hugh works in an iron mill which is essentially an open building filled with multiple hot burning fires that are used to heat the iron. It is a miserable, sad place where many people worked long hours for little pay.

Boarding House appears in Life in the Iron Mills

Before his death, Hugh lived in the damp basement of a house with his father, a little girl, and Deb.



Opera appears in The Wife's Story

Hester writes an opera in her free time in the hopes of one day seeing it performed on the stage. Hester gives it to a producer and offers to sing in the show, creating for herself a situation in which she would be forced to leave her husband and children.

Newport appears in The Wife's Story

Hester learns that because of financial difficulties, her family will be forced to move to her husband's hometown of Newport, leaving the home they have built together over the first year and a half of their marriage.

Ship

Hester intends to board a ship to return to New York in order to take a part in her opera but falls ill before she can.

Poems

A man Anne loved became a poet, writing many poems that Mrs. Palmer admires, making her wish she had made different choices as a young woman.

Bonds

Mrs. Palmer takes all her bonds from the bank with the intention of running away and doing all the things she was never able to do as a young woman.

Themes

Mrs. Palmer boards a train in her escape from her home and children only to find herself in the same car with three people she greatly admires. However, as Mrs. Palmer listens to the their conversation, she comes to realize they are not the great people she had always believed them to be. When the train crashes, Mrs. Palmer returns contentedly to her home and family.



Themes

Poverty

"Life in the Iron Mills" is about a young man who is amazingly talented. This young man can create a sculpture out of scrap metal that speaks to the person looking at it, telling a story that no one can truly appreciate unless they have lived the emotion it represents. This young man, Hugh, knows he is talented, but because of his place in society, he does not have the opportunities he needs to market his talent. Hugh has to work for a living in order to support himself, his father, and a young girl who lives with them. Hugh works hard at the iron mills, spending more time at the fires in the mill than with his family, but only making enough money to provide a damp, moldy room in a small boarding house and potatoes for their every meal.

When a group of professional men come to visit the mill, they notice the sculpture of a young woman who is reaching out in hunger. At first the men believe Hugh has made a mistake by making the woman so healthy, until Hugh explains that the woman's hunger is not physical, but an emotional hunger for all the luxuries money can provide. The men believe Hugh is very talented, but they cannot do anything to help him because they do not have the money that would be required to lift him out of the slums and into the art world. Hugh becomes deeply depressed by this realization and it later influences his decision to keep some money that his friend, Deb, stole from one of these men. Keeping the money proves to be a mistake, however, because Hugh and Deb are put in jail for the crime. Hugh ends up taking his own life.

Poverty in this story has taken a talented, responsible young man and restricted his ability to live to his full potential. Hugh is a talented man, he could have been a great artist, but his class and his inability to rise above his birth, have left him with few choices. Even the rich men in the story recognize Hugh's talent, but they are unwilling to do anything to help him because helping this young man out of poverty could very well leave them tarnished, change their class and leave them no better off than Hugh. It is for these reasons that poverty is a theme of "Life in the Iron Mills."

Duty versus Desire

Hester, in "The Wife's Story," believes she has a great talent writing music as well as singing. Hester has recently gotten married and loves her husband but is overwhelmed with her husband's five children and an infant of her own. Hester longs for home and the ability to spend her days writing music. Hester continues her music in secret, writing when everyone else is asleep, completing an opera she believes deserves to be performed on the great stages of the world. Hester sneaks this opera out of the house and gives it to a producer with an offer to sing one of the parts should the opera be produced. However, news that her family is about to move out of New York forces Hester to make a choice.



Hester is aware that her husband has been hurt in the past and that her recent decision to send their infant daughter away has caused a rift between them. Although this causes Hester some guilt, she feels he cannot possibly love her any longer; therefore, it would not matter to him if she left. Hester cannot imagine that God gave her the gift to sing and write music if he did not intend for her to use them. Hester makes the decision to leave her family, only to discover that her talent is not as good as she believes and she stands to lose everything. When this turns out to be a dream, Hester is relieved and she embraces her family, glad that she was not allowed to make the choice she had wanted to make.

