Margret Howth: A Story of To-Day Study Guide

Margret Howth: A Story of To-Day by Rebecca Harding Davis

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Introduction

Margret Howth: A Story of To-Day, published in 1862 in Boston, was Rebecca Harding Davis's second widely acknowledged work, and her first novel. Set in an Indiana mill town during the fall and winter of 1860, it depicts the suffering of the working poor at a time when industrialization was growing across America.

During the time Davis wrote, the society she lived in was divided into areas of activity that were considered appropriate for men, or for women. Women were expected to take care of home and family; men were expected to attend to the world of ideas, politics, and money. Writing books was considered to be a male activity, and women who wanted to be authors, like Davis, were expected to write "moral" fiction: fiction that educated, elevated, and promoted religious values.

However, some writers, such as Davis, preferred to present uncouth, sinful, or "low" characters, who were generally ordinary, poor, and flawed people. This realistic fiction was intended to be the opposite of popular nineteenth-century fiction, which presented strong heroes, beautiful heroines, and romantic plots. Davis managed to fit her depiction of unattractive, sinful, and flawed people within the social ideal that women write moral fiction by using her stories to examine social and religious issues□and to bring up moral questions. She writes at the beginning of the book:

"You want something . . . to lift you out of this
crowded, tobacco-stained commonplace, to kindle
and chafe and glow in you. I want you to dig into
this commonplace, this vulgar American life, and see
what is in it. Sometimes I think it has a new and awful
significance that we do not see."

Margret Howth was first published in six installments in the *Atlantic Monthly* beginning in October, 1861. At the request of her editor, James Fields, Davis rewrote the novel to make the ending happier. Although she was disappointed with the necessity of doing this to make the book more agreeable to the public, she had faith that Fields was probably right.

According to Jane Atteridge Rose in *Rebecca Harding Davis*, the book has been called "the earliest realistic depiction of an American woman as an individual and as ordinary." Jean Fagan Yellin, in her afterword to the Feminist Press edition of the novel, wrote that "readers immediately recognized" the significance of the book, and that critics commented on Davis's revealing "the fictional possibilities in people who had been presumed to be inarticulate, or whom economic or social oppression had submerged."

Author Biography

Rebecca Harding Davis was born Rebecca Harding on June 24, 1831, at her aunt's home in Washington, Pennsylvania, and soon was taken to the family home in Big Spring, Alabama (later renamed Huntsville), where she would become the oldest of five children. Although they only lived there until Davis was five, Davis later remembered her mother's description of "the mixed magnificence and squalor of the life on the plantations among which we lived; the great one-storied wooden houses built on piles; the pits of mud below them in which pigs wallowed," according to Jan Atteridge Rose in *Rebecca Harding Davis*.

In 1837, the Hardings moved to Wheeling, West Virginia, a steel-manufacturing town. Wheeling was a prosperous, diverse place, a center for new immigrants looking for work and for those who wanted to migrate farther west. Her experiences in Wheeling would provide characters and incidents that would recur, with little alteration, in much of her fiction.

Davis was educated at home by her mother. She was an avid reader, although her reading was limited, for the most part, to the Bible and works by John Bunyan, Sir Walter Scott, and Miss Edgeworth. She also read several stories by Hawthorne, which impressed her deeply because instead of writing about knights, fairies, and magical events, he took ordinary people and events and made them seem magical. Many years later, she realized how deeply his vision and sensibility affected her.

She attended Washington Female Seminary in Pennsylvania, where she was exposed to antislavery lectures and radical reformers. After she had attended for three years, her education was over; more education was unthinkable for a young woman of her time. Although she did not marry, she remained in her parents' house, taking care of younger siblings and doing the housework. She continued to read widely, using her father's library and the textbooks her brother, Wilson, brought home from college. In the late 1850s she began publishing reviews, poetry, stories, and editorials in the *Wheeling Intelligencer*, and in 1859, she briefly worked as its editor.

During this time she also took long walks, keenly observing everyone she saw□a range of people that apparently included "thieves, convicts, prostitutes, drunks, addicts, and suicides," according to Rose.

In 1861, her first work, "Life in the Iron Mills," was published in the *Atlantic Monthly*. Noted for the "bold authority" in its description of impoverished iron workers, according to Rose, the book "exploded with a force that shook America's Eastern intellectual community to its foundation" with its realistic treatment of unpleasant subjects and situations.

James T. Fields, co-owner of Ticknor and Fields publishers, as well as editor of the *Atlantic*, asked Davis to write another piece, but requested that this one be less depressing than "Life in the Iron Mills." He rejected *Margret Howth* at first because it

was still too sad, and Davis rewrote it to satisfy him, with what Rose described as a "happy ending in which the ambitious and egoistic male becomes domesticated and the self-sacrificing female is fulfilled through marriage." According to Rose, the book has been described as "the earliest realistic description of an American woman as an individual and as ordinary."

Because of the book's success, Davis was invited to Fields's home in Boston to meet other wellknown writers of the time. After this visit, she stopped in Philadelphia to meet Lemuel Clarke Davis, a lawyer who had written to her about her work "Life in the Iron Mills." The two fell in love and were engaged during her visit. On March 5, 1863, they were married. They had three children, Richard Harding, Charles Belmont, and Nora. Even- tually, Richard Harding Davis's career as a journalist and writer would overshadow his mother's.

Davis went on to write several novels and story collections, which are regarded as a form of "spiritual activism," according to Michele L. Mock in *NWSA Journal*, and as a form of pioneer American realistic fiction. She died on September 29, 1910, in Mount Kisco, New York, of edema of the lungs caused by heart disease.

Plot Summary

Chapters I-II

Margret Howth: A Story of To-Day opens as Margret Howth begins her new job working on the ledgers at Knowles & Company woolen mill, owned by Dr. Knowles. The job is dreary, lonely, and depressing; she works alone, in a dirty room high in the mill; on the floors below, workers slave in suffocating heat and deafening noise, amid the caustic fumes of dyes. She has taken the job to make money to take care of her impoverished parents; her father, a former schoolteacher, has gone blind and can no longer support the family. At the end of the day she returns to the family home, a formerly comfortable place that is now spare, since she and her mother have sold everything valuable in order to buy food.

Dr. Knowles, the owner of the mill, follows her. He has a grand scheme in mind, and he has been watching Margret to see how she will fit into it. He is also friends with her father, and spends time with him, arguing politics. Margret notices that the doctor is watching her, as he has watched her for her whole life, "with a kind of savage scorn," but doesn't know why he does so. His grand plan is to sell the mill and use the money to found a commune, where he will take ex-slaves, alcoholics, and all other downtrodden people, and teach them self-reliance and self-worth. All will live on an even footing with the others, and the community will be based on "perpetual celibacy, mutual trust, honour," and individuals will "rise according to the stuff that's in them." And, he hopes, Margret will work on this plan with him.

Lois Yare, a mixed-race woman who is deformed from rickets□a disease caused by malnutrition □and who has suffered brain damage, comes to the door. She began working at the mill when she was seven years old, but because of her condition couldn't keep up with the work. She left the mill, planning never to go back, and became a peddler of fruits and vegetables. She is a kind, optimistic, and loving person, and everyone she meets can't help but be kind to her; she believes that everything will be right someday□if not here, then in heaven□and that even among the poorest people, there are some who are "the Master's people," meaning children of Christ. Her mother was an alcoholic and her father, Joe Yare, is a thief, but she has never let her poor origins, or her physical suffering, affect her outlook. She tells the Howths that her father has just gotten out of jail, news that she's delighted about. He will be working as a stoker in the mill.

Chapters III-VII

The next day, Margret goes to work again. She thinks about her lost love, Stephen Holmes, an entrepreneur. She was once engaged to him, but the wedding was called off when she had to begin taking care of her aging and impoverished parents. She hears him walk past the room where she sits reconciling the mill's books, but he doesn't stop,

and she thinks he doesn't know she's inside. He is now engaged to Miss Herne, the intelligent but unpleasant daughter of the man who is co-owner of the mill with Dr. Knowles. He admits that he doesn't love her, but without her money he can't realize his ambition of owning his own factory some day. When he walks past the room where Margret is working, he does know she's inside, and he misses her, but he thinks it's better if he doesn't speak to her anymore, because it will be too painful for both of them.

Holmes plans to buy Dr. Knowles's share in the mill, using money his future father-in-law will give him. One of the workers at the mill, a coaldigger, meets Holmes and asks him if he will do a favor for Lois's father, Joe. Holmes and the worker are the only two people who know Yare was involved in a forgery. If Holmes keeps quiet about it, Yare won't go back to jail and can clean up his life and move on. Holmes, however, says it's not up to him: Yare broke the law, so he must pay the consequences.

While Holmes is riding in a carriage with Miss Herne, they see Margret, and he decides that before he marries Miss Herne, he will talk to Margret one more time. He goes to her and tells her he always loved her, but that love kept him from realizing his ambition in life. As he talks, he realizes that ambition is nothing, and begs her to take him back. She is disgusted by that fact that he put power before love, and refuses. He tells her "I will wait for you yonder [in Heaven] if I die first," and she admits that she loves him too, despite her refusal.

Dr. Knowles finds Margret and tells her he wants to show her "a bit of hell: outskirt." He takes her to a mission house, where prostitutes, gamblers, vagabonds, runaway slaves, ragged children, and other poor and forgotten people live, and tells her ironically, "it's a glimpse of the under-life of America □God help us!□where all men are born free and equal." He asks if she will join him in working for them, and tells her that God is calling her to this work. This is why he has been watching her all her life□to assess her fitness and see if she can fit into his grand plan. She doesn't give him an answer, however.

Chapters VIII-XI

Holmes goes to the mill, where Joe Yare begs him not to tell anyone about the forgery. Holmes, again, refuses to keep the secret. That night, while Holmes is sleeping in the mill, Yare sets it on fire. Yare's daughter, Lois, knowing Holmes is upstairs, runs into the burning building and saves him, but not before she inhales a deadly dose of toxic fumes from the burning dye vats.

Holmes lives, but his dream of wealth and power is destroyed. So is Dr. Knowles's dream, since the mill burned down before they could conclude the sale, and now he has no money to build his commune and achieve his grand scheme of becoming a famous reformer. He devotes himself to simpler acts of charity at the mission house. Holmes recuperates in bed. His body heals, but his spirit feels sick as he thinks about how materialistic he was, how ready he was to deny love and marry a woman he despised just to get money. He is inspired by Lois's pure faith to reconsider his life and how he has wasted it, but realizes it's not too late to make amends. He asks Margret to marry

him, and she accepts. Knowles is deeply disappointed, since he thought she was going to work with him at the mission, but in the end, Margret's life as Holmes's wife fills her with such happiness that she is completely fulfilled. In a surprising event that ties up the one remaining loose end, the poverty Margret's family has endured is suddenly ended when oil is discovered on the Howth property.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

Margret Howth: A Story of To-Day is Rebecca Harding Davis' novel of life in a textile mill town in Indiana, in the early 1860's. Contrary to most popular novels written in this time period, the author presents the unattractive side of the emerging Industrial Age and the imminent Civil War in America.

The novel begins with the narrator, Margret Howth, explaining that she is about to tell a story of To-Day. Margret's world is a bleak one, where hunger and poverty rule, and hope is a distant memory. Margret hopes that her story will be told when she is dead, so that people will know the anguish of the time in which she lived.

Margret shares that the reason that she is writing this book is because the sight of some old journals today has prodded her memory back to October 1860, and her life in a mill town in Indiana. The ledger is the record of the mill where she worked, Knowles & Co., a woolen manufacturing company.

Margret describes the meticulous writing in the ledger, and how its style indicates that a woman wrote it. Even if history does not remember her name, they will know that it was she who wrote on those pages.

Margret has taken the position in the accounting office at the mill that is owned by Dr. Knowles, a friend of Margret's father. On her first day at this job, which also happens to be her twentieth birthday, Margret climbs the steep ladder to the tiny, dark office that she shares with a scrawny chicken in a cage.

Margret's first day is a short one of methodical transferring of figures from one ledger to another. Although the work is tedious, there is a sense of satisfaction when Dr. Knowles comes to the office to send her home.

Dr. Knowles has known Margret all her life and knows that she has given up the idea of love and marriage for the sake of working to support her mother and newly blind father. Margret knows that the fleshy doctor watches her with more than a friendly intent, yet she takes her time putting on her hat and shawl and climbing back down the ladder to the main floor of the mill. Tomorrow, she will work a full day like the others, sweating at these machines. However, for now, Margret is happy to be once more outside in the fresh air.

The walk back home is long, past the rowhouses, through the suburbs, and finally into the country. Margret is aware that Dr. Knowles follows her at a comfortable distance. The old doctor stops and waits, as Margret reaches her home and embraces her father, who sits on the porch awaiting her return.

Having given Margret and her father some time alone, Dr. Knowles makes his way to the stone cottage for his nightly visit to the family. Dr. Knowles studies Margret intently, as she moves about the cottage in her household tasks, even as her father and the doctor engage in one of their ritual arguments. Dr. Knowles had been coming to the house every day during the last month to tend to Margret's father, a schoolteacher who has gone blind. Now, the doctor continues to come, even though his medical skills are not urgently required.

Margret watches the doctor and her father walk outside and notes with tenderness how the doctor holds back any intrusive tree branches that her father cannot see. Margret hears her father tell Dr. Knowles that some new plan of the doctor's is bound to fail, but Margret is unaware of the scheme and continues with her chores.

Margret looks lovingly at her mother dozing in a chair, the burden of poverty and illness having stripped her vitality over the past few months. Margret also silently gives thanks that her father cannot see that she and her mother have sold many of the family's possessions, such as house wares and artwork, so that they could have a little money to run the household.

