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GENDER, REVOLUTION, AND THE POLITICAL UNCONSCIOUS IN REBECCA HARDING DAVIS'S *LIFE IN THE IRON MILLS*

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In the handful of studies devoted to it, Rebecca Harding Davis's story has usually been discussed and interpreted from the point of view of its generic complexity (realism, romance, irony, parable, conversion narrative)[1] and a special interweaving of the social, political, and the religious in its foregrounding of the theme of social injustice and class exploitation. Sheila Hassell Hughes's recent interpretation, for example, gives priority to the religious aspects of the story read as an inverted parable of Lazarus, and at the same time discusses the text as proposing solutions and drawing inferences analogous to those of modern liberationist theology.[2] While finding this interpretive suggestion extremely interesting one feels baffled by the invitation to locate Davis's latent social diagnosis within the framework of twentieth-century responses to class conflicts. The more so as the reader feels easily attracted to a similar proleptic temptation to see the imagery in

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1 Cf. Walter Hesford, "Literary Contexts in Life in the Iron Mills,'" *American Literature*, Vol. XLIX, No. 1, 1977, 70-85; Sharon M. Harris, *Rebecca Harding Davis and American Realism*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991; William H. Shurr, "*Life in the Iron Mills*: A Nineteenth-Century Conversion Narrative," *American Transcendental Quarterly* 5 (Dec. 1991), 245-57.

2 Sheila Hassell Hughes, "Between Bodies of Knowledge There is a Great Gulf Fixed: A Liberationist Reading of Class and Gender in *Life in the Iron Mills*," *American Quarterly*, Vol. 49, No. 1, 1997, 113-137.

the opening of Davis's story as a prefiguration of the modernist aesthetics of the city (the preponderance of emblems such as rain, water, river, mud, smoke, fire, is heavily reminiscent of Eliot's early poetry). Yet noting the similarity is the only reasonable critical gesture one can afford in this case: any further probing would appear to be a hyperbolic exercise leading to a falsification of the reasons for the widely recognized unique importance and appeal of the story. Instead, a promising exegetic procedure seems to follow from New Historicist suggestions that the text be placed and observed within the tissue of contemporary ideological debates, in this case concerning social and racial inequality in the specifically North American historical circumstances.

Critics of the story repeatedly dwell upon the possible meanings of Davis's central symbol, that of the statue of the korl woman whose fantasmagoric impression on the onlooker engenders connotations of unsolved mystery, an unanswered question, unspecified "poignant longing", spiritual hunger, thirst, combined with uncanny physical power ("a nude woman's form, muscular, grown coarse with labor, the powerful limbs ... the tense, rigid muscles, the clutching hands, the wild, eager face, like that of a starving wolf's".)[3] What informs most of the passages in the story concerning the narrator's own interpretation of the korl woman's figure, is this contradiction of latent power on the one hand, and the sense of utter deprivation on the other, the incongruity which is noticed and questioned by one of the characters in the crucial scene of the story: "But what a mistake you have made, my fine fellow! You have given no sign of starvation to the body. It is strong, - terribly strong." (33, emphasis mine) The contradiction, as I shall argue, encodes the central ambiguity underlying Davis's

[3] Rebecca Harding Davis, *Life in the Iron Mills, or the Korl Woman*, with *A Biographical Interpretation* by Tillie Olsen, Old Westbury, N.Y.: The Feminist Press, 1972. The text is cited parethetically throughout.

story, originating in the epoch's ideological debates and concerning not only the existence of class stratification within the American democratic system, but also the related issues of class conflict, slavery, violence, and revolution. This contradiction apparently exists also at the level of the story's organization which offers the possibility of open subversion and rebellion, and at the same time defuses and smothers this possibility by means of the code of domestic sentimentality prevalent in the story's ending. Yet the contradiction seems to find resolution in the potential reading of the motif of Deborah - the arch-sufferer in the narrative - not as an element of discord but as a continuum subsuming both the act of revolutionary subversion (theft) and the redeeming reward for it as an act inspired by love and compassion, in the pastoral idyll of the Quaker commune where Davis's heroine awaits her reunion with God. This potential resolution of the central ambivalence behind the story's codes of meaning accounts for Davis's novel approach to the basic questions of her epoch concerning the historical division into the owners and the dispossessed.