Hester is forced to make the choice between duty to her husband and their children and her desire to be a great singer and song writer. Hester lives in a time when having everything is not possible. For Hester, the choice seems clear because her husband already has stopped loving her because she sent their child away. However, it soon becomes clear that the choice is not as simple as it appears and Hester is given a second choice. It is this struggle that Hester is forced to go through that makes duty versus desire a theme of her story.

Lost Opportunities

In "Anne," Mrs. Palmer has a dream in which she is seventeen again and in love with a neighbor named George. When she wakes and realizes that thirty years have passed, Mrs. Palmer is saddened by the choices she made and everything she gave up. Although Mrs. Palmer loves her husband and children, she has always wanted to be a part of something bigger, of an intellectual group of people. The man Mrs. Palmer once loved became a poet, a great man full of amazing insights that never fail to amaze Mrs. Palmer. Mrs. Palmer finds herself wondering how different her life might have been if he had been her husband.

Mrs. Palmer decides to run away and meet all the great minds she has admired all her life. Mrs. Palmer removes all her bonds from the bank and runs away without telling her children where she is going. On the train, Mrs. Palmer discovers she is in the same car with a sculptor, a female activist, and the poet she once loved. Mrs. Palmer listens to their conversation and quickly comes to the conclusion that these are not great people, but selfish people who use other people's pain to their own advantage. When the train crashes, Mrs. Palmer is happy to return home.

Mrs. Palmer believes that by marrying Job Palmer she missed out on opportunities to be a great thinker and to be surrounded by the people who would change the world. Mrs. Palmer runs away for a last chance to live this missed opportunity but discovers these great people are not what she always believed them to be. It is this desire and its subsequent discovery that makes missed opportunities a theme of the story.

Style

Point of View

The point of view of "Life in the Iron Mills" is first person. The narrator is never named, though her occupation is hinted at at the end of the story. This person tells the story through an authorial voice giving opinions about the events in the story but never taking active part in the story until the end when she reveals that she has come into possession of the kohl woman. "In The Wife's Story," the point of view is first person. The narrator is Hester, a young woman who has married an older man and is helping to raise his five sons as well as her own infant daughter. In "Anne," the point of view is also first person. The narrator in Anne is Mrs. Nancy Palmer, an older woman who has awakened from a nap to realize she missed many opportunities she had dreamed of as a young girl.

The points of view of all these stories are first person. However, "Life in the Iron Mills" is different from the others in the fact that the narrator is not an active participant in the story but is a sympathetic observer who feels that Hugh Wolfes' story is an important one that must be told. The point of view is first person, but it is also told in an authorial voice as the narrator makes many comments on the events of the story and about the direction of the story, making pronouncements on the emotional impact of the theme of poverty. The other two stories are first person stories about and narrated by women who feel that they have missed opportunities in their lives and learn that those missed opportunities were not as important as they always believed they were. Although different, each point of view within these stories work well with the story and give the reader a perspective that is both informative and thought provoking.

Setting

The setting of "Life in the Iron Mills" is a town, presumably in Virginia or Ohio, where iron mills are the major industry. The town is dark and gloomy because of the constant smoke from the fires at the mills. The dark, dusty atmosphere is metaphoric of the poverty in which many of the mills workers live, a sad life in which both physical and emotional hunger is a constant. The setting of "The Wife's Story" begins in New York and moves to Newport as the family in the story are forced to move because of economic difficulties. In "Anne," the setting is a prosperous ranch that the heroine of the story has run and made successful on her own. The setting moves to a train on which the heroine is attempting to run away, but that train crashes, a metaphor for the crushing of the woman's beliefs in the opportunities she felt she missed out on in her youth.