When evening comes, the warm light from the fireplace casts a lovely glow on the now sparsely furnished room. For these few minutes, it seems that the house is as it used to be. Margret wills the old feelings of comfort and beauty to return and feels within herself that it will happen.

Chapter 1 Analysis

The story is told from both the first person narrative position, which means that the narrator reveals not only the actions of the plot line, but also her thoughts and feelings about what is happening, as well as the third person omniscient position. This additional perspective from an unnamed source provides narrative about Margret, in terms of her dress, demeanor, and general characteristics on which she herself would not be able to comment.

The narrator is Margret Howth, a 20-year-old woman living in late nineteenth century

Indiana. Margret begins her story by making claims about the dismal state of the nation and the country's working poor, and then reverts to memory when prompted by the discovery of the Knowles & Co. ledger. Even in the retelling of the memory, Margret reminisces about the past in contrast to the dire present, due to her father's sudden blindness and subsequent poverty.

The novel's beginning points to a sad plot line, but the author adds touches of beauty in her writing with the literary technique of foreshadowing. For example, the description of Margret's ledger pages states, "The sordid, hard figures seemed to her types of the years coming, but she wrote them down unflinchingly: perhaps life had nothing better for her, so she did not care."

The author also uses metaphors, such as describing the stalwart churches that Margret passes on her way home. "These churches lifted their hard, stone faces insolently, registering their yearly alms in the morning journals." Obviously, churches do not have faces that can be lifted, but the author wants the reader to understand that the churches have a long history in the area and will withstand whatever trials are yet to come in this trying time.

Chapters 2 and 3

Chapters 2 and 3 Summary

Night has fallen hard and cold, and Dr. Knowles watches the Howth family in their little home, as Margret reads from the Bible. At one point, Margret feels the doctor's eyes on her. She responds coolly, thinking that all through her life the doctor has looked at her with a savage scorn. Margret cannot understand why this man, who is compassionate to all others, seems to hold her in such a sneering view.

At last, it is time for Dr. Knowles to head back to his home in town, and Margret leads her father to his room for the night. Margret steps outside for some quiet time before going to bed and muses about the dire circumstances of her fate. Suddenly, she hears the familiar yapping of a small dog and sees her beloved terrier, Tiger, who has been gone for two years.

As the two old friends are reacquainted, Margret can hear the sound of wagon wheels coming down the road and realizes that it is the wagon of the vendor, Lois Yare. Lois is a mulatto woman afflicted with rickets and brain damage from a childhood spent working in the textile mill with poor ventilation and little food.

Margret can hear Joel, the Black man who works for the Howth family, greet Lois in the lane. Mrs. Howth is delighted to see Lois, as well. She asks Joel to bring some food and fresh coffee for Lois, who has been driving all day. As it is so late, Mrs. Howth asks Joel to fix a bed for Lois in the barn loft, so that she will not have to drive all the way back home in the dark.

Mrs. Howth does not maintain the same cool distance with Lois as she does with other Negroes, partly because Lois is so pitiable that she does not even register on any social scale to Mrs. Howth's way of thinking.

Lois shares the fact that her father, Joe Yare, is back from serving two years in prison and now working as a stoker in Dr. Knowles' mill. Margret congratulates Lois on her good news, but is also apprehensive about Joe's presence back in town.

The next morning, Margret rises, when it is still dark outside, and begins her day. An overwhelming sense of dread fills Margret, as she views this day as just one in a series of countless others filled with despair and lack of hope. Finally, Margret finishes dressing and moves downstairs, her body betraying her heavy mood with her slow and heavy steps.

When Margret opens the front door of the house, Tiger, rushes outside delighting in the fresh, cool air. Margret begins to fix breakfast. Margret is torn about Tiger's return, because he reminds her of her former love, Mr. Holmes. Margret had given him up, not only because her parents require her help now, but also because Margret felt that she had only served as an impediment to Mr. Holmes' goals.

Margret is overcome by the loss of a love-filled life in exchange for one of endless duty in dire circumstances and wonders if the sacrifices people make in their lives are ever noticed or appreciated.

Suddenly, Margret hears Joel's voice outside and realizes that he must be speaking to Lois. Margret prepares some breakfast for Lois and heads outside, where the tiny woman is readying her wagon for her day of selling. Lois offers to give Margret a ride into town, since this will be Margret's second day of work at the mill. Margret marvels at the overflowing baskets of fruits and vegetables. She notices how the luscious colors sit in such stark contrast to the grey landscape through which the two women travel this morning.

The conversation turns to the return of Lois' father, and Lois is encouraged that the man is redeemed. She has placed her trust in God to make everything all right. Lois has a philosophy that everything does come out all right at some point, because everything is in God's hands.

Margret brings up the subject of the mill. Lois' mood darkens, due to her memory of working there from the ages of seven through sixteen. Had it not been for the rickets and brain loss she suffered during that time, she would probably still be there. Mr. Holmes had ultimately found her a little room and this cart from which she sells produce and makes her living.

Margret winces at the mention of Mr. Holmes' name and is almost relieved when Lois returns to the topic of the horrific conditions in the textile mill. Fortunately, Lois does not dwell on any topic too long, and Margret is happy to have the interruptions of Lois' stops at farmhouses along the way where she sells her goods.

Finally, the little wagon reaches town and Margret, buoyed by Lois' high spirits, leaves Lois and heads down the narrow streets in town toward the mill, where she will begin her second day of work.

Chapters 2 and 3 Analysis

The author introduces another pivotal person into the story in the character of Lois Ware. Lois is an itinerant peddler, who fills her cart with beautiful fruits and vegetables to sell to the people in the area. They view her with a mix of joy and pity. Lois' deformities are pitiable, but her indomitable spirit and sense of joy for life draw people to her, instead of pushing her away.

The author uses Lois as an icon for persistence in spite of adversity. She comes into Margret's life, just as Margret is feeling doomed about her own future. Even though Lois is on the bottom rung of any social ladder, she is the only one capable of elevating Margret's spirits and perspective on her own bleak life. The author creates Lois vividly with overflowing baskets of ripe, luscious produce which symbolize new life and vitality, as Lois ministers to the people she encounters in her own way.

The author uses the technique of foreshadowing with the arrival of Tiger, Mr. Holmes' dog, which indicates the imminent encounter Margret will have with her former fiancy.

Chapters 4 and 5

Chapters 4 and 5 Summary

As Margret tends to her work on the mill's ledgers, Dr. Knowles and one of the clerks, Mr. Pike, stop in Margret's office to look at the caged chicken. Mr. Pike acknowledges that Mr. Holmes is the only one who feeds the chicken and that Holmes has a kinder disposition to animals than he does toward people. Dr. Knowles, fully aware of Margret's broken engagement to Holmes, watches her face for traces of interest but finds none.

Dr. Knowles and Mr. Pike discuss the imminent purchase of the mill by Mr. Holmes and a man named Mr. Herne, whose daughter will stand in his place in the daily operations. Margret pauses only slightly upon hearing these words, passes the notion off as ridiculous, and proceeds with her work.

Down the hall, the other clerks discuss the acquisition of the mill in more somber tones. It is agreed that Holmes has secured a good future for himself by buying out Dr. Knowles and agreeing to marry Miss Herne, who will be the co-owner of the mill.

Margret works on diligently, oblivious to the discussion of the men down the hall, but her heart pauses as she hears the approaching footsteps of Mr. Holmes. Margret thinks about the time when the sound of those footsteps filled her heart with joy. Now, an overwhelming sadness fills her, especially when the footsteps do not pause at her door but stay on their course down the hallway.

Although she does not realize it, Holmes is aware that Margret sits behind this door. His hand brushes the doorknob in a caress as he passes. Holmes still has pangs over the broken engagement and wonders if Margret had been hurt as he has. He thinks about all the years that he had envisioned Margret as his wife. Fully aware of the potential hurt that any acknowledgement could bring, Holmes chooses to walk past Margret's door to avoid any uncomfortable or awkward confrontation.

The author turns her attention away from Holmes and onto Lois, whose days are filled with simple pleasures and an almost zealous religious conviction. Lois is one of those rare people who can give beyond their own means, simply because it is what the Lord wants of her. She is filled with overwhelming joy because of it. People who encounter Lois find her to be simple minded because of her afflictions, but the author reminds the reader that it is sometimes such people who are closer to the spiritual realm than others, who think their intellect and reason to be far superior.

It is this perspective on life which allows Lois to greet the days differently from Holmes, who looks at the same scene in front of the mill this evening but has an entirely different view. Holmes sees the bleak humanity and dreary lives ending yet one more day of toil in unfit circumstances while Lois sees only a sea of people who greet her with kindness and to whom she will bestow kindness in return.

Lois lives in a room in a house near the mill and, although it is sparsely furnished, she shares it now with her father, Joe. The room is small and not fit for entertaining. Joe looks longingly out the window at the people passing by, knowing that his criminal record prevents his interaction with them. He feels as if he is still imprisoned, although he is technically free.

After Joe goes to bed each night, Lois puts away her knitting and sits on the steps of the house to watch the moonlight wash over the buildings in the area. She marvels at the perfect ending of another perfect day.

Meanwhile, Holmes has taken a walk out into the country and faces west, where he imagines the Pacific Ocean and the vast prairies of promise. He wonders if his investment in this mill town is the appropriate move for him. Holmes walks to the abandoned school house, where he is to meet Dr. Knowles, who will give him the deed to the mill. Holmes waits in the quiet building until he sees the heavy, lumbering figure of Dr. Knowles making his way toward him.

Dr. Knowles had been out walking this morning to survey the property that he has purchased for a new commune that he is going to establish. The two men make pleasant conversation and begin the walk back to town, both of them hesitant to discuss the real purpose for their meeting. It is as if the deed holds a stench and decay that neither man is eager to touch. It is only when the two men reach the doorway of the mill that Dr. Knowles hands over the deed to Holmes to review and sign by tomorrow.

Dr. Knowles continues to walk away from the mill, while Holmes makes his way to the room that he has prepared for himself on the upper floor of the mill. Once more, Holmes is painfully aware that Margret sits quietly in an office below him. He ponders the circumstances that broke them apart, and whether he is doing the right thing by marrying Miss Herne.

Holmes silently acknowledges his loneliness and knows instinctively that he would be happier with Margret as his wife, yet the lure of the money available to him with the purchase of the mill and the subsequent marriage to Miss Herne is a powerful lure for a boy raised in poverty. Ultimately, Holmes signs the deed and leaves his room by a circuitous route, so that he will not run the risk of encountering Margret.

Out on the street, Holmes encounters one of the mill workers, a distant relative of his who has come to ask for some leniency in the mill's treatment of Joe Yare. Apparently, this worker and Holmes are the only two people aware of Joe's crime of forgery two years ago. The worker asks Holmes to keep his silence about it, so that Joe can lead a normal life again.

The worker acknowledges Holmes' inclination for defining right from wrong, inherited from his outspoken mother. Holmes softens momentarily, but ultimately can promise no special treatment, because Joe had committed the crime and must live with the results.

Suddenly, a shiny carriage drives past the mill. Holmes can see the pale figure of Miss Herne, who waves weakly to him from the window. The worker congratulates Holmes on

his upcoming nuptials and departs. Holmes watches some of the departing mill workers and then walks down the street in the direction of the departing carriage.

Chapters 4 and 5 Analysis

The author introduces the theme of the conflict of love versus money. While Holmes is perceived to be a cold character, his demeanor is actually one of success driven by failure and lack in his childhood. Holmes has vowed to improve his lot in life and has achieved a comfortable position. The local businessmen would look upon him more favorably, if he were to engage in more social and humanitarian activities.

Holmes' motivation for survival gives him momentary pause, as he reflects on his lost love for Margret, but Holmes ultimately decides in favor of financial security. Perhaps the money represents love to him more than any woman ever could. A childhood of deprivation inflicts no outward signs, but Holmes carries the fear of lack with him always and chooses what he considers to be the best decision for his own peace of mind.

The author also addresses the theme of religion and spirituality, especially in the character of Lois and her simple-minded ministering to the people that she encounters. Even Holmes and Dr. Knowles understand that Lois has spiritual connections far beyond those granted to most people. Lois sometimes has encounters with God, which leave her weak and tired. Although she cannot explain what happens, she knows that she has a special connection to God.

The author uses the literary technique of irony to explain Lois' spirituality in contrast to the other people, who consider themselves to be superior in every way. It is the crippled and socially classless Lois, who has received this special gift as opposed to the divine gifts bestowed on the people in town, who believe that they should be the recipients because of their superior status.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

It is now evening, and Lois is headed back to town after a day selling in the country. The sky is quickly changes color to an ominous shade. Lois is alarmed so much that she pulls her wagon to the side of the road to watch it, sure that it is an omen of something bad to come.

Soon, Lois hears the sound of approaching carriage wheels and moves her wagon over as far as possible. Lois can see the delicate face of Miss Herne in one of the carriage windows and understands immediately that this woman is heartless and cruel. Lois also notices that Miss Herne is dressed in yellow, which is the color worn by shams. This woman looks perfectly capable of living up to the term.

As the carriage moves past Lois and toward town, it also passes the pathetic figure of Margret on her way home. Miss Herne exchanges a few derogatory comments with one of the passengers, and then addresses Mr. Holmes about his being affianced to the pitiful Margret a while ago.

Holmes does not dignify Miss Herne's caustic remarks, but transforms himself into the ambitious, vain man she expects him to be. Holmes wrestles with his thoughts of his old persona of a compassionate person with the new person his marriage to Miss Herne will dictate and determines that he will do whatever he has to in order to achieve his objectives.