The present attempt to define the story's positioning within the dominant ideological discourses of power in American social and political life of the 1850s owes much of its direction and method of argumentation to Fredric Jameson's concept of the "political unconscious", however simplified my version of his ideas might be. Jameson's approach in the introductory chapter of his book[4] entails not only giving priority to the communal/ social/political aspects in "our reinterpretation - our rereading and rewriting - of the literary text" (J 75), but dividing the whole interpretive process hierarchically (after Northrop Frye) into three ever-widening "horizons" or stages, each requiring a

[4] Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious. Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981. Jameson's book is cited parenthetically, with page numbers preceded by letter J.

different reconstruction of the individual text, which would mediate between its inherent individuality of narrative and structure and its inevitable positioning within the extrinsic social context. This context, the "referential" so often spurned by the poststructuralists and dismissed as "yet another text", functions in Jameson's Marxist approach in a similar way to the Lacanian "Real", which resists symbolization as a non-text, but which is "inaccessible to us except in textual form", demanding, in our attempts to grasp it, "prior textualization, its narrativization in the political unconscious". (J 35) In confronting Davis's story I have been primarily interested in the first two of Jameson's horizons (while completely ignoring the last one, concerning the text's mode of existence within the sequence of the historically changing modes of production). His first interpretive stage depicts the text as a symbolic act in an "individualizing exegesis" and an explication of the text's "narrowly political and historical horizon" as enclosed in its unique form and structuring; the second phase involves a reconstitution of the individual text in relation to the "collective and class discourses of which a text is little more than an individual parole or utterance". (J 76) In practice, however, I have limited myself to the first step of the procedure with its basic "specification of the relationship between ideology and cultural texts or artifacts" where "the individual narrative, or the individual formal structure, is to be grasped as the imaginary resolution of a real contradiction." (J 77-9, emphasis mine) Accordingly, I propose to read Davis's story as a symbolic resolution of one of the fundamental ideological contradictions of her times: that between the historically conditioned principle and demand of non-violence, and the emerging practical and political conviction of the necessity, if not inevitability, of violence for solving the major social problems of the time.

The concept of the "political unconscious" as developed by Jameson borrows its shape from Freud's psychoanalysis of desire and wish-fulfilment together with their main "narrative events" of repression and revolt (congenial, as Jameson notes, to a Marxist perspective). It depends as well on Northrop Frye's notion of desire as not only individual but also communal energy inevitably informing a society's "religious figures" and aesthetic forms, directed at "full and nonalienated development of the human personality and of human potentialities" (J 70-1), as well as conditioning a civilization's impulse towards self-perfection. In this sense, Jameson adds after Frye, "all literature, no matter how weakly, must be informed by what we have called a political unconscious, /.../ all literature must be read as a symbolic meditation on the destiny of community." (J 70) The political unconscious and the space within which it functions in Davis's story are defined by the text's two centers of desire and power: the sign of the statue of the korl woman belonging to the aesthetic order, and the emblem of abstract value, money, belonging to the realm of the economic organization of society. From both the cultural and psychological perspective of the story these textual signs stand in diametrical opposition to each other, with money being initially reduced to the function of "the signifier most destructive of all signification,"[5] and the aesthetic form, by contrast, representing a signifier which generates abundant but rather ineffective interpretive responses. Yet in the course of the narrative both "empty meanings" - the korl statue and the stolen money - acquire a multitude of the signifieds in the intersubjective space they themselves create by assigning specific roles to different characters, through the protagonists' individual reactions to each

[5] Jacques Lacan, "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'," in: *The Critical Tradition. Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends*, ed. David H. Richter, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989, p. 702.

signifier in question.[6] Through the characters' engaging in the process of signification the two signifiers become full signs of desire and power, functioning on both the individual and the communal level, remaining in constant tension, while being constantly interpreted, reinterpreted and misinterpreted by the story's protagonists and its narrator. In this way they also indirectly and symbolically formulate the textual diagnosis of the social and political reality outside the text's boundaries.