The setting of "Life in the Iron Mills" is not only common sense based on the plot of the story, but it is a metaphor for the life the characters of the story live. Their lives are dark, gloomy, filled with pain and suffering and no sign of hope on the horizon. The town in



which they live is dark and gloomy because of the constant smoke from the iron mills. This gloom is increased in the beginning of the story by the clouds and fog that the narrator describes hanging over the town. This setting sets the tone of the story, alerting the reader that it will not be a happy story, and they are not disappointed. Both "The Wife's Story" and "Anne" have settings that are less dramatic. These settings are mere backdrop to a lifetime of sacrifice and lost opportunities that have accumulated to such a point that these women can no longer ignore what they have lost. The settings here are less important, but continue to support the plot with the time period in which they are set, giving the impression that these women had no choice in the direction of their lives, adding to the desperation of the women's situations. In these ways, the settings of these stories work well to support and add to the developing plots, giving the reader a fully-rounded story that will haunt them long after they put them down.

Language and Meaning

The language of the stories is simple, clear English. "Life in the Iron Mills" was written in the years before the Civil War; therefore, some of its language is a little more formal than modern English, but it does not include words that a modern reader would not recognize. The dialogue, however, is filled with broken grammar and unusual spellings in an attempt to capture the uneducated speech of the poor people who populate the story. However this dialogue is not used excessively so does not impede the understanding of the story. In "The Wife's Story" and "Anne," the language is a little less formal as these stories were written in later years and further into the author's experience. The language continues to be more formal than a modern reader might be accustomed to but is simple enough that even a young reader will be able to understand the meaning. The dialogue in these other two stories is easy to read as these characters are highly educated and living above the poverty level.

The language of these stories is formal, but not so much so that the reader cannot enjoy the simple plots they develop. The language is appropriate for the time period in which the stories were written and the intention of the author. In "Life in the Iron Mills," the dialogue tends to be difficult, but it expresses the less educated character of the people who worked in the iron mills, further developing the theme of poverty and lack of opportunities for these people. In "The Wife's Story" and "Anne," the dialogue also characterizes the people who are speaking, showing that these characters are better educated and living a life that is different from the characters in "Life in the Iron Mills." In this way, the author has done a good job of being true to her characters and expressing who they are through her words.

Structure

The book includes three short stories by Rebecca Harding Davis. These stories do not include chapter breaks or other separations, but are simply presented the way they were most likely intended to be read. After "Life in the Iron Mills," writer Tillie Olsen has presented a biographical interpretation that tells the life story of Rebecca Harding Davis



as it influenced her writing. This interpretation tells how Mrs. Davis began writing and how her stories came to be published in various publications, including *Atlantic Monthly* where two of these stories in this book appeared. Also included are notes that explain some of the passages in the interpretation that were not self explanatory.

"Life in the Iron Mills" is a simple story with only one plot that is encased in some basic information about the town in which the main characters lived and what happened to them after the story ends. "The Wife's Story," too, is a simple story with only one plot. The story begins simply on the day Hester is forced to make her final decision and backtracks to several months before this day to explain how Hester came to this place in her life. The end of the story suggests what might have happened had Hester made the choice she wanted to make and the choice she ends up making. "Anne" begins when Mrs. Palmer is having a dream of being a young woman again and wakes to find she is not satisfied with the life she has lived. Again this story has one simple plot that moves in a linear fashion from the moment she wakes to the moment she comes to realize her life is not as bad as she thought.



Quotes

"A cloudy day: do you know what that is in a town of iron-works?" "Life in the Iron Mills," pg. 11

"There is a secret down here, in this nightmare fog, that has lain dumb for centuries: I want to make it a real thing to you. You, Egoist, or Pantheist, or Arminian, busy in making straight paths for your feet on the hills, do not see it clearly,—this terrible question which men here have gone mad and died trying to answer. I dare not put this secret into words. I told you it was dumb. These men, going by with drunken faces and brains full of unawakened power, do not ask it of Society or of God. Their lives ask it; their deaths ask it. There is no reply."

"Life in the Iron Mills," pgs. 13-14

"Not many even of the inhabitants of a manufacturing town know the vast machinery of system by which the bodies of workmen are governed, that goes on unceasingly from year to year."