Holmes exits the carriage before it reaches town, with the purpose of walking back along the dirt road to find Margret. Holmes feels that he must speak to her one last time to eliminate any fact that he did not act honorably in the situation. Margret is sitting, leaning against a stone wall at the same location that she was, when the carriage passed her a little while ago.

Margret is startled by Holmes' appearance. She stands quickly and begins to fidget in a way that Holmes finds endearing. Holmes tries to explain to Margret that he loved her and still does, but that he has new ambitions that Margret cannot accept. It has been two years since Holmes and Margret broke their engagement. As he stands before her now, Holmes realizes that perhaps ambition does not have merit over true love.

Margret asks Holmes if he loves Miss Herne. He admits that he does not, but he will marry her because of what her money can do for him. Holmes can see that Margret has suffered and will continue to suffer in her life and wants her to take him back, so that they can have a good life together.

Margret admits that she did love Holmes. However, she does not love who he has become, and therefore cannot be with him. Margret tells Holmes that she loves him and

will wait for him in heaven, if she should die before him. The couple embraces and kisses. Then, Holmes leaves her by the side of the road and heads back to town.

Margret is still sitting in the same place by the stone wall, when Dr. Knowles comes upon her, chastising her for worrying her parents over her tardiness in returning home this evening. Dr. Knowles had offered to find Margret, but now wants to show her something before escorting her home.

Dr. Knowles pulls Margret to her feet and leads her down a side road and into "a bit of hell." Margret followed the doctor, in spite of her good sense, until they reached an abandoned tavern populated with a variety of people abandoned by polite society.

Margret sees filthy women, tramps, drunks, and dirty children running around in the grimy building. There are several Negroes using the tavern as a stop on the Underground Railroad, heading toward Canada. The doctor has one more tragedy to show Margret and leads her down a narrow passageway to view the corpse of a fifteen-year-old girl, who committed suicide by drinking herself to death. The girl had been in love with a man, who was killed at the textile mill. She killed herself in her despair over his loss.

When Dr. Knowles leads Margret from this place of death and stench, he tells Margret to put her problems in perspective with what she has just viewed in this horrible place. Dr. Knowles tells Margret that God has called her to do the work of saving these people. The doctor knows that Margret is a woman of integrity. Her sense of loss and emptiness needs some purpose. He's determined to help Margret see that her life is now with these poor unfortunates.

To drive home his point, Dr. Knowles reminds Margret that there is no one in the world who really treasures only her, and that she will find fulfillment in this life of service. Dr. Knowles walks Margret home. In the darkness of her room, Margret compares her life to Jesus' life and suffering, which is the surest way to redemption.

Chapter 6 Analysis

The story has reached its climax with Holmes' final declaration to Margret that he cannot achieve his goals, unless he marries Miss Herne. This emotional devastation is the turning point in Margret's life. She not only truly understands this man she loves, but also knows that she must choose important work for fulfillment.

The opportunity to live a life with a bigger purpose is immediately presented by Dr. Knowles. He has been biding his time for many years, assessing Margret's suitability for this type of work. Dr. Knowles also knows that Margret is at the most vulnerable point in her life and capitalizes on her need to feel needed by trying to convince her that God needs her to do this work of salvation.

It could be viewed that Dr. Knowles has cunningly waited all these years in order to find the right time to involve Margret in this difficult work, and that taking advantage of her

vulnerability is less than noble. The author probably did not intend to portray this perception, but rather, that Dr. Knowles has known Margret all her life and knows that she is capable of selfless love, which would have been wasted in a life with someone as shallow as Mr. Holmes. In that regard, Dr. Knowles can actually be saving Margret's life by asking her to help save others.

Chapters 7 and 8

Chapters 7 and 8 Summary

Holmes returns from his talk with Margret to find Lois and her father, Joe, keeping watch at the mill tonight. Always glad to see the affable Lois, Holmes engages in conversation with her, but essentially ignores Joe, whom he cannot abide for his crime. Lois offers some of the food that she has prepared, but Holmes excuses himself to go to his room upstairs.

Joe follows Holmes out into the passageway and implores him not to reveal his past crime of forgery to anyone, so that he may rebuild his life and stay with Lois. Holmes cannot promise that, because Joe has committed a crime which cannot be ignored. He tells Joe that he will deal with him tomorrow.

Joe returns to where Lois is keeping watch over the furnace and encourages her to go home, knowing that she is desperately afraid of being in the mill for any length of time. Lois thinks it odd that her father insists that she leave, but he accompanies her home and returns to the mill, unaware that Lois has followed him and is hiding in the shadows across the street.

Lois falls asleep in her hiding place and does not see her father set fire to the building. After a little time passes, Lois awakens with the sense of something gone horribly wrong. It is then that Lois sees the leaping flames across the street and realizes that the mill is on fire. A terrible thought occurs to her that Mr. Holmes is alone in his room and is in danger of being consumed by the flames. Lois rushes into the mill to save Mr. Holmes, in spite of her fear of ever returning to the building.

Holmes spends his recovery time in a hospital, with Lois continually at his side. It is a long time before Holmes can even comprehend his situation. He lies in his bed, registering that he has a stream of visitors but wishing that they would all leave him to his private thoughts. The fire at the mill had occurred in October, and Holmes now looks out the window on grey December days.

Holmes is aware of the voices of the nuns tending him in the hospital. He's come to rely on Lois' steadfastness and calming effect on him. Dr. Knowles would visit occasionally, but neither man knows what to say to the other. The extent of their relationship was the ill-fated transaction of the sale of the mill, which never occurred.

Dr. Knowles has lost everything with the destruction of the mill. as he never purchased any insurance. He's now forced to return to medical practice, instead of pursuing his dream of saving souls in his new commune. Only one time did the doctor visit the land he had intended to purchase for his commune. It was a cloudy October day shortly after the mill fire, and the doctor spent the afternoon looking at the empty expanse of land. He then said his farewell to his lifelong dream.

Dr. Knowles visits Holmes on this December afternoon and informs him that he has plans to open a smaller institution for socialist healing, called the "House of Refuge." Margret has agreed to join him in his work there. Dr. Knowles can see that the mention of Margret's name still means something to Holmes and quickly congratulates Holmes on his upcoming marriage to the lovely Miss Herne.

As Dr. Knowles leaves the hospital that night, he encounters the always cheerful Lois and tells her that he believes that her philosophy that everything will come out all right in time is bound to be true for both him and her.

Chapters 7 and 8 Analysis

The author uses the literary technique of irony in the destruction of the textile mill. The dreams of both Dr. Knowles and Mr. Holmes have been destroyed in the ashes. The mill served as a source of profit for both men to further their own goals, regardless of the consequences of the workers, who suffered horribly inside. Now, both men are left with nothing, due to their greed and single-mindedness.

In another ironic twist, the mill most probably would have survived had Holmes shown some compassion toward Joe Yare. Yare's act of arson is not condoned, but desperate people take desperate measures. The irony lies in the fact that if Holmes were the caring person he used to be, before the greed overtook him, he would have granted some concern for Joe. The whole situation would have resolved more happily for all involved.

It is interesting to note that upon seeing the mill consumed in flames, Lois' only thought is the fate of Mr. Holmes and not that of her father. Either Lois assumes that her father set the blaze or her feelings of compassion for Mr. Holmes from his past kindnesses toward her greatly outweigh the feelings that she has for her father, who has not made life any easier for Lois recently or during her childhood.

Chapters 9 and 10

Chapters 9 and 10 Summary

As Holmes continues to recuperate, he realizes the approach of Christmas in the children's voices outside his window and in the little gifts that Lois crafts, when she sits with him. Holmes can sense a weariness that has taken over Lois lately and feels tremendous guilt that her already vulnerable health has been compromised by her rescue of him in the burning mill.

The fast-approaching holiday turns Holmes' thoughts to home and children, and he sinks into a depression realizing that he will not have these comforts. His illness and the loss of the mill precipitated Miss Herne's swift lack of interest in any more romantic pursuits with Holmes.

As the December days rush by, Holmes remembers the Christmas holidays spent at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Howth. Margret and he spent every holiday of their childhoods together. Holmes can remember Margret's tender face looming over his soon after the fire, but she has not returned. He has no reason to think that she will.

Holmes wills himself to be better by Christmas Eve, because he has launched a plan. It includes his declaration of love to Margret, once more in the hope that she will take him back. When Christmas Eve dawns, Holmes gets clearance from his doctor to make the trek out to the Howth farmhouse. Before he makes this fateful trip, though, Holmes visits the home of Lois, who is too ill to make her friendly visits anymore.

Joe Yare jumps out of hiding at Holmes' approach to Lois' little shanty and begs Holmes to have pity on him because of the holiday. After the fire, Joe had disappeared and has come back today, so that he may see Lois for Christmas. Holmes does not intend to address the situation with Joe and enters the house to see the crippled, little Lois.

Claiming that the sight of Holmes is the best Christmas gift ever, little Lois puts up a cheerful fazade, in spite of her quickly failing health. Lois has provided the best gift, although she is not aware of it. Throughout her visits to Holmes during his recovery, she would speak to him of the pure love of Jesus, and how Christmas is the day that love was born on earth.

Lois will never fully comprehend what her loyalty and kindness have meant to Holmes, who is now a changed man. Holmes' renewed interest in Christmas fills him with a sense of hopefulness for the first time in a long time.

It is evening and very dark when Holmes finally leaves Lois. He heads back to the heart of town, when he encounters Dr. Knowles speaking with a minister in front of Knowles' new mission, The House of Refuge. Dr. Knowles mentions that Margret will be leaving the building soon. Holmes lingers with the men and hides in the shadows, so that Margret will not see him there.

The men watch the gaunt Margret leave the building and head home. When sufficient time has passed, Holmes bids farewell to the doctor and the minister, and turns to make the walk to the Howth farmhouse. Along the way, Holmes feels a sting at the site at the stone wall, where he last spoke with Margret. He hopes beyond all measure that she can forgive him and take him back into her heart.

The night is bitterly cold and windy, yet Holmes trudges on, until the Howth farmhouse is finally in view. From outside, Holmes can see the ravages of poverty on the little house that had been a source of comfort and joy for so many years. Margret sees Holmes, just as he walks onto the porch. She lets him inside, her demeanor not betraying her anxious heart.

Not realizing that Holmes is no longer betrothed to Miss Herne, Margret conducts herself with extreme coolness and courtesy, thinking that Holmes has made one last visit to announce his wedding plans. Holmes is cut to the quick by Margret's clipped demeanor and begins to wonder if he should abandon his plan to get Margret back.

Holmes tries to engage Margret in conversation, but she remains distant, especially from any topic relating to emotions or their past engagement, preferring to speak instead about her work with the poor at The House of Refuge. Holmes contends that Margret's artistic soul is not suited for such dismal work. Margret replies that she had asked God to show her the work he has for her, and this is the answer.

Holmes can stand the tension no longer and kisses Margret. She relaxes into him with relief at still finding some comfort in his arms. Margret relents a little bit and tells Holmes that the two of them can still be friendly. Holmes declares that he wants Margret to be his wife. Margret forgives Holmes for all the suffering that she has endured on his behalf, and the couple embraces.

Holmes leaves at midnight, but promises to return for Christmas Day. When he does, Mr. Howth is overjoyed at the prospect of a guest for the day. Mrs. Howth has prepared the perfect Christmas goose and plum pudding, and the poverty and starvation, which haunt them every other day, is temporarily forgotten.

Later in the afternoon, Dr. Knowles stops by for a visit, as do Lois and Joe. Dr. Knowles ascertains from Holmes' presence that Margret will be marrying Holmes and not returning to The House of Refuge, which is a critical disappointment to him.

Chapters 9 and 10 Analysis

In addition to Margret's point of view, the author introduces Holmes' perspective, so that the reader can understand what he is thinking. For example, when Holmes is building up to the moment when he will ask Margret to take him back, and she comments that she knew he would come, he thinks to himself, "Why should I come? To show you what sort of heart I have sold for money? Why, you think you know, little Margret. You can reckon up its deformity, its worthlessness, on your cool fingers.... Give me your hand, and feel how it pants like a hungry fiend. It will have food, Margret." Holmes then grabs

Margret's hand. She recoils because, unlike the reader, she does not know the intensity of Holmes' thoughts prior to reaching for her hand.

The author uses the theme of religion extensively throughout the novel, especially with Lois, but now also with Holmes, who has literally had a trial by fire. The burning of the mill has obliterated the life that Holmes was building, including a marriage to Miss Herne. Throughout his recovery, Holmes begins to understand that his former life was shallow and meaningless, and he has a second chance to build a life of substance. Ironically, much of the credit goes to the crippled, little Lois, whose faith is stronger than any physical affliction.

Holmes notes several times how he understands now why Christmas is so important to Lois. Having seen Lois making her small holiday gifts, Holmes had been amused. Now, he knows through Lois' example that Christmas is the celebration of the birth of love on earth. His eyes are opened to that fact for the first time in his life.

From a historical and cultural context, the author mentions Charles Dickens, the author of *A Christmas Carol,* when describing the Howth Christmas feast, complete with roast goose and plum pudding. Dickens was a contemporary writer at the time that the author wrote this novel. The mention of his name was probably considered quite savvy for the time.

Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary

The author begins the chapter by saying that she is about to end the story. There are many occurrences in the lives of the characters which she will not mention, asking the reader to color in the balance in his own mind. The author revisits the happiness of Christmas Day at the Howth farmhouse, with Margret allowing Holmes to tell her parents of their new engagement. Mr. Howth is overjoyed, but Mrs. Howth must excuse herself from the others to collect her thoughts.