The latent ideological discourse of Davis's story, published in 1861, concerns the period of the 1850s, the decade rich in political and social debates on the complex heritage of the American Revolution of the previous century. On the one hand the founding fathers left the legacy of the sacredness of the union and the necessity to preserve it at any cost, this including preservation of the institution of slavery in the South. On the other - their message of the unquestioned equality and right to freedom of all human beings sounded a note of alarm in the conscience of a growing number of Davis's contemporaries of different political orientations and social backgrounds. These two contradictory signals from the past appeared to be and were treated as mutually exclusive by the majority of politicians and social activists, who either - like Daniel Webster - looked upon slavery as a necessary evil to be maintained within the state's

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[6] This passage owes a lot to Lacan's "Seminar..." which defines the money that Dupin receives as a reward for his services, as a sign-destructive signifier helping the detective to neutralize a chain of signification that threatens his identity. In the case of Davis's characters, the same signifier generates as many meanings as its opposite, the aesthetic object - it almost becomes a center of aesthetic contemplation, as Hugh Wolfe's response to it might suggest. Just like Poe's purloined letter the stolen money in Davis's story orchestrates the scene of signification through triads (Hugh Wolfe who does not see anything, the proprietor Mitchell who is also blind, and the "thief", Deborah, who sees). The money, like the letter, disempowers those who use it "for ends of power."

body in order to save the union, or - like William Garrison - demanded the immediate secession (in this case of the North) in order not to partake in such iniquity for the sake of one's own salvation. What both Webster and Garrison shared, however, was the call for non-violence, to avoid the "conflagration and terror" of political revolution, which originated in America and bestowed on it "tranquillity and prosperity," while proving violent and disastrous elsewhere in the world.[7] The emphasis on non-violence was strictly connected with the apocalyptic visions of bloody slave insurrections or class revolt communicated via pamphlets and newspaper excerpts from histories of Central America and Europe, from which it was clear that any social or racial turmoil would surely - as the American political and intellectual elite argued - disintegrate and destroy the union.[8]

The uneasy alliance between the ideology of non-violence and anxieties related to abuses of the system was characteristic of contemporary social debates, and appeared in diverse configurations. While Webster was willing to sacrifice the slaves' cause for the sake of the union and internal peace, John C. Calhoun, whom Richard Hofstadter ironically called "the Marx of the Master Class," argued for the preservation of the Southern system as a peculiar safety valve for the social tensions in the North:

> To forestall [revolution, Calhoun] suggested consistently - over a period of years - what Richard Current has called "planter-capitalist collaboration against the class enemy." In such a collaboration the South, with its superior social stability, had much to offer as a conservative force. In return, the conservative

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[7] Eric J. Sundquist, "Slavery, Revolution, and the American Renaissance," in: *The American Renaissance Reconsidered*, eds Walter Benn Michaels, Donald E. Pease, Baltimore: the Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989, p. 3.

[8] Cf. Eric J. Sundquist, "*Benito Cereno* and New World Slavery," in: *Reconstructing American Literary History*, ed. Sacvan Bercovitch, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986, especially pp. 106-108.

> elements in the North should be willing to hold down abolitionist agitation, and they would do well to realize that an overthrow of slavery in the South would prepare the ground for social revolution in the North.[9]

The ideal of social harmony precluding revolutionary violence, as put into practice in the South, led some extremist Southerners (like George Fitzhugh) to argue for the superiority of slave-master economic relations over free labor, and even to suggest the implementation of slavery in the North. This incensed Whig/ Republican politicians and their electorate and finally convinced the conservative Northern "Small-Fisted Farmers, Mud-sills of Society, Greasy Mechanics"[10] to support Lincoln and actively oppose the South.