"Life in the Iron Mills," pg. 19

"I want you to come down and look at this Wolfe, standing there among the lowest of his kind, and see him just as he is, that you may judge him justly when you hear the story of this night. I want you to look back, as he does every day, at his birth in vice, his starved infancy; to remember the heavy years he has groped through as boy and man,—the slow, heavy years of constant, hot work." "Life in the Iron Mills," pg. 25

"I think in that one hour that came then he lived back over all the years that had gone before. I think that all the low, vile life, all his wrongs, all his starved hopes, came then, and stung him with a farewell poison that made him sick unto death. He made neither moan nor cry, only turned his worn face now and then to the pure light, that seemed so far off, as one that said, 'How long, O Lord? how long?'" "Life in the Iron Mills," pg. 60

"Nothing remains to tell that the poor Welsh puddler once lived, but this figure of the mill-woman cut in korl." "Life in the Iron Mills," pg. 64

"I know many people hold the theory, that once in every life God puts the stuff of which He has made the man or woman to the test, gives a soul a chance of a conscious fight with that other Power to win or lose itself, once for all. I do not know: it seems but just that one should be so left, untrammled, to choose between heaven and hell, but who can shake off trammels,—make themselves naked of their birth and education?" "The Wife's Story," pg. 177



"I turned and looked down the river again, shivering,—trying to think of the place and all we were leaving. I did not wonder that it cost the others little to give up the house: it meant little to them." "The Wife's Story," pg. 185

"And in a moment she brought my baby and laid it in my breast. It was only when its little hand touched me that I surely knew God had forgiven me." "The Wife's Story," pg. 221

"It was a strange thing, the like of which had never before happened to Anne. In her matter-of-fact, orderly life mysterious impressions were rare." "Anne," pg. 225

"How could a woman have a practical head who grew so bored with the pleasant church sociables, and refused absolutely to go to the delightful Literary Circle? Who would listen to a hand-organ with tears in her eyes, and who had once actually gone all the way up to Philadelphia to hear an Italian stroller named Salvini?" Anne, pg. 229

"At such times Mrs. Palmer will say to herself, 'Poor Anne!' as of somebody whom she once knew that is dead.

Is she dead? She feebly wonders; and if she is dead here, will she ever live again?"

"Anne, pg. 242

Topics for Discussion

Who is Deb? What is significant about her? Why does the narrator start her story with Deb? Why does Deb go to the iron mill? Why does she stay? What does Deb do to help Hugh? Is this a genuine effort to help, or is Deb trying to cause trouble? Why does Deb get a lesser sentence compared to Hugh? How is this influenced by the time period in which the story is set?

Who is Hugh? What does Hugh do for a living? What hobby does Hugh have? Is Hugh talented? Why does Hugh not quit his job and pursue his hobby? What do the visitors say about Hugh's hobby? Why do they not help Hugh? What does this decision cause Hugh to realize? How does Hugh act on this realization?

Discuss social class. What class of people are Hugh and Deb? Could Hugh and Deb rise from their station in life? Why or why not? What class of people are the visitors to the mill? Could they help Hugh change his life? How? Why do they not help? What reason do they give? Is this logical or selfish? How?

Who is Hester? Why did Hester get married? Does she love her husband? Why did Hester send her infant away? What caused Hester to make this decision? What did this decision do to Hester's marriage? Why? Is Hester happy in her marriage? What has caused her unhappiness? What does Hester want to do about this?

What is Hester's hobby? Is Hester good at this hobby? How does she know how good or bad she is at this hobby? Why does Hester believe she should pursue this hobby? What could it cost Hester to pursue her hobby? Why? How is this reflected by the setting of the story? How might this decision be different for Hester if the story were set in modern times? What is the overall theme of this story?

Who is Anne? Who is Nancy Palmer to Anne? Why did Anne not marry George? Did she regret this decision? Why? What does Mrs. Palmer want from her life? Has she found it? Why or why not? What kind of life has Mrs. Palmer lived? Is it a good life? Why is Mrs. Palmer not satisfied with this life? What does Mrs. Palmer want?

Discuss women's rights. What are women's rights? Did Rebecca Harding Davis believe in women's rights? Why or why not? How are these beliefs reflected in her writings? Was Mrs. Davis a pioneer in women's rights? In what way? Did she know the impact of her writings on the women's rights movement? How is this reflected in her writings?