Later that night, Joel, who works for the Howths, tells Mrs. Howth that oil has been discovered on the Howth property in an area where he and Mr. Howth have been working. Mr. Howth had already retired for the evening, so Mrs. Howth will not disturb him. It does not immediately register with her why Joel is so excited about some foul smelling oil.

Lois returns to her little shanty on Christmas night and never leaves her home again. During the week after Christmas, Lois is visited by friends and neighbors, all aware that the crippled girl is near death. Lois does not want to die but sets her affairs in order, such as they are, by giving away needlework and other personal effects.

Finally, New Year's Eve arrives. Lois' demeanor grows quieter and calmer, and Joe knows that the time of death is near. He asks all the visitors to leave, so that he may spend this time alone with Lois. Margret, Holmes, and the others grant the wish, but stay in the building in the event that they are needed.

Joe falls asleep and is awakened by Lois' cold hand on his and her voice asking for the others to come back. Margret holds Lois' head upright, so that she may see the old year exit along with her life. The tiny little cripple dies.

The visitors are saddened by the short life of their friend but know that she is no longer crippled and sits with Jesus in heaven, which had always been her dream.

The author leaves the rest of the story to the reader to complete in his mind, with the only guideline that Margret is happy in her new life in the New Year.

Chapter 11 Analysis

The author writes this chapter by directly addressing the reader and providing some skeletal information from which to conclude the story. The main characters have all resolved their issues; Margret and Holmes are again engaged to be married; Lois has completed her time on earth; and oil has been found on the Howth land. The only character whose fate is incomplete is that of Dr. Knowles, who will no doubt struggle on in his work with the poor. The happy endings of the engagement and the newfound

wealth from the oil strike are obvious, but both Lois and Dr. Knowles have met their dreams in quieter ways.

The author uses the literary technique of symbolism associated with New Year's Eve and the New Year. Lois' life ends, just as the clock strikes midnight, so she will not see the New Year, signaling the end of not only Lois' life but the way of life for all the characters up until this point. The symbolism of the New Year, complete with all its normal connotations, represents fresh starts for the characters who welcome it openly.

It is interesting to note that the ill-fated character of Lois has many of the same qualities of Little Eva in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin,* written at the same time period. Both Lois and Little Eva are extremely religious, and people recognize their spirituality, exceptional beyond their young years. Both characters also die at an early age, and the deathbed scenes are particularly poignant and similar in their tones.

By adding the subtitle, *A Story of To-Day,* to the novel's title gives the book life beyond the time in which it was written. The challenges and joys experienced by Margret and the others are similar to those experienced by all people at one time or other. Obviously, the historical context alters circumstances, but the main themes of love, betrayal, loss, grief, sacrifice and redemption, are all universal, and will exist for all time.

Characters

Miss Herne

Miss Herne is the daughter of the man who is co-owner (with Dr. Knowles) of the weaving mill. She is engaged to Stephen Holmes, who plans to marry her to get her father's money. She is attractive, with light blue eyes and blond hair, but has what Davis describes as a "cheap, tawdry intellect," and a sharp, sarcastic tongue that has given her a reputation of being "brilliant" and a "fine talker." She is shallow, and wears a great deal of perfume, which Holmes is disgusted by; he compares it to the stench of the mill. Her fine dress and educated talk only thinly mask the fact that she has no substance □no depth. She has had an easy life and is not reflective by nature; when she sees people, she doesn't think of them as real people with troubles and joys, but only as good-looking or ugly, welldressed or badly dressed. She isn't interested in love, but believes Holmes is infatuated with her, and enjoys the sense of power over him that this gives her. She views him as her future slave, but on the surface, acts feminine and fluttery. Holmes, reflecting on his engagement to her, thinks, "That nerveless, spongy hand,□what a death-grip it had on his life!"

Stephen Holmes

Stephen Holmes is young, good-looking, on his way up in the world, and talented. He is a selfmade entrepreneur, and although he is capable of acts of kindness, such as giving Lois Yare a cart so that she can start up her own business, he is cynical about love. When he is told that "God is love," he responds, "Was He? No wonder, then, He was the God of women, and children and unsuccessful men." He believes he can be his own savior and that people should be responsible for themselves, not rely on God to make things right. His plan is to make a lot of money and eventually move back East, where he feels more comfortable.

Holmes is a quiet man, and perhaps because of this, others seek him out to tell him their troubles; Davis describes him as "one of those men who are unwillingly masters among men," a born leader. However, Davis implies that this popularity is largely because he's perceived as a "go-getter" and people are impressed by this, and by the fact that he is expected to become rich. Tellingly, she notes that beggars don't bother to ask him for anything, because they know he won't help them.

Holmes was once betrothed to Margret Howth, but gives up his betrothal when her father goes blind and she has to stay home and take care of him. Holmes plans instead to marry Miss Herne, whose father is co-owner of the mill with Dr. Knowles. If he marries her, he will get her father's money, which he can then use to fund his ambition to own his own factory someday. He doesn't love Miss Herne, but feels that dealing with her will be a small problem, far overshadowed by the wealth he could have. Because of his "coarse" interest in money, he is an unusual hero for literature of Davis's time, which

featured more idealistically depicted heroes; Davis was aware of this, and asks the reader, "How can I help it . . . if it made his fingers thrill with pleasure to touch a full pocket-book as well as his mistress's hand?"

When Holmes is about to marry Miss Herne, however, the mill is destroyed by a fire, which almost kills him. He is saved by Lois Yare, and slowly nursed back to health. In watching Lois and the nurses who take care of him, he finally sees the value of selfless love over greed and ambition. He realizes that he has spent his life chasing spiritually empty dreams, and as his body heals, his soul sickens. He goes to Margret on Christmas Eve and tells her he loves her; the two are reunited, and will be married.

Margret Howth

Margret Howth is a plain woman, unlike the conventionally beautiful heroines of most nineteenthcentury fiction. Davis describes her as having "no reflected lights about her; no gloss on her skin, no glitter in her eyes, no varnish on her soul." She dreamed of marrying Stephen Holmes, a prosperous businessman, but that dream was destroyed when he decided to marry someone else or, since the story is not clear on this point, when she decided she could not marry him. Her father, previously a schoolteacher, has become blind, and she believes her first duty is to him. Although she seems dutiful and accepting of her fate, inwardly, she is not. She is secretly tormented by the fact that she must take a dull, joyless job at a weaving mill, by the fact that now she can never be a wife and mother, and by the fact that she has lost her true love. As Davis writes, "Christ was a dim, ideal power, heaven far off. She doubted if it held anything as real as that which she had lost." In this, she is an unusual heroine for literature of the time; most readers would have been shocked by a woman who is not terribly religious, who is miserable about caring for her aging parents, and who does not meekly accept her duty and pretend to be glad about it.

Margret has low self-esteem□she doesn't believe she's worthy of love□but is also caught up in her own suffering to such an extent that at first, she has no time to think about the suffering of others, such as Lois Yare, a poor and deformed peddler, or the people at a rescue mission run by Dr. Knowles, whom she sees when he takes her to see "a bit of hell: outskirt." However, as the story progresses, her heart opens to these people through Knowles's appeals and through Lois Yare's example. Eventually, she realizes that she, like most people, is involved in creating the world's "gulf of pain and wrong," and joins the doctor in helping people who are ill, impoverished, and hopeless.

Mrs. Howth

Margret's mother is a long-suffering woman, devoted to her husband. She works long and hard simply to help the family survive. She never lets her husband see her fears about their possible starvation, but always acts pleasant and hopeful. Margret notices that her mother's eyes are "dim with crying . . . though she [Margret] never saw her shed a tear," and describes her as "always cheery, going placidly about the house . . .

as if there were no such things in the world as debt or blindness." Her mother goes on long walks, foraging in the fields for unharvested peas or corn, and comes home hopeless and exhausted, but never discusses her pain with anyone.

Samuel Howth

Margret's father, a former schoolteacher, is now impoverished and blind. A royalist who is descended from people who fought on the British side during the American Revolution, he sneers at democracy and dreams of bygone eras when kings and queens ruled. One of his greatest pleasures is debating politics with Dr. Knowles; since going blind, he has increased the vehemence of his arguments, and looks forward to the doctor's visits. He is convinced that Knowles's commune scheme to elevate the poor and downtrodden will fail, because "any plan . . . founded on self-government, is based on a sham, the tawdriest of shams." In all this debating, he seems to live in a world of political fantasy, and is removed from his own poverty. In fact, because he is blind, his wife and Margret have been able to conceal from him the fact that they had to sell many of their old belongings in order to have money for food.

Joel

The Howth family servant, Joel is a rough, uneducated man who nevertheless reads the newspaper and is avidly political, despite his ignorance. Unlike Mr. Howth, he believes fervently in the power of democracy, and keeps up with current affairs to see whether the government is truly "carryin' out the views of the people." He has little role in the story until the end of the book, when he discovers oil on the Howth property, thus restoring wealth and good times to the Howth family.

Dr. Knowles

Dr. Knowles, principal owner of the weaving mill where Margret works, is old and obese, "overgrown, looking like a huge misshapen mass of flesh," and has a face that "repelled most men: dominant, restless, flushing into red gusts of passion, a small intolerant eye, half hidden in folds of yellow fat." He is part Creek Indian on his mother's side, and thus carries what others consider "the blood of a despised race." However, because he has this blood, he has an innate sympathy with outcasts, the poor, and those who suffer from prejudice. This sympathy is an obsession for him: nothing in the world could be as important as social work, work for the poor. When he first appears in the book, the author hints that he is involved in some sort of obsessive scheme, which the other characters comment on incredulously. He has also been observing Margret for many years, secretly assessing her character to see if she will be suitable for his plans. He believes that her dream of becoming a wife and mother has been shattered for one reason: so that she can participate in his plan. "It was his part to put her work into her hands," Davis remarks.

Knowles takes Margret to his mission house and forces her to see that other people in the world are suffering far more than she is. Her loss of a selfish man is nothing compared to what others have to face: sickness, starvation, slavery, prejudice, ignorance.

Knowles is arrogant about his plan, believing that he, and he alone, can be a savior of many people, and dreaming about the praise he will earn. Knowles's plan is to sell the mill and use the money to create a communal farm, where poor, oppressed, and downtrodden people can live clean, simple lives of dignity and self-worth. However, his commitment to this cause is tested when a fire, set by Joe Yare, burns the mill to the ground before he can sell it. At first Knowles is deeply bitter about this, but gradually realizes the value of small acts of kindness, which can be as helpful as any grand scheme in helping those who are less fortunate. He works at his House of Refuge near the railroad tracks, and instead of being filled with the desire to be praised for his grand scheme, he accepts that the work he now does may not bear fruit until after his death, and he may never be personally rewarded for it.

Mr. Pike

The manager at the weaving mill, Pike is a cunning, sly man, who embezzles money from the mill, but reveals another side of his character when his little daughter is nearby: he is proud of her and kind to her, and brings her to the mill so she won't be lonely at home. His wife has died, and Pike explains, "I'm father and mother, both, to Sophy now." He has two sons, much older, to whom he gave a good education; they are now out West, seeking their fortunes, and he's proud of them. Davis comments, "Even this man could spare time out of his hard, stingy life to love, and be loved, and to be generous!"

Joe Yare

Lois Yare's father, a former slave, has spent time in jail for stealing. He also once committed forgery, a fact that only Stephen Holmes and a coaldigger at the mill know about. If Holmes told about this, Yare could be sent back to jail. When the coaldigger asks Holmes to give Yare a chance and not inform on him, telling Holmes that Yare is trying to reform and start a new life without crime, Holmes says that he didn't make the law; Yare broke it, and he must pay the consequences.

Yare goes to Holmes and begs him not to tell of the forgery, saying of prison, "what good'll it doe me to go back there? I was goin' down, down, an' bringin' th' others with me." Holmes refuses, so that night, knowing Holmes is sleeping in the factory, Yare torches it and burns it to the ground. His daughter, Lois, runs in and saves Holmes, and ultimately she dies because of exposure to toxic fumes. In the end, Holmes, who has undergone a change of heart, tells Yare he won't report him for the arson, either, although he is still disgusted by this "vicious, cringing wretch." Davis does not make it clear whether Holmes thinks Yare is wretched simply because he is black, or because

he has lived through slavery and has never had a chance to improve himself. However, she remarks that his sad eyes may have seemed dishonest to other people, but when he looks at his daughter, Lois, he has nothing but kindness for her, and he worries about what she thinks of his past.

Lois Yare

Lois Yare is a mixed-race woman, the daughter of an alcoholic mother and a criminal father. She is also deformed and stunted from a bout of rickets, and apparently also has brain damage. She started working at Knowles's weaving mill when she was seven years old, but because of her handicaps she couldn't keep up with the work, and the overseer was getting ready to send her to the poorhouse. She left the mill when she was sixteen, but still remembers the horror of working there□the stench of the dye vats, the toxic fumes, the noise and heat□and swears she will never set foot inside again. Her eyes, despite her deformed appearance, are "singularly soft, brooding brown." Everyone she meets is attracted to her because of her kindness and happiness.

She works as a wandering peddler, driving her cart from farm to farm, buying and selling produce. She was given the cart by Stephen Holmes, who knew she could not return to the mill. Her cart reveals that she has the soul of an artist: the vegetables are arranged with care for their color, texture, and shapes, and the cart itself, though patched and old, has "a snug, cosey look." Whenever she can, she gives to people, even if it's only a piece of fruit. Davis writes, "She thought that unknown Joy linked all earth and heaven together, and made it plain."

Although Lois suffers more than any other major character in the book, she is the most filled with love and kindness. Instead of being bitter about her experiences, she believes that "things allus do come right, some time," because "The Master," or Christ, will make it so, and that everyone will have a chance, even if they have to wait until they're in heaven to get it. A true Christian, she knows that many of the starved, drunk, criminal, ex-slave, and downtrodden people she sees are really "the Master's people," even though they are despised by white, wealthy people. Her faith never wavers, no matter what happens, and she teaches all the other characters about the true nature of faith, Christianity, and love.