Thus the close interrelation between the issue of slavery and class conflict recurs again and again in political and social texts of the period, inextricably combined with the call for non-violence in the name of the Union (as in Webster), defence of the Southern political and economic system (Calhoun), the preservation of democratic institutions (Wendell Phillips), or concern with divine order and moral improvement (Garrison). Nineteenth- and twentieth-century views have consistently interpreted American anxiety over the idea of social revolution and violence in terms of the very existence of the slave, the ultimate underdog whose lot was so incomparably bleak as to persuade the white laborer to withhold and control his own dissatisfaction with capitalism: "[...] the presence of a submerged class of slaves gave the humbler whites a sense of status and all whites a community of interest."[11] Another factor that made the

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[9] Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition*, New York: Vintage Books, 1989, p. 106.

[10] The phrase used by James H. Hammond, Calhoun's political associate, in his famous speech against "wage slavery" in the North. Hofstadter, pp. 116, 153-154.

[11] Hofstadter, pp. 62-63.

notion of violence in the service of social justice unpopular was, according to Leo Marx, "the pastoral impulse," understood as the ideological underpinning of American response to growing industrialization and capitalist enterprise, "a desire, in the face of the growing power and complexity of organized society, to disengage from the dominant culture and to seek out the basis for a simpler, more satisfying mode of life in a realm 'closer', as we say, to nature."[12] In Davis's times, a practical and political embodiment of the pastoral impulse may be detected in the proposed Republican solution to the problem of urban poverty - "neither [in] charity, public works, nor strikes, but [in] westward migration of the poor, aided by a homestead act," a policy publicized by Horace Greeley in his New York Tribune with the enthusiastic and urgent outcry "go straight into the country - go at once!"[13]

In Rebecca Harding Davis's story the pastoral vision is all too visible and it takes on an obvious and yet complex form in the opposition of the iron-mill town and its paradise-like surroundings, a dichotomy evocative of two of Frye's privileged archetypes, the city and the garden. Davis's version of the pastoral alternative additionally acquires a religious dimension as the site of the utopian Quaker commune which saves one of the two protagonists, the woman Deborah, while "coming too late" to save the man, Hugh Wolfe. One of the basic hermeneutical questions in the story relates to the reasons for this difference concerning their respective fates. Like her contemporaries, Davis undoubtedly considered the pastoral escape/evasion as a radical, if not the only solution to the plight of the iron-mill workers.

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[12] Leo Marx, "Pastoralism in America," in: *Ideology and Classic American Literature*, eds Sacvan Bercovitch, Myra Jehlen, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986, p. 54.

[13] Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men. The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970, p. 27.

However, the problem was that the beaten-down victims of the capitalist system as she presented them, had practically no chance, financially, physically, or intellectually, to migrate to the West and prosper there. In this context, the survival of the female protagonist in the story has all the characteristics of the magical passage through a series of ordeals of the hero(ine) of a fairy tale, rewarded in the end with a "happy ever-after" conclusion to his/her courageous and selfless perseverance. Except that the ordeal of the heroine of Davis's narrative consists in committing a bold transgression of social norms, which constitutes, as I shall argue, a powerful figure for revolutionary subversion in the story.

While the pastoral element is conspicuous in the narrative, the absence of the question of slavery in the text has been repeatedly noted by critics - with understandable surprise, considering the facts of Davis's life - ever since the story's re-introduction to the literary scene by Tillie Olsen in 1972.[14] However, the slave symbolism exists in the text quite distinctly, although its meanings are compressed, and due to this largely disguised. When at the story's opening the narrator offers a descriptive personification of the River Ohio /s/he imagines "a look of weary, dumb appeal upon the face of the negro-like river slavishly bearing its burden day after day."(12) At the same time the narrator evokes the French settlers' original impression of the river in the ironic exclamation "la belle riviere!", in which the river acquires - rhetorically - a female quality. The rhetorical and symbolic compression of the river, the negro and a female, performs several functions in the story. One of them is the identification of the slave with the woman: women in Davis's text stand clearly for ultimate human suffering which leads not to elevation but degradation of one's humanity. The main female character, Deborah, is a cripple working in the cotton mills, subjected to daily drudgery that robs her of any vestige of

[14] See footnote 3.

feminine grace or any opportunity of mental or physical rest. She is hopelessly in love with her cousin, an iron-mill worker called Hugh Wolfe, yet, "/s/he knew, in spite of all his kindness, that there was that in her face and form which made him loathe the sight of her [...] that his soul sickened with disgust at her deformity, even when his words were kindest." (22-3) In comparison with Wolfe's old father, "her face was even more ghastly, her lips bluer, her eyes more watery" (16), although it is made clear that she is still young. She is also referred to in the story as "the weak, flaccid wretch"(17), "a limp, dirty rug"(21). Other women mentioned in the text are the helpless and timid Irish girl Janey, Deb's anonymous companions, "drunk" with fatigue and lack of sleep, also "the bloated, pimpled women at the doors" whom Hugh Wolfe remembers "with a new disgust, a new sense of sudden triumph," when he decides to make use of the money that Deborah has stolen for him. The women, in short, seem to belong to the subhuman underclass of slavery which serves mainly as a negative point of reference in the process of self-identification of the male ("white") protagonist in the story.

On the other hand, however, the common figure for the slave and the female in Davis's narrative is the river, which although "dull and tawny-colored, [dragging] itself sluggishly along," leaves the muddy town behind to find itself eventually in he green paradise of the countryside. The narrator, accordingly, changes her initial qualification of the river as an emblem of slave existence:

> My fancy about the river was an idle one: it is no type of such a life. What if it be stagnant and slimy here? It knows that beyond there waits for it odorous sunlight, - Quaint old gardens, dusky with soft, green foliage of apple-trees, and flushing crimson with roses, - air, and fields, and mountains. The future of the Welsh puddler passing just now is not so pleasant. To be stowed away, after his grimy work is done, in a hole in the muddy graveyard, and after that, - not air, nor green fields, nor curious roses. (13)

The river, then, possesses the ability to escape the slimy town, unlike the people living there, including the iron mill puddler Hugh Wolfe. Yet the woman who looks after him finally escapes the town, just like the river, making it precisely the changing "type" of her transformed life.

The male protagonist of the story defines himself in relation to the degraded humanity of Deborah on the one hand, and, in the central episode of the narrative, against the apparent superiority of the rich intellectual, Mitchell, on the other. While he "despises" the sight of the woman (acknowledging, however, her devotion and rewarding her with an occasional kind word), he elevates and idolizes the appearance of the rich man: "As he knocked the ashes from his cigar, Wolfe caught with a quick pleasure the contour of the white hand, the blood-glow of a red ring he wore. His voice, too, and that of Kirby's, touched him like music, - low, even, with chording cadences. About this man Mitchell hung the impalpable atmosphere belonging to the thorough-bred gentleman."(29) The attitude of adoration implies the distance that Wolfe discerns between himself and Mitchell, and simultaneously it marks the recognition of a characteristic they both share - a deep sense of beauty, which provides the basis for Wolfe's negative self-identification, with Mitchell serving as an unattainable point of reference: "At every sentence, Wolfe listened more and more like a dumb, hopeless animal, with a duller, more stolid look creeping over his face, glancing now and then at Mitchell, marking acutely every smallest sign of refinement, then back to himself, seeing as in a mirror his filthy body, his more stained soul." (30) Sheila Hughes perceives Wolfe's admiration for and negative identification with Mitchell as a betrayal of his class, which leads to his total alienation and isolation in the prison episode, when he fails to communicate with Joe the lamp-lighter.[15] It must be stressed that his isolation

[15] Sheila Hassell Hughes, p. 130.

is initially a self-imposed attitude: in the scene where Wolfe ponders on the possibility of keeping the stolen money which is "his by his right," he thinks "with a new disgust, a new sense of sudden triumph" about the images of "filth and drunkenness" that he will be now able to discard in pursuit of a better, fuller life. This reflection is preceded by a lengthy fragment depicting the beauty of the evening sky, which deeply affects Wolfe. It is clear that his decision to partake in the theft is influenced by this moment of aesthetic elation: "He folded the scrap of paper in his hand. As his nervous fingers took it in, limp and blotted, so his soul took in the mean temptation, lapped it in fancied rights, in dreams of improved existences, drifting and endless as the cloud-seas of color." (47-8) It is first of all his superior aesthetic perception and his talent that seem to isolate him psychologically, making him in his own eyes similar to people like Mitchell, and thus precipitating his subsequent fall.