When her father sets the mill on fire, Lois realizes that Stephen Holmes is inside, and although the mill terrifies her, she runs in and saves his life. Later, it turns out that this heroic act will kill her: she has inhaled deadly fumes from the burning dye vats.

Themes

Role of Women in the Nineteenth Century

In the nineteenth century, a woman was expected to find a husband, raise a family, and run a clean and orderly household. In addition, a woman was not supposed to have a career or to be highly educated; her life was limited to her home and her family.

In the novel, Margret Howth deviates from these expectations, because she has lost, or given up, her chance to find a husband□at least throughout most of the book. She has let Stephen Holmes go because she is now burdened with the care of her blind and poor father, as well as her mother, because her mother was dependent on her father's income. She's a working girl, quite a descent in social class from her upbringing as a schoolteacher's daughter.

In another sense, however, Margret is still traditional in that she's fulfilling the only other acceptable role for a woman; if a woman couldn't or wouldn't get married, it was socially acceptable for her to live with and care for her parents, particularly if one or both of them was ill. Davis portrays Margret as loving her parents but chafing under this restricted life; she feels guilty for resenting the lot that has fallen on her, but this doesn't stop her from feeling her resentment. This honest attitude seems very modern, similar to that of many women who are caretakers of children or parents and who give up their careers outside the home to provide these services.

Effects of the Industrial Revolution

During the mid-nineteenth century, the Industrial Revolution brought dramatic changes to workers' lives. Before the Industrial Revolution, goods were manufactured by craftspeople who brought their individual attention and particular talents to each piece they produced, leading to pride and a feeling of mastery, creativity, and self-worth. For example, before the textile mills developed, cloth was woven and spun by people working in their own homes or in small shops. After the use of large mechanized looms became widespread, looms were run by large numbers of relatively untrained people□often women and children□who served the machine by inserting bobbins and shuttles of thread, clearing lint, and doing other menial and repetitive tasks for many hours each day. These working conditions gave workers little sense of pride or control over their fate. In addition, wages were low, the work was exhausting, and there were no provisions to take care of workers who became ill or injured on the job. The need for large numbers of unskilled laborers to run these kinds of machines led to the growth of the poor working class, made up of ex-slaves, immigrants, and rural poor who were displaced from their farms by the growth of industry. These people often "fell through the cracks" of the new system, as Davis shows in *Margret Howth* with her depictions of the immigrant laborers in the mill, and the ex-slaves, alcoholics, and other down-and-out people whom Dr. Knowles wants to save.

Breakdown of Old Social Orders

With the Civil War and the rise of industrialism, American society became more fluid as old patterns of society broke apart and changed. In the early nineteenth century, society was relatively stable. People "knew their place" in an order governed by economic status, gender, race, and family name. By the middle of the nineteenth century the numbers of the working poor were growing as immigrants and poor rural people moved to the cities in search of work, and found only menial labor available. Americans became more mobile, moving from one social class to another and from one state to another. In *Margret Howth*, Margret's own father moves from being a highly respected schoolteacher to being blind and poor, dependent on his daughter's efforts and his wife's meager scavenging in the fields. Stephen Holmes is on his way to being highly respected as part-owner of the textile mill, and as son-in-law of the owner. Lois Yare moves from being a crippled ex-textile worker to an independent entrepreneur, with her own produce cart. In previous decades, this kind of social movement would not have been nearly as easy.

Utopian Reform Movements in the Nineteenth Century

The nineteenth century saw a proliferation of experimental utopian communities, like the one Dr. Knowles wants to establish in the novel. These communities were typically based either on religious views, like those of the Mormons, Amish, Hutterites, and Shakers, or on social and political theory, like those of the Owenites and Brook Farm. All of these communities included people who wanted to establish a new social order, usually communal, and some included nontraditional marital arrangements, such as polygamy or group marriage.

Most of the colonies did not survive past the beginning of the twentieth century. Some were dependent on the charisma and strength of their leaders, and when the leaders died, the groups disintegrated; others were affected by the widespread social change from an emphasis on rural life to more industrialized, urban, secular, and scientific values. In addition, those with more nontraditional social arrangements, such as group marriage, suffered increasing hostility from the outside world. However, some of the groups, such as the Mormons, Amish, and Hutterites, flourished and still exist today. Other groups, not directly linked to the nineteenth-century movements but based upon many of the same principles of communal ownership, self-sufficiency, and decision making by consensus, have sprung up in recent decades; some of the longest-lived and most well-known of these "intentional communities" are The Farm in Tennessee and the Findhorn Community in Scotland.

Style

Author Intrusions

Throughout the book, Davis often refers to herself, the author, as "I," and addresses the reader as "you," as if she's having a conversation with the reader about the book. For example, the book begins, "Let me tell you a story of To-Day,□very homely and narrow in its scope and aim." Chapter V begins, "Now that I have come to the love part of my story." In addition to these short descriptions of what she's about to tell the reader, she also makes assumptions about the reader and embarks on sermons about what she thinks the reader wants, and what the reader should want, should believe, and should do. The first five pages of the novel consist of one of these sermons, in which Davis refers to the Civil War, slavery, patriotism, and chivalry, and notes that she will write about other truths "that do not speak to us in bayonets and victories □Mercy and Love. Let us not neglect them, unpopular angels though they be." Thus, she tells readers that this will not be a war story or a story of slavery; it will not be stirring and patriotic; it will tell about "common things" and common people. After this five-page discussion, the action of the novel begins with the narrator finding an old ledger, which reminds her of the story she wants to tell. Throughout the book, she interrupts to address the reader about religion, society, and other topics, or to warn of her intentions: "I am going to end my story now."

To the modern reader, these author comments may seem intrusive and distracting. Often, a modern reader may not know what Davis is referring to, because society has changed, or because she comments about events current at the time, but no longer remembered. For example, of Christmas 1860, she writes, "Do you remember how Christmas came that year? how there was a waiting pause, when the States stood still, and from the peoples came the first awful murmurs of the storm that was to shake the earth?" She's referring to the coming Civil War, and this reference would have been deeply meaningful to people who lived then, though modern readers might find it confusing if they are not versed in Civil War history.

References to Social, Literary, and Biblical Figures

Davis's style is typical of the nineteenth century, with author intrusions, references to social, literary, and Biblical figures, and short quotations in foreign languages sprinkled liberally throughout the text. Davis often refers to Biblical stories and characters, literary figures, religious thinkers, philosophers, political leaders, and social reformers, but modern readers may not know who these people were or what their significance is. For example, she compares Margret's hair to "Bysshe Shelley"□a reference to Percy Bysshe Shelley, an English romantic poet. In the following few pages, in a political, social, and religious debate between Dr. Knowles and Mr. Howth, the two men refer to Cornwallis, a British general; Auguste Comte, a French mathematician and philosopher; Jeffersonian democracy versus Federalism; a biblical verse from the Book of Luke;

abolitionists and Fourierites (followers of the French reformer Francois Marie Charles Fourier); and the philosophers Baruch Spinoza, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, and Comte de Claude Henri Sant-Simon, a French socialist reformer. When Davis wrote the book, these references would have been understood by most educated people, but modern readers may not follow the substance of the argument unless they are similarly educated or do some research.

Foreign Language Quotes

Davis occasionally inserts phrases or quotations in Italian, Latin, French, and German, which also would have been familiar to educated people of her time. These are typically drawn from widely read books such as Dante Alighieri's *Inferno*, John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, and the works of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe.

Historical Context

Civil War

At the time Davis wrote her book, the Civil War had already started, but the book is set in the months just before it begins. In the decades before the war, the North and South had become increasingly different from each other in terms of politics, economy, and society. The North was more heavily industrialized and commercial, employing great numbers of immigrants, whereas the South was still an agricultural society, based on slave labor. Although tensions between North and South arose largely because of their different economic and political situations, the institution of slavery became a focal point of the war.

The war began in April of 1861, when Fort Sumter was fired upon and Virginia seceded from the Union. Other states followed, leading to years of bloody combat. Few places were as divided as Wheeling, where Davis lived. Some people there chose to fight for the North, and others, often from the same families, chose to fight for the South. Still others, not wanting to risk their lives, simply fled into the mountains. In the summer of 1861, Wheeling was occupied by federal troops and put under martial law; by July, Wheeling was the center of "loyal Virginia," the part of Virginia (later called West Virginia) that did not secede. In August of 1861, Davis wrote in a letter: "Just now 'New Virginia' and its capital are in a state of panic and preparation not to be described," according to Jean Fagan Yellin in her afterword to the Feminist Press edition of the book.

The Civil War was a bloody conflict: almost as many Americans were killed during the war as were killed in all the other wars the United States has been involved in.

Industrialization and Technological Changes

Although Davis refers indirectly to the coming war, the main intent of the book is to consider the increasing effects of industrialization on American society. During the 1800s, the American economy, particularly in the North, shifted from an agricultural base to an industrial one. Railroads, petroleum refining, electrical power, steel manufacturing, textile mills, and other industries appeared or expanded. The growth of industry resulted in a new social class of rich industrialists and a prosperous middle class. It also led to vast growth in the working- class labor force, made up largely of immigrants and people who migrated to the cities from farms.

In the new industries, there were no laws to prevent children from working, to limit the hours anyone worked, or to provide for time off. Workers, including children, often worked twelve or more hours a day, seven days a week, often in sweltering heat, suffocating fumes, and deafening noise□for very low wages. If they complained, they were fired, because there were always more hungry people looking for work who would

take their places. If workers became injured or were unable to keep up with the work, as Lois was in the book, they were simply fired, with no compensation. No work meant no pay, and starvation was often the result.

Because the growth of technology and increasing farm production led to lowered prices for farm produce, many farmers also went through hard times. Young people often simply left their family farms and went to the cities to look for work, adding to the swelling number of laborers seeking employment. Often, the work they found was seasonal, and they, like other workers, were unemployed for part of the year.

Americans who were born in the 1860s would see huge changes in their lifetime: a shift from candles to kerosene lamps to electricity; a shift from walking and horseback riding to steam-powered trains to electric trolley cars to gasoline-powered automobiles.

Critical Overview

Margret Howth: A Story of To-Day, is widely acknowledged as a pioneering work in American realism; Rose, in *Rebecca Harding Davis*, noted that the book "has been cited as the earliest realistic depiction of an American woman as an individual and as ordinary."

The book was originally titled *The Deaf and the Dumb*; As Rose notes, Davis was referring not to deaf people who are disabled, but to those who are deaf to everything that is not superficial, and the dumb refers to those who comprehend profound spiritual truths but are unable to express them. At the request of her editor, James T. Fields, Davis changed the title to *Margret Howth: A Story of To- Day*. "To-Day" in the title refers to the fact that the story took place in current time (at the time when it was written) but also refers to the mundane, material world, as opposed to the spiritual realm, heaven, or "To-Morrow," where Davis believed that all people go when they die.

This emphasis on the mundane, commonplace elements of life and on common people was relatively new in fiction, which until then had focused on wealthy, beautiful people. Davis deliberately turned against this and made her heroine, Margret Howth, plain looking, with "no gloss to her skin, no glitter to her eyes"; the other characters are all ordinary looking or actually ugly, and she writes about "vulgar American life," as she tells the reader near the beginning of the book. Rose remarked that readers of the time, used to softer, more idealistic fiction, would have been shocked by "a heroine who is miserable caring for her parents, an egocentric, superficial hero, and an antagonist who expresses the moral attitudes of the author."

Davis was aware that readers might find her approach unusual, and she explains it in an aside to the reader in the middle of the book:

> I live in the commonplace. Once or twice I have
> rashly tried my hand at dark conspiracies, and women
> rare and radiant in Italian bowers; but I have a friend
> who is sure to say, "try and tell us about the butcher
> next door, my dear, . . . I must show men and women
> as they are in that especial State of the Union where
> I live."

James T. Fields rejected Davis's first draft of the book; according to Rose, he objected to its narrative tone, which he found too depressing, and which he believed wouldn't sell. Davis responded that she had originally intended the story to end "in full sunshine," and that the negativity he perceived had crept in through her eagerness to tell the truth about her characters, but that she would change the book back to conform to her original idea. Rose remarks that the new, happy ending seems contrived and that it is "inconsistent with Davis's vision," and writes, "regrettably, similarly contrived happy endings compromise many of Davis's later works as well." Davis herself did not like the

new ending; according to Rose, she compared it to "giving people broken bits of apple-rind to chew."

The novel's success led Davis to meet several famed nineteenth-century authors, including Nathaniel Hawthorne, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Louisa May Alcott, and Bronson Alcott. She felt a creative and spiritual kinship with Hawthorne and Holmes, but was unimpressed by Emerson and Bronson Alcott because of their idealistic reactions to the advent of the Civil War.

In the 1930s, critic Arthur Hobson Quinn remarked in *American Fiction: An Historical and Critical Survey* that Davis had revealed the "fictional possibilities inherent in people who had been presumed to be inarticulate, or whom economic and social oppression had submerged," and Fred L. Pattee wrote in the *Dictionary of American Biography* that "Russian-like in their grim and sordid realism," her books were "distinct landmarks in the evolution of American fiction."

In 1951, Bernard R. Bowron, Jr., remarked in *Comparative Literature* that Davis was a pioneer in "the literature of industrialism, critically concerned with contemporary social problems," which led to the development of American naturalism.

The American writer Tillie Olsen brought increased attention to Davis and her work in 1985 with her homage in the afterword to the 1972 Feminist Press edition of Davis's "Life in the Iron Mills".

In *Publishers Weekly*, Penny Kaganoff wrote that although she didn't recommend the book for "the general reader," she thought it was "important for feminist literary scholars and libraries."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Winters is a freelance writer and has written for a wide variety of educational publishers. In this essay she considers themes of blood and race in Davis's book.

Rebecca Harding Davis's novel *Margret Howth* is a novel of social reform, as Davis brings up questions about the fate of the poor, relationships among people of different races, and the effects of industrialization. An interesting aspect of the book, however, is that although Davis urges social reform through Christianity, she seems to believe in theories of race and "blood" that imply that some people are destined to live among the "dregs" of humanity no matter what assistance they are given.

In the nineteenth century, two pseudosciences were in vogue□ethnology and phrenology. Both of these purported to link physical traits with nonphysical ones, and to link biological sex and race with particular physical traits. These "sciences" often led to biased, inaccurate conclusions about some physical traits and the supposed mental, moral, or spiritual capacity of people with these traits.

Early ethnologists studied hereditary traits, as well as blood, of different people, in order to determine how these traits were linked to race. Their underlying assumptions were racist, as they attempted to determine what characteristics belonged to each race of people, and which race was "naturally" superior. Of course, whites were determined to be superior, and Native Americans, African- Americans, Asians, Hispanics, and other groups were considered inferior. The term "blood" was used to refer to inherited racial characteristics□not simply physical characteristics, but the intellectual, emotional, and, particularly, moral traits that were supposedly linked to race.

In addition, another popular pseudoscience was phrenology, in which the different shapes and sizes of individuals' heads and their different facial features were believed to correspond to particular intellectual, spiritual, or moral traits. Because these traits were considered to be as inborn and as genetically determined as the physical traits, they were considered unchangeable□one was doomed by birth to a particular place in society, to a life of crime, or to a religious life. Naturally, features considered typically "white," such as a high forehead, long narrow nose, and thin lips, were believed to show intelligence, whereas features more typical of other groups had negative connotations.

Because these theories were widely discussed as part of the popular culture during the nineteenth century, references to these theories are frequent in writing of the time, including Davis's *Margret Howth*. Characters are defined and their actions are explained by their "blood" or by their inherited appearance. A well-known example of these theories appearing in fiction occurs in the Sherlock Holmes stories by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle; when Holmes meets his archrival, the villain Moriarty, Moriarty says to Holmes, "you have less frontal development than I should have expected," referring to the shape of Holmes's head.

"Blood" is frequently mentioned in the book□ not referring to the red fluid that leaks out after wounds but to heredity and even fate. Margret, despite her parents' poverty, is of "Virginia" blood, "cool, high-bred"; in one scene, Davis writes, "she looked at the big blue-corded veins in her wrist, full of untainted blood." She is like her mother, who has "hospitable Virginian blood," and like her father, who is descended from British Loyalists and thus carries his royalist tendencies in his blood, as his wife tells Dr. Knowles.

Dr. Knowles, in comparison, is the son of a white father and a mother who was half Cree Indian and half-white. Another character notes that it's no wonder that he's drawn to work among the most desperately poor people□alcoholics, prostitutes, runaway slaves□because his mother was "a half-breed," and, thus, Knowles must have inherited her "redskin" tendencies to drink and steal, and that gives him sympathy with people who do likewise. Knowles is described as "coming out of the mire, his veins thick with the blood of a despised race," but it's clear that the other characters believe he's swimming against the tide, and that eventually, he will sink back to the level he came from.

Stephen Holmes, on the other hand, may be white, but he's just as much a prisoner of his blood and his genetic inheritance as anyone else in the book. In a discussion about religion, Holmes sees Dr. Knowles looking at Holmes's "massive head, with its overhanging brow, square development at the sides and lowered crown." Holmes sees what Knowles is looking at, puts his hand on top of his head, and says, "Exactly. Crippled there by my Yorkshire blood□my mother." He's referring to his own preference for making money over some of the more esoteric things in life□he chooses money over love, and his main interest in life is having money and power. He is "crippled" by his Yorkshire blood, because people from that region of England are said to be interested mainly in money; this trait has been passed down to him and apparently there's nothing he can do about it.

Lois is the daughter of an ex-slave father, Joe Yare, and a white woman who died from the effects of alcoholism. Lois is deformed from rickets □a disease that results from a vitamin deficiency and is not genetic□and has also suffered some kind of brain damage. Despite the fact that she is the most kind and loving person in the book, she has one trait that sets her apart from even the poorest poor: "the taint in her veins of black blood." She is only "set apart" in the view of the wealthier characters, however; she is welcome at any home in the district and is loved by everyone because of her kindness. She is unconcerned with appearances; of all the characters in the book, she's the only true Christian. Like Jesus, she knows that even among "the very lowest" there are "the Master's people"□people who, though starved and beaten, would "scorn to be cowardly or mean"□ who show God's kindness to everyone. Lois is one of these people, and this is why she's so loved.

Although Lois is the "lowest of the low," which is hinted at by her name, Lois, and her father's nickname, Lo, she is the only character in the book who truly lives by Christian principles. Other characters in the book, such as Dr. Knowles and Margret, may think they are doing God's will□and Knowles is positive that he is□but only Lois is truly

spiritual, and she puts them all to shame, despite the harshness of her life and the prejudice she is daily exposed to.

The other characters, however, can't see past her race. Knowles, who seems like he should know better because of the social work he's involved in, says of Lois, "that girl's artist-sense is pure, and her religion, down under the perversion and ignorance of her brain. Curious, eh?" There's no evidence in the book that Lois is "perverted," and although she isn't educated, she's not "ignorant," and in fact seems wiser than many others. Holmes writes off her spiritual gifts, as well as her artistic gifts, by commenting that the shape of her head makes it apparent that she was simply born that way. He tells Dr. Knowles, "Look at the top of her head . . . It is necessity for such brains to worship."

The only person who is aware that Lois's life has been shaped not so much by heredity as by society is Margret, who eventually realizes that Lois's life has been warped, her potential has been wasted, and she has suffered not simply by "the fault of her blood" and her illness, but, more tellingly, by social attitudes towards her. "Society had finished the work [that heredity began]," Margret thinks.

Lois's father, Joe Yare, is a thief who has never had any opportunity to better himself. He is black, like the runaway slaves described in the book as "stolid, sensual wretches, with here and there a broad, melancholy brow, and desperate jaws." Fresh from two years in jail, he hopes to make a new start, but is initially thwarted by Stephen Holmes, who says he will report him for a forgery. Yare tries to kill Holmes by setting a fire in the mill, but Holmes survives, and the two eventually face each other. Davis writes of Holmes, "Did God make him of the same blood as this vicious, cringing wretch crouching to hide his black face at the other side of the bed?" One must wonder if Yare is characterized as a "vicious, cringing wretch" simply because he is black, or because of his crimes. Later, however, Davis writes, "what if he were black? what if he were born a thief? what if all the sullen revenge of his nature had made him an outcast from the poorest poor? Was there no latent good in this soul for which Christ died, that a kind hand might not have brought to life?"

In her afterword to the Feminist Press edition of the book, Jean Fagan Yellin asked, "Is Yare a criminal because he is black (that is, because he is somehow racially incapable of civilization)? Or because, when held in slavery, he was denied access to the Christianity and literacy essential to civilization?" *Margret Howth* doesn't answer this question, but as Yellin noted, it does ask how privileged, wealthy white people should respond to people like Yare. Should they punish them, as Holmes initially decides to punish Yare, or should they be compassionate, as Holmes is in the end?

Davis, of course, believed in compassion, and she was opposed to slavery, but the book makes plain that she, like other people of her time, tended to believe that there was some truth in the theories of blood and race. As Dale M. Bauer wrote in *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, "By the conclusion, Davis's thinking seems to be in line with the dominant theories of ethnology, reiterating the thesis that 'there's a good deal of an obstacle in blood' or that a 'vice of blood' overrules charity, sympathy, and

social welfare work." The question the book brings up, however, is why would one try to help those who were poor and oppressed if their condition was supposedly hereditary? Wouldn't they sink back down into the "mire" they came from? Davis was, of course, a product of her own time and culture and like most people was not immune to popular ideas of her own time, particularly since they were presented as scientific. However, the book gives the impression that she personally was troubled by the conflict between these ideas of blood and race and her opposing Christian belief that oppressed people were as good as privileged people and that they should be regarded with compassion and given help in improving their lives. *Margret Howth: A Story of To- Day* magnifies this conflict, but does not provide any final answers regarding Davis's attitude towards it.

Source: Kelly Winters, Critical Essay on *Margret Howth: A Story of To-Day*, in *Novels for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay excerpt, Pfaelzer provides an overview of Margret Howth*, outlining the political, social, and personal issues the novel explores. Margret Howth* is also the story of the breakup of rural social structures in an emerging industrial capitalist economy. The novel begins with an image of one of the most profound changes of industrialization, the painful and repressive adjustment of a young woman who leaves home and enters the workplace for the first time. It explores how new relationships of production surrounding the woolen mill□wages, contracts, and competition □are replacing the rural networks of family, barter, gossip, and charity. Thus Davis contrasts the atomized and defensive personalities spawned by the economy of the mill□Knowles, Holmes, and Joe Yare□to the caring and responsible relationships of dependency sustaining those who work and live in the surrounding countryside, outside the economic aura of the mill□the Howths, local farmers, and, in particular, the peddler Lois. In contrast to the sham utopianism embraced by Knowles, Lois unites the community by trading its garden produce, a role that links her to its preindustrial economy. By comparing the new manufacturing town with the rural life of the farms (the Howth farm is still just a long walk from the mill), Davis exposes the tensions in the early stages of capitalist development. Mercantile and farm ethics of hard work, thrift, attachment, honesty, and community are yielding to individualism, secularity, self-interest, competition, alcoholism, and petty crime.

The novel begins on Margret's first day of work, her twentieth birthday, when she enters the mill as a bookkeeper in order to "support a helpless father and mother; it was a common story." Clearly, her status has worsened. Margret's climb onto her stool on October 20, 1860, in a small "closet," a dark seventh-floor office, is mainstream American literature's first record of a young rural woman leaving home to work in a factory. The floors shake with the incessant thud of the looms, and the office is heavy with the smell of dye and copperas, a sulfate of copper, iron, and zinc used in woolen dyes. Seated uncomfortably on her stool which is, metaphorically, "too high for a small woman," the American heroine is no longer looking out a window, but finds herself fully occupied by the world of work within. As in "Life in the Iron-Mills," images of artistic repression define industrial work. Unwilling to "dramatiz[e] her soul in writing," she has taken up ledger work, the uncreative and monotonous copying from one book to another. With her steel pen "lining out her life, narrow and black," she soon wipes the ink from her pen in a "mechanical fashion"□reified by her task. Through the imagery of writing itself Davis replaces sentimental fiction's metaphoric and literal closet of the house with the realist's enclosed office: female confinement endures.

In contrast to her own anonymous "cramped quiet lines," Margret soon discovers a series of charcoal sketches drawn on the office walls by her predecessor, P. Teagarden, who has boldly emblazoned his name on the ceiling with the smoke of a candle□an interesting literary gesture from a woman novelist who is pleading with her publisher to keep her work anonymous. Teagarden has also left behind a doleful chicken pecking the floor of a wire cage, which, along with the drawings, prompts Margret to recall how, as an aspiring and imaginative young girl, she planned to "dig down into the middle of

the world, and find the kingdom of the griffins, or . . . go after Mercy and Christiana in their pilgrimage." As Margret walks past soot-stained warehouses toward her home in the hills after her first day of work, the narrator observes, "One might have fancied her a slave putting on a mask, fearing to meet her master"□an image of alienation and self-disguise that fuses wage slavery, chattel slavery, and the repressions of domestic life. These images of mechanical confinement and artistic inhibition anticipate such images as the caged parrot of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, who incessantly chants, "Allez-vous en!" ("Go away!" "Get out!") and the wallpaper in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper," whose design becomes a frightening projection of female repression.

Despite Fields's title for her novel, Davis always saw Dr. Knowles as the center of the story. Influenced by his readings of early European socialists, Knowles, like Hollingsworth in Hawthorne's *Blithedale Romance*, plans to use the profits from the sale of the mill to launch a utopian community made up of the most degraded and impoverished residents of the town□alcoholics, prostitutes, and abandoned women□and he hopes to recruit Margret (suggesting Margaret Fuller, perhaps) as his aide. The relationship between Margret and Knowles, rather like that between Hollingsworth and Zenobia, distills the tensions between the telos of sentimentalism and the telos of romanticism. Knowles presumes that Margret "had been planned and kept by God for higher uses than daughter or wife or mother. It was his part to put her work into her hands." Like her mother, who thinks that "Margret never had any opinions to express," Knowles presumes that her desire is a species of his own, which he fantasizes as incestuous and repressed intimacy: "Between the two there lay that repellent resemblance which made them like close relations,□closer when they were silent."

While Margret views her office job as a consequence of her father's financial incompetence and of Holmes's rejection□"perhaps life had nothing better for her, so she did not care"□Knowles, who consistently misreads Margret, sees her work as a romantic test. Intending to "make use" of her in his utopian community, "he must know what stuff was in the weapon before he used it. He had been reading the slow, cold thing for years,□had not got into its secret yet. But there was power there, and it was the power he wanted." He is convinced that Margret is an emanation of his best self and that if he can control her it will assign them both significance. To Knowles, Margret is a "Damascus blade which he was going to carry into battle." But only in his phallic projection is she dangerous; in fact, Margret's repression and plainness undercut Knowles's egoistic fantasies: "There were no reflected lights about her; no gloss on her skin, no glitter in her eyes."