His aesthetic gift is then both a curse and a blessing: it enables him to create a powerful formula for his class's spiritual deprivation, and at the same time it preconditions his eventual alienation from his class as he acknowledges his affinity with Mitchell (and vice versa, as asserted in the scene in which Mitchell miraculously picks out Wolfe from among the crowd of workers as the author of the sculpture). Wolfe's painful identification with Mitchell makes him acquire the "double consciousness" discerned in the blacks by W.B. DuBois,[16] and confirmed by modern sociologists: the oppressed group tends to assume and adopt the negative representation of itself as it is formulated by the oppressive majority. Accordingly, Wolfe perceives himself with increasing self-loathing, comparing Mitchell, "the pure face, the delicate, sinewy limbs, in harmony with all he knew of beauty and truth," with his "squalid daily life,

[16] W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, quoted and discussed in Sheila Hassell Hughes, pp. 124-5.

the brutal coarseness eating into his brain, as the ashes into his skin: before, these things had been a dull aching into his consciousness; tonight, they were reality." (40) At this point, Wolfe's identification with the middle class rather than his own begins to assume more and more vivid forms: he observes a crowd of bourgeois passers-by on their way to church, and longs to live a life similar to theirs, a life which he envisages as invested in natural moral superiority, that inherent illusion comprised in the worldview of the ruling classes: " was it not his right to live as they, - a pure life, a good, true-hearted life, full of beauty and kind words?" (46)

The most striking aspect of Wolfe's misguided adoption of the middle class perspective is his attitude to the money stolen from Mitchell by Deborah for his sake. Trying to persuade himself of his right to keep it, he imagines it as "something straight from God's hand.[...] God made this money - the fresh air, too - for his children's use." (47) An integral part of capitalist economy, "a medium of exchange that functions as a unit of account and a store of value,"[17] money is certainly a human creation, not God's. Yet it becomes a powerful ingredient of middle class ideology, acting in its most pronounced form in Protestant (Calvinist) ethics, where material (financial) prosperity turns into a sign of God's grace. Wolfe's delusion is actually a version of this belief, he rightly claims his entitlement to the money within this ideological framework: he should be rewarded with possession of material goods as one of the elect, due to his unusual artistic gift. His appropriation of the money seems thus to him an act of justice blessed by God, although this time it is the nineteenth-century God of universal benevolence, and not the Calvinist punitive Father: "[t]he Something who looked down on

[17] *The Oxford Dictionary of Finance*, eds Brian Butler, Alan Isaacs, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 184.

him that moment through the cool gray sky had a kindly face, he knew, - loved his children alike." (47)

The inconsistency in Wolfe's speculations on the divine origin of money and justice follows directly from his alienation in yet another sense, repeatedly observed by the alternately sympathetic and ironic narrator, who reminds the reader that "[o]f God and heaven [Wolfe] had heard so little, that they were to him what fairy-land is to a child: something real, but not here; very far off." (46) In the church scene, when Hugh listens to the Christian reformer, he totally misses the import of the speaker's message: "[h]is words passed far over the furnace-tender's grasp, toned to suit another class of culture; they sounded in his ears a very pleasant song in an unknown tongue." (49) The failure of the reformer to communicate the Christian dimension of the worker's existence marks Wolfe's and his class's disappropriation in the religious sense, their exclusion from the current discourses of transcendence in society, which in the case of the story's protagonist means total abandonment and isolation at the moment of ultimate trial in his life. The narrator carefully dramatizes the irony of his suicidal death, having Wolfe kill himself with a piece of tin that he used before to cut korl for his statues, and showing him waiting for death with "his arms outstretched," in the posture of a self-crucified Christ, one who could have saved his people through his art but failed through hubris, lack of love and compassion, and ultimately through betraying the cause of his co-sufferers by abandoning his class allegiance.

In one of the story's central codes of meaning - that of sentimental domesticity characteristic of much of contemporary women's writing - Deb's final deliverance can be read as an outcome of her selfless devotion and love, the very features Hugh Wolfe lacked. She commits the theft without speculating on the social or moral significance of her act, motivated, as it seems, exclusively by the depth of her unrequited passion. In this way,

she takes her place alongside many other nineteenth-century sentimental heroines whose lives - in a sentimental "bid for power"[18] - proves to be a moral victory over villains and oppressors exerting their control over the weak and the dispossessed within and with the help of the prevailing social and economic system. However, there is an important difference between Davis's story and sentimental fiction as a genre. This lies in the fact that the moral superiority of the sentimental heroine generally asserts itself in her passive acceptance of adversities and a readiness to totally erase her will and individuality in the process of internalizing God's authority, as part of the genre's message that "the only way to overcome tyranny is through the practice of a grueling and inexorable discipline."[19] As Jane Tompkins stresses in her analysis of Susan Warner's sentimental bestseller, The Wide, Wide World, the suffering woman in this fiction never escapes but faces her oppressors without rebellion, instead inverting and internalizing her struggle with evil. However, the slow moral ascension of the sentimental heroine through passive self-denial and the constant practising of repression of her natural emotions is not the model followed by the female protagonist of Davis's story. Deb succumbs to the material conditions of her existence just like other sentimental female characters; unlike them, however, and unlike her love, Hugh Wolfe, she is not meek and passive when given the opportunity to act.

In the central episode of the story, the encounter between Deb and Hugh and the three representatives of the oppressive ruling class, the woman (although invisible) is the only participant who draws practical conclusions from the lengthy discussion of the korl woman, social inequality, and the crucial role of money in the preservation of social injustice. Through

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[18] Ann Douglas's phrase. Cf. Jane P. Tompkins, "The Other American Renaissance," in: *The American Renaissance Reconsidered*, pp. 40-44.

[19] Tompkins, p. 50.

stealing Mitchell's purse, she unwillingly recognizes in its contents not only the effective means to change the imbalance of power in society, but also both its abstract and practical properties, which enable it to "change hands" in commercial transactions whose "clink" in the market-place reaches Hugh vaguely, and ironically, when he is already in prison. Deb seems to have instinctively realized that money, so dramatically invoked in the men's conversation, can be appropriated by force in the process of relocating power in society, a process that has nothing divine or "natural" about it. Its appropriation in the act of meting out social justice motivated by love and compassion is what informs her radical attempt to improve the lot of Hugh Wolfe. Furthermore, when she later identifies the moment in the foundry scene when she committed the theft (as being during the time when Mitchell was leaning against a brick wall), it is possible for the reader to identify the narrative context of her act, which is Mitchell's expression of his credo concerning social revolution. He himself does not feel responsible for improving the workers' lot ("reform is born of need, not pity"), and he denounces any intelletivation of Wolfe's downfall, the theft has in fact only brought to the surface the male protagonist's inner inadequacy, consisting in his deluded self-identification and the ensuing misreading of his class loyalties. It is Deb who tries to change his hopeless situation, and it is she who in prison never decries or regrets her action on moral grounds, and who defies society's officials when mourning over Wolfe's body: "There was no meekness, or sorrow, in her face; the stuff out of which murderers are made, instead." (61) There is very little, indeed, of the sentimental heroine in Deborah, and the idyllic coda to her life at the end of the story strikes the reader as incongruous and discordant: this kind of resolution is better suited as a reward for a humble, inward, and passive female life. Although Jane Tompkins claims that self-denial and the passive acceptance of

life's blows in sentimental fiction is subversive of the existent order of reality, in practice its social impact was easy to diffuse, as argued by Eric Sundquist in his discussion of Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel:

> Uncle Tom's Cabin [...] produced a flood of melodrama, graveyard poetry, popular songs, dioramas, engravings, gift books, card games, printed tippets and scarves, china busts and figurines, gold and silver spoons, commemorative plates, needle-points, and similar artefacts that gave conventional expression to subversion, and thereby contained and controlled it.[20]

In this way rebellion as expressed in sentimental fiction was diluted by having been turned into yet another commodity. Yet the subversive impulses encoded in Davis's story seem to have undergone repression and thus ideological control not outside the text, but within it - in the final pastoral vision of Deb as an elderly Quakeress. Like a typical sentimental heroine she appears to have been rewarded for her selflessness and endurance, while her act of revolt proved to be futile, resulting in the death of the man it was supposed to save.