In my view, a central problem with Davis's novel comes from a contradiction within transcendentalism itself: how to reconcile egoism with the dissolution of self that allows for political engagement. Like Bronson Alcott, Knowles tries to resolve this profound impasse by linking his ambitious quest to the universal good, a fusion of the personal and the public at the core of utopianism. In assigning political righteousness to his dominating fantasies of Margret, Knowles legitimizes her powerlessness at the same time that he blesses it with historical possibility. Margret's social vision, by contrast, derives from sentimentalism. Fred Kaplan explores how sentimentalism inherited the

Enlightenment faith in the redemptive power of emotions over self-calculation. He cites David Hume, for example, who argues that "the ultimate ends of human actions can never . . . be accounted for by *reason*, but recommend themselves entirely to the sentiments and affections of mankind, without any dependence on the intellectual faculties." Kaplan thus distinguishes sentiment, an "access of feeling," from the romantic "excess of feeling," which, almost by definition, must deny the world. Furthermore, he suggests, while sentiment offers an optimistic vision overall, it nonetheless takes its force from a keen awareness of human nature that, paradoxically, jeopardizes its claims to an ideal world. Margret's dilemma is thus to find a way to defend the sentimental woman against the self-sufficient romantic imagination on the one hand, and the post-Calvinist forces of philosophical realism on the other. If sentimentalism sought to atrophy woman in her emotions and traditional social duties, realism sought to limit woman as the dubious product of her social conditions and biology. To Davis, neither race, gender, class, nor region should be prescriptive.

For Davis, the split between preindustrial and industrial values has a gendered valence. She believes that transcendentalism prompts patriarchal self-interest, which fits comfortably with the industrial breakup of rural and familial communities. In Knowles and Holmes, both mill owners, she portrays men who assert their self-reliance while they remain emotionally and financially dependent. The romantic man needs the sentimental woman, typified by Lois, as an enduring sign of the living gospel, and as an apostle of anti-egotistical and anticapitalistic values that can heal the culture as a whole. In *Margret Howth*, it is as the vessel for men's salvation that women's essential nature takes on a transformative role in the ongoing social debate about American industrialism. In this Davis again echoes Emerson, who holds that self-reliance is not a paradigm of freedom from duty, but rather a model of an internalized standard of duty.

Thus, rather than a protonaturalist text, *Margret Howth* belongs to a discursive category that Thomas Laqueur terms the "humanitarian narrative," a hybrid of sentimentalism and early realism in which details of suffering, particularly bodily suffering, prompt compassion□understood in its time as a moral imperative to undertake social change. "Sentiment thereby shapes Davis's vision of social goals. For example, Margret, despairing of her plight, agrees to accompany Knowles on a visit to a crowded railroad shack, a "haunt of the lowest vice," where he hopes to recruit members for his celibate community. In this passage Davis recalls the nighttime visit to the mill in "Life in the Iron-Mills," but this time the witness is female, as are the homeless Irish women and fugitive slaves who live in the shack; as an empathic female, the narrator repudiates Knowles's romantic appropriation of suffering.

True to the lineaments of sentimentalism, the suffering of the industrial poor is pictured as an imprisoning and confining female site where gender transcends class. Knowles views poverty as erotically female: "'Come here!' he said, fiercely, clutching [Margret's] hand. 'Women as fair and pure as you have come into dens like this,□and never gone away. Does it make your delicate breath faint?" Knowles and Margret stand over women who are prostrate and drunk, incompetent as mothers and incapable of taking action on their own behalf: "Women, idle trampers, whiskybloated, filthy, lay half-asleep, or

smoking on the floor, set up a chorus of whining and begging when they entered. Half-naked children crawled about in rags."

The destitute women are further distinguished by their Catholic faith, which, to Davis, marks them as recent immigrants: "On the damp mildewed walls, there was hung a picture of . . . Pio Nono, crook in hand, with the usual inscription, "Feed my sheep." This ironic reference to Pius IX (the pope who whose betrayal of the Italian revolution of 1848 was bitterly described by Margaret Fuller) points to Davis's lifelong hostility to Catholicism as well as to Protestant churches that were unwilling to engage in the Social Gospel. Davis conflates the Irish women with runaway slaves, who are mutually eroticized: "In the corner slept a heap of halfclothed blacks. Going on the underground railroad to Canada. Stolid, sensual wretches." The narrator's racial discourse is indistinguishable from that of Knowles, who, while viewing the slave women as his future utopians, is trapped in the rhetoric of human commerce, and who observes, "so much flesh and blood out of the market, unweighed!." When Margret, by contrast, picks up a slave child and kisses her face, Knowles responds, "Would you touch her? . . . Put it down." Locked in their own discursive systems, Margret and Knowles appropriate the poor in different ways.

Eventually Margret agrees to join the community, a reluctant choice that mainly stems from her plight as a lonely single woman who is tired of taking care of her pettish mother and her bigoted father. Margret is repulsed by Mr. Howth's dreams of secession, his admiration for Napoleon, and his tiresome investigations of the Middle Ages when commoners still believed in the "perfected manhood in the conqueror." Unlike Knowles, her father believes that now "the world's a failure. All the great dreams are dead." Even in a novel that prioritizes affectional bonds, Davis, like Susan Warner in *The Wide Wide World*, satirizes a father who is self-interested, unreliable□indeed, "blind." Margret's decision to enter Knowles's "House of Refuge," a parody of the idealized home, reflects the disempowerment of domesticity and frustrations at her parents' house, "in which her life was slowly to be worn out: working for those who did not comprehend her; thanked her little,□that was all."

Davis, herself a single woman taking care of her parents, is unromantic about the trials of housewifery on a meager income, the "white leprosy of poverty." She pictures how Mrs. Howth forages in the harvested fields for late peas or corn, until Margret "could see the swollen circle round the eyes, and hear her [mother's] breath like that of a child which has sobbed itself tired"□a role reversal that exposes the protective covenant of motherhood. Not only is the family vulnerable to economic pressures outside its moral sway; Davis's satiric representations of Margret's family as conflicted and inept□indeed, her very act of ironizing the family□destroys it as sentiment's utopian telos. Thus, Margret's choice to follow Knowles is based not only on her poverty, but also on her own isolation as a woman whose lover has rejcted her, whose dog has run away, and whose mother prefers the company of her father. Compared to the House of Refuge, her parents' home offers neither Margret nor her mother female authority, emotional transcendence, or the moral significance of domestic work. Margret also turns to a life of social duty because Jesus (often shaped in sentiment as a consoling figure who protects women from isolation) also "had been alone."

Unlike Margret, but also unlike the romantic figure Mitchell in "Life in the Iron-Mills," Knowles has a political role: "Fanatics must make history for conservative men to learn from." Knowles is a follower of the French utopian socialists Fourier (1772-1827) and Saint-Simon (1760-1825) and of the German romantic and founder of "absolute idealism," Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762-1814), whose works Davis probably read with her brother, Wilson, a student of European romanticism. From Fourier's design for phalansteries, Knowles planned a community that would work "like leaven through the festering mass under the country he loved so well." From Fichte, who was influenced by the "ethical activism" of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Emmanuel Kant, Knowles inherited the view of a morally empowered ego. Unlike the solipsistic strain found in many transcendentalists, Fichte believed in a socially ethical self that could withstand pressures from the competitive and aggressive world of nature. History, once a prerogative of God, now belonged to the individual, who had a duty to create a rational, moral, egalitarian, and self-sufficient community free from the "anarchy of trade." Organized into guilds, the tightly organized community would provide each member with tools, the value of one's labor, and the right to a full creative life. While Davis never develops Knowles's utopian design, in his plans to "make use" of Margret, however, he also exhibits the authoritarianism of Hawthorne's Hollingsworth and of Saint- Simon, who argued that leadership belongs to the educated elite□scientists, physiologists, historians, and economists□who can best design and supervise a technocratic but providential state on behalf of the poorest and most numerous classes.

Unlike Margret, Knowles identifies with social as well as personal suffering. On the one hand, the details of the humanitarian narrative touch his Fichtean sense of moral empiricism: "All things were real to this man, this uncouth mass of flesh that his companion sneered at; most real of all, the unhelped pain of life, the great seething mire of dumb wretchedness in streets and alleys, the cry for aid from the starved souls of the world." On the other hand, still reiterating the word *real*, Davis locates Knowles's political drive in his own racial oppression. In her first reference to the plight of Native Americans, the narrator explains that Knowles's mother was a Creek Indian and notes: "You and I have other work to do than to listen,□ pleasanter. But he, coming out of the mire, his veins thick with the blood of a despised race, had carried up their pain and hunger with him: it was the most real thing on earth to him,□more real than his own share in the unseen heaven or hell."

In contrast to the social egoism that compels Knowles is Stephen Holmes's "self-existent soul." Holmes, who has purchased the mill with his fiancée's dowry, is driven by economic self-interest. He has "turned his back on love and kindly happiness and warmth, on all that was weak and useless in the world," that is, everything he identifies with Margret. A representative of the emerging ideology of bourgeois individualism, Holmes views his new fiancée, the mill, its workers, and Margret as his property, which he will try to transform into an aspect of his self. Since purchasing the mill, he has become so mechanized that to Margret his familiar footsteps now sound like an "iron tread . . . so firm and measured that it sounded like the monotonous beatings of a clock." Now, "in the mill he was of the mill." Eventually he even decides to sleep in the mill, where his hard bed and chairs are made of iron□"here was discipline." Only

money, he finds, is erotic: "it made his fingers thrill with pleasure to touch a full pocket-book as well as his mistress's hand."

Fusing his utilitarian belief that "all things were made for man" with a romantic vision of the self, Holmes seeks "a savage freedom . . . the freedom of the primitive man, the untamed animal man, self-reliant and self-assertant, having conquered Nature." As Margret realizes that she must leave Holmes to his "clear self-reliant life,□with his Self, dearer to him than she had ever been," Davis marks the dangers of romanticism through a character who has chosen solitary wholeness over communal fragmentation. Nonetheless, even in a sentimental narrative that values nurturance and concern, both Margret and Dr. Knowles are attracted to Holmes whose credo is *Ego sum*. Margret finds Holmes "a master among men: fit to be a master," and Knowles likewise observes "If there were such a reality as mastership, that man was born to rule."

Holmes rather than Knowles thus inherits the mantle from Mitchell in "Life in the Iron-Mills." Pictured, like Mitchell, through images of coolness and ice, Holmes is an exponent of the "great idea of American sociology,□that the object of life is *to grow*." Unlike the korl woman, however, who is "hungry to know," Holmes has a "savage hunger" that drives him to transcend his childhood in the slums and become a "merchant prince." In contrast to the statue, he believes that "endurance is enough" for the slaves and destitute factory workers who work at his mill. Images of slavery surround Holmes; he believes that he has been "bought and sold" by his fiancée, who "held him a slave to her fluttering hand." While she is "proud of her slave," he resents the fact that "there were no dark iron bars across her life." It is tempting to think that having promised Fields a perfect day in June, Davis was mocking her publisher when Miss Herne masquerades as June in a tableau vivant. Anticipating the tableaux vivants in Edith Wharton's *House of Mirth*, Miss Herne dresses as a seductive, dangerous, and serpentine figure who, in Holmes's view, glows with a "smothered heat beneath the snaring eyes" and whose "unclean sweetness of jasmine-flowers mixed with the . . . smells of the mill . . . Patchouli or copperas,□what was the difference? The mill and his future wife came to him together." Miss Herne's decadent sexuality, a form of promiscuity earlier associated with aristocratic excesses that threatened middle-class virtues, has in *Margret Howth* evolved into a female metaphor for the seductive power of industrial capitalism itself. Margret's chastity, by contrast, emerges as a trope for bourgeois morality, which, in the end, prevails.

In *Margret Howth*, true community arises through the understanding of shared suffering rather than through the design of any single individual. In the figure of Lois Yare, Davis's first African-American character, the politics of pathos bridge the discourses of sentimentalism and realism, mobilizing democratic sentiment through the values of domesticity. Lois embodies the tension between personal pain, inscribed in the language of sentimentality, and industrial oppression, inscribed in the language of vernacular realism. To signify the loss of preindustrial innocence, Davis invokes the racist stereotype of a childlike, physically handicapped, mentally retarded mulatto woman: "Her soul, being lower, it might be, than ours, lay closer to Nature." Nonetheless, when speaking for herself Lois insists that it is the mill (where she had worked from the time she was seven until she turned sixteen), not her nature, that has

ruined her mind and her health. Like Stephen Holmes, she was "of" the mill: "I kind o' grew into that place in them years; seemed to me like as I was part o' the' engines, somehow."

Countering the narrator's racist observation that Lois's "tainted blood" had "dragged her down" is Lois's own clear insistence on the erotic force and toxic ecology of the mill:

> Th' air used to be thick in my mouth, black wi' smoke 'n' wool 'n' smells. In them years I got dazed in my head . . . 'T got so that th' noise o' th' looms went on in my head night 'n' day,□allus thud, thud . . . th' black wheels 'n' rollers was alive, starin' down at me, 'n' th' shadders o' th' looms was like snakes creepin',□creepin' anear all th' time.

Lois's sense of defilement by the mill marks her passage to adulthood and affiliates her narrative with that of other girls in sentimental fiction (such as Ellen Montgomery in Susan Warner's *Wide Wide World*, 1850), who are initiated into a culture that has abused their bodies and repressed their emotions. Lois recalls that before she went to work on the looms she used to play house in the lumberyard at the mill; now she realizes that her "crushed brain and unawakened powers" were caused by the "mass of iron and work and impure smells" of those years.