In this context, another nineteenth-century female type from sentimental fiction should be taken into consideration: the character of the reformed criminal.[21] In this case, the difficulty with classifying Deborah as one of them springs from the reluctance of the narrator to clearly qualify her transgression as morally reprehensible, as /s/he does in the case of Hugh's appropriation of the stolen money. Deb's theft is throughout the text left without moralistic comment, as an act resulting solely from positive motivation, and this obscures its socially transgressive nature.

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[20] Sundquist, "Slavery, Revolution...," p. 18.

[21] For a variety of women types and characters in American popular fiction in the nineteenth century see David S. Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance. The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988, pp. 351-367.

There is also no sign whatsoever that Deb has misgivings or regrets either before or after her crime. There is no mention of it in the concluding Quaker episode. Thus, Deb appears to be neither a repentant criminal nor a passive sentimental sufferer.

For all these reasons it seems possible to read the idyllic ending of Davis's story not as a narrative suppression of the powerful subversive motive behind Deb's sacrifice, but as a logical continuation of her act of rebellion, which would provide an ideological resolution both to the fictional narrative and to the central social and political dilemma of the author's time. Revolutionary activity in the economic sphere is most often thought to lead to reappropriation and redistribution of the means of production - the deprived fight to wrench the latter from the privileged class of proprietors and divide them evenly among all members of the community. This cannot be done otherwise than through violence, especially during the phase of reappropriation of individual property. Yet in the classic Marxist version, social revolution does not lead to property redistribution among private owners, but to abolition of private property altogether.[22] In this, Marxist theory and nineteenth-century socialist practice approach the tenets and social attitudes of the Quakers who oppose all forms of property as well as all social institutions and all official state-imposed social obligations, in favor of living in communes. What distinguished the classic Marxist formula and the Quaker principles was the attitude to violence: while the former promoted it in the name of social justice, the latter preached the relinquishing of violence in any form. The figure of Deb accommodates both stances: the religious idyll of the conclusion to her life seems not to be opposed to but conditioned by her subversion of the social order, which was at the same time an act saving her humanity. In the light of the inexorable logic of

[22] Cf. Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1978, pp. 92-3.

Davis's narrative it was only due to Deb's revolutionary transgression that she could find her way to the Quaker commune. The ensuing idyll was made possible by the prior rebellion.

In this interpretation Davis seems to provide an implicit answer to the contemporary debate on inequality, as well as a challenge to the political prerogative of non-violence as an attitude foreclosing destruction and chaos. She contradicts this prerogative by reversing the order of the ideological narrative: violence does not follow the state of order but precedes and conditions the future dominion of social peace and harmony. This reading of the political unconscious in Davis's story also subverts the popular contemporary diagnosis of the antebellum historical moment as an ideal although precarious balance - she identifies and implicitly condemns the wrongs and abuses of the present day by indirectly emphasizing the value of revolutionary violence as a means to abolish injustice and introduce a better world.

The portico-like ending of the story consists of three forms of the narrative coda - Hugh's death, Deb's survival, and the narrator's attempt to once more interpret the meaning behind the korl woman's "unfinished" shape. The disturbing contrast between the latent power of her muscles and the violent yearning in her expression make her, in Doctor May's recognition, "a working woman - the very type of her class," to which Mitchell's response is "God forbid!" (32) Deb's deformed figure is also described in the story as "the type of her class"; although her strength is less obvious, her yearning invisible, they contain both power and spiritual hunger capable of threatening the existing order. To the question of the korl woman as transcribed by the narrator: "What shall we do to be saved?",[23] Deb's example symbolically provides the most pronounced and forceful answer.

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[23] Rebecca Harding Davis, p. 35, emphasis mine.