But for Davis, writing from a slave state in 1861, the traditional midcentury fictional ending of marriage and home is historically and imaginatively unavailable for a black woman character□a tension that Davis seems to have understood. Initially Margret identifies with Lois, the disfigured and bitter survivor of years of slavery and brutal child labor, through their common female suffering, acknowledging that her own "higher life" was also "starved, thwarted." As Julie Elison observes, in the nineteenth century pain (which is always gendered) serves as the link between the body and power. However, Margret soon recognizes a crucial distinction: unlike Lois she "was free□and liberty . . . was the cure for all the soul's diseases." Thus Davis refuses to let slavery and blackness serve as a generic metaphor for many other sorts of pain.

Although permanently deformed, Lois recovers spiritually through her relationship to nature. In the figure of Lois we can trace the profound influence of Emerson on Davis. Lois is indeed a nature scholar who, in Emerson's sense, "can read God directly." In a series of passages that adhere rather closely to the prescriptions of "The American Scholar" and "Nature," Lois reveals what Emerson calls an "original relation to the universe," Emerson argues that a primal contact with nature allows one to experience God firsthand, unmediated by corrupt churches or biblical interpretation; able to be "read" by anyone, nature can replace the Bible as the greatest spiritual text. Further, a nature scholar is unalienated because he is infantile:

> Few adults can see nature. Most persons do not see the sun. At least they have a very superficial seeing. The sun illuminates only the eye of the man, but

> shines into the eye and heart of the child. The lover of nature is he whose inward and outward sense are still truly adjusted to each other; who has retained the spirit of infancy even into the era of his manhood . . . In the presence of nature a wild delight runs through them, in spite of real sorrows.

In *Margret Howth* Lois is a child-artist who reads nature as a great spiritual text; she becomes the world's eye. For Davis, Lois's primal ability arises from the fact that she is black and female. Even though Lois is clearly a young adult, the narrator and various characters refer to her as a cheerful child. Unlike Knowles and Holmes, Lois has eyes quick to know the other light that "went into the fogs of the fetid dens from which the coarser light was barred." Like the scholar-artist, she has the simplicity of character to become an "interpreter" of nature who understands that nature is (in Emerson's phrase) a "remoter and inferior incarnation of God, a projection of God in the unconscious." Thus Lois, says the narrator, can see glimpses of the "heavenly clearness" of God's light: "Was it weakness and ignorance that made everything she saw or touched nearer, more human to her than to you or me?." Surrounded by Emersonian images of sunlight, Lois "liked clear, vital colours . . . the crimsons and blues. They answered her somehow. They could speak. There were things in the world that like herself were marred,□did not understand□were hungry to know: the gray sky, the mud streets, the tawny lichens."

Emerson's scholar inevitably becomes a realist artist whose unmediated sensibility is shaped not by tradition or imagination but by the eye: "To the human eye that the primary forms, as the sky, the mountain, the tree, give us . . . a pleasure arising from outline, color, motion, and grouping." Lois is such an artist, fulfilling Emerson's requirement that art should become an epitome of the real world, a "result or the expression of nature, in miniature." Lois instinctively composes her cart along such lines: "Patched as it was, [it] had a snug, cosy look; the masses of vegetables, green and crimson and scarlet, were heaped with a certain reference to the glow of color . . . What artist sense had she,□what could she know□this ignorant huckster□of the eternal laws of beauty or grandeur?." Davis frequently judges her characters by this transcendent artistic capacity. Like Hugh Wolfe, Lois, an "ignorant huckster," has built her sculpture from the materials of her work. By contrast, despite his humanitarian inclinations Knowles is "blind to the prophecy written on the earth," and, similarly, in his isolated myopia Holmes sees that "the windless gray, the stars, the stone under his feet, stood alone in the universe, each working out its own soul into deed. If there were any all embracing harmony, one soul through all, he did not see it."

While Davis masculinizes society, she feminizes nature which, as such, is vulnerable to male exploitation and definition. Viewed in relation to urban life and industrial control, nature in *Margret Howth* becomes a projection of woman's unconscious and an image of her recurrent need for mothering. Like Emerson, who sees nature as a "beautiful mother," Lois finds in nature a new mother who "longs to take her uncouth child home again." Onto this maternal sensibility Davis layers a feminized sense of erotic unity. While Holmes's impetus is toward separation, discontinuity, and selfdenial, Lois moves toward a transcendent sense of nature that erases boundaries□"Why, sometimes, out in

the hills, in the torrid quiet of summer noons, she had knelt by the shaded pools, and buried her hands in the great slumberous beds of water-lilies, her blood curdling in a feverish languor, a passioned trance, from which she roused herself, weak and tired"—a romantic and erotic erasure of the self and others, subject and object. The surrender to the romantic universal also removes the entranced child-woman from the inevitability of history, represented by the mill. Marianne Hirsch suggests that in female romanticism sleep not only signifies withdrawal into the symbolic landscape of the innermost self; it also suggests the one-dimensional nature of a woman's development. Excluded from social interaction, she is thrown back into herself, where she can explore her spiritual or emotional sides, but only at the expense of other aspects of her selfhood.

For Emerson, Lois's transcendent capacity would have had a social function: "The office of the scholar is to cheer, to raise, to guide men by showing them facts amidst appearances." In contrast to Knowles, who is ineffectually trying to forge a utopian society in his own image, Lois, the peddler, through her "Great Spirit of love and trust" and her romanticized trinity of "a faith in God, faith in her fellow-man, faith in herself," offers the enduring possibility of a true preindustrial community. One morning, for example, as Margret walks alongside Lois into town, they stop and visit at each farmhouse, collecting produce and butter and enjoying several breakfasts. Repudiating the imagery of mechanical time that surrounds Holmes, Lois's leisurely work connects Margret, the isolated bookkeeper, with her neighbors. For the first time "the two women were talking all the way. In all his life Dr. Knowles had never heard from this silent girl words as open and eager as she gave to the huckster about paltry, common things." As she shares "disjointed" womanly talk with Lois, Margret feels "keenly alive" for the first time. Even in the town, where Margret used to see the houses as closed and silent, she discovers through Lois a sisterhood of servants, housemaids, and news vendors.

In the end, rage generated by racism and poverty brings down the industrial house—a danger that Davis believed the North must heed. Lois rescues Holmes from a fire that her angry father, Joe, has started at the mill, and dies after inhaling the fumes of burning copperas. But her death does not represent the Christian martyrdom of Stowe's Uncle Tom or Little Eva. Lois's pre-oedipal attachments, her allegiance to childhood, her dissolution of boundaries, and her sense of the dangers of industrialism render her death an inevitable effect of the adult world of industrial and chattel slavery. Her death actualizes sentimental rage, reiterating the novel's choice between romance and self, community and ego. As Lois lies dying, the community, black and white, comes together and invests her death with the power of social redemption. In *Margret Howth* Davis revises the theme of much female fiction from the mid-nineteenth century—the endless attempt to achieve self-sacrifice—by viewing women's submission as a tragic consequence of masculine assertion and romantic egoism. Eventually Margret quits the House of Refuge and forgives Stephen Holmes, who has repented of his ambitious romance and returned to Margret, announcing, "I need warmth and freshness and light: my wife shall bring them to me. She shall be no strong-willed reformer, standing alone: a sovereign lady with kind words . . . only to that man whom she trusts." The narrator notes, however, that Margret "paid no heed" to this final comment.

Davis was quite disappointed with Margret, and wrote to James Fields that she did not want the novel named after its heroine because "she is the completest failure in the story, besides not being the nucleus of it." Whether Margret dissatisfied her author as a woman or as a literary achievement is tauntingly unclear. If Margret's betrothal and reentry into her family sanction what Davis took to be available forms of female adulthood for middle-class women, Lois's death from the brutality of child labor and the toxic waste of the mill suggests the sorrowful fate of mill girls and former slaves. Since Fields had vetoed Davis's plan to "kill Dr. Knowles at Manassas," "in the end, she leaves Knowles and Holmes mutually penniless from the fire. Knowles abandons his utopian plan and quietly builds the House of Refuge as a homeless shelter. The impoverished Howth family, however, is ironically rescued by their slave, Joel, who discovers oil on their farm□a portentous omen of industrial inevitability in a book that marks its risks.

Margret Howth critiques transcendentalism's investment of the egotistical imagination with social power. In this early novel Davis challenges literary and philosophical systems that, in their formal structures and social textures. divorce the reader from life in the commonplace. Midway through the novel, as Davis prepares to satisfy Fields and "come to the love part of [her] story," she speaks to her place in literary history: "I am suddenly conscious of dingy colors on the palette with which I have been painting." She compares her ambivalent characters, who must navigate difficult choices in their public and personal lives, to figures in "once upon a time" fiction, when readers "had no fancy for going through the world with half-and-half characters." Nature, she reminds herself, no longer turns out "complete specimens of each class." Refusing to write of a heroine who "glides into life full-charged with rank, virtues, a name three syllabled, and a white dress that never needs washing," she announces that her heroines will never be "ready to sail through dangers dire into a triumphant haven of matrimony." Thus, Davis introduces the reconciliation of Margret and Holmes with a manifesto on realism: "I live in the commonplace. Once or twice I have rashly tried my hand at dark conspiracies, and women rare and radiant in Italian bowers; but I have a friend who is sure to say, 'Try and tell us about the butcher next door, my dear'." This became her lifelong literary charge.

In *Margret Howth* Davis extends her discourse of realism and talks about "the butcher next door," seeking to challenge the restrictive tenets of sentimentalism□its illusion that domestic culture can transcend political culture, that the self can be divorced from social circumstances, and that domestic life can guarantee women status, autonomy, economic security, and moral redemption. Romanticism, she found, severed the individual from history just as the imperatives of slavery and industrialism were threatening the American illusion of community. Indeed, autonomy became a snare that threatened women's identity as social subjects. Exploring subjectivity in the history of slavery and early industrialization, Davis finds that her characters face aesthetic frustration and emotional repression. In fastening the emerging strategies of literary realism onto felt experience, Davis reclaims from sentimentalism its subjectivity and intensity of feeling. In *Margret Howth*, her first novel, the social practices of domesticity, female labor, free black labor, and nascent industrialization authorize emotional appeals, shaping American realism as an indigenous and heartfelt political narrative.

Source: Jean Pfaelzer, "The Common Story of *Margret Howth*," in *Parlor Radical: Rebecca Harding Davis and the Origins of American Social Realism*, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1996, pp. 62-75.

Topics for Further Study

Research the life of a worker in a large industry in the 1860s, such as a steel mill worker, textile mill worker, or railroad builder. Write a diary of a week in the worker's life, describing your work, daily routine, and problems you face.

Davis believed that religion was the answer to some of our social problems. Do you agree or disagree? Why? How do you think social problems, such as poverty, drugs, and widespread unemployment, should be dealt with?

In *Margret Howth*, Davis mentions that many of the workers in the mill were immigrants or African Americans. Did you have ancestors who were in the United States in the 1860s? If so, do you know what types of work they did? Write about their lives; if you don't know the facts of their lives, write about what you would have done for work if you had lived during that time.

Research the rise of labor unions and write about the changes they created in working conditions. Do you think we still need unions to protect workers? Why or why not?

Compare and Contrast

1860s: The Civil War begins in 1861, and its four-year conflict is one of the bloodiest periods in American history.

Today: Although the United States has since been involved in numerous wars and conflicts all over the world, none has been as bloody as the Civil War.

1860s: Most women in America are not educated beyond grade school; those women who do receive an education usually are sent to a women's school for a few years, while their brothers go on to college.

Today: Both men and women in the United States have equal opportunities for education and college.

1860s: Slavery is legal throughout the American South.

Today: Slavery has long since been abolished in the United States, and there have been ongoing efforts to increase civil rights for minorities; however, prejudice and oppression still linger.

1860s: Widespread industrialization results in a great need for cheap labor, and there are no laws protecting workers from exploitation and dangerous working conditions, no laws preventing child labor, and no laws regulating how many hours people may work.

Today: Laws regulate workplace safety, provide for a minimum wage, prevent child labor, and determine how many hours employers may ask employees to work each day.

What Do I Read Next?

Upton Sinclair's 1906 book *The Jungle*, a masterpiece of social realism, exposed conditions in a Chicago meatpacking plant and led to the passage of laws governing the purity of food and to the creation of the Food and Drug Administration.

Harriet A. Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), written in the same period as *Margret Howth*, tells of Jacobs's life in slavery and her escape from it.

"Life in the Iron Mills" (1861) was Davis's first major published work, and examines the appalling conditions workers endured in an iron mill in the mid-nineteenth century.

Rebecca Harding Davis and American Realism (1991), by Sharon M. Harris, surveys Davis's role in creating a new American genre.

Further Study

Baym, Nina, *Woman's Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and about Women in America, 1820-1870*, Cornell University Press, 1978.

Baym provides a critical guide to novels written by women or that feature women characters in the midnineteenth century.

Harris, Sharon M., *Rebecca Harding Davis and American Realism*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991.

Harris discusses Davis's influence on the literary movement of American realism.

Mock, Michele L., "A Message to Be Given: The Spiritual Activism of Rebecca Harding Davis," in *NWSA Journal*, Vol. 12, No. 1, Spring 2000, p. 44.

Mock explores Davis's beliefs and describes her as a forerunner of contemporary ecofeminism.

Pfaelzer, Jean, *Parlor Radical: Rebecca Harding Davis and the Origins of American Social Realism*, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997.

Pfaelzer discusses Davis's place as a founder of the social realist movement.

Yellin, Jean Fagan, *Women and Sisters: The Antislavery Feminists in American Culture*, Yale University Press, 1990.

Fagan discusses several women writers who wrote works opposing slavery.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Novels for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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