

SUCCESS AND FAILURE OF REBECCA HARDING DAVIS

JAMES C. AUSTIN

Pioneer realist and sociological fiction writer, Rebecca Harding Davis (1831-1910) was born too early. In her struggle with the nineteenth century, the century won too many of the victories. Yet because of her successes as well as her traceable failures, her story provides an informative light on the times.

Born Rebecca Blaine Harding in Wheeling, she spent most of her early life in what is now West Virginia, becoming familiar with the steel mills, the farms of the Pennsylvania Dutch and the Quakers, the coal mining towns, and the institution of slavery.¹ Although she left the region upon her marriage to L. Clarke Davis in 1863, she wrote of it frequently. Her merits as a writer were her accurate observation of local color, her social consciousness, and her awareness of suffering. Her native defects were a ponderous and over-insistent style, a certain lack of form, and a proneness toward the hackneyed kind of philosophizing popular in her time.

Her first published words of any importance--from "Life in the Iron Mills," The Atlantic Monthly, April 1861--show her at her best:

A cloudy day: do you know what that is in a town of iron-works? The sky sank down before dawn, muddy, flat, immovable. The air is thick, clammy with the breath of crowded human beings. It stifles me. I open the window, and, looking out, can scarcely see through the rain the grocer's shop opposite, where a crowd of drunken Irishmen are puffing Lynchburg tobacco in their pipes. I can detect the scent through all the foul smells ranging loose in the air.

The idiosyncrasy of this town is smoke. It rolls sullenly in slow folds from the great chimneys of the iron-foundries, and settles down in black, slimy pools on the muddy streets. Smoke on the wharves, smoke on the dingy boats, on the yellow river,--clinging in a coating of greasy soot to the house-front, the two faded poplars, the faces of the passers-by. The long train of mules, dragging masses of pig-iron through the narrow street, have a foul vapor hanging to their reeking sides.²

This is an excellent description of the smog of the upper Ohio River--where the term "smog" should have been invented. It also suggests the gloomy tone of much of the author's best work, a gloominess that was strongly objected to. The story depicts in realistic detail the lot of the mill workers, whose only hope is in a pitying God. Miss Harding's strong, crusading spirit suggests the influence of Elizabeth Gaskell.

Besides writing about the exploited laborer, the author was also among the first of American fiction writers to deal realistically with war and with race prejudice. In "David Gaunt" (Atlantic, 1862) she described the splitting apart of families and friends that the Civil War brought to the region that was yet to become West Virginia. In Waiting for the Verdict (1867), she attacked prejudice against Negroes without indulging in the violent biases of either the North or South.

The underlying theme in Miss Harding's early writing was the romantic demonstration that love is important regardless of defeat. This was the conclusion in "Life in the Iron Mills," the ending of which was otherwise utterly black. In A Story of To-Day (Atlantic, 1861-62, later entitled Margret Howth) and in "David Gaunt," the author dramatized the conflict between human love and loyalty to particular creeds or dogmas. In Paul Blecker (Atlantic, 1863), the vague ideal of Duty was shown to be less commendable than a trust in benign instincts: "Duty was, after all, a lean, meagre-faced angel, that Christ sends first, but never meant should be nearest and best."³ The idea anticipated Howells' attacks on the sentimental dogma of duty for duty's sake.

The author's distrust of abstract creeds and principles is something we could wish she had been more consistent in. As something of a rebel against literary Boston, she once described a literary gathering there: "Never were the eternal verities so dissected and pawed over. . . . But the discussion left you with a vague, uneasy sense that something was lacking, some backbone of fact."⁴ Mrs. Davis excelled at portraying the backbone of fact.

But the eternal verities were in demand, and it is perhaps the author's major fault that she willingly complied with the demand. Her philosophizing was nearly always aesthetically impertinent. In the novelette Natasqua, for example, she tells us gratuitously that "love and patience and common-sense can conquer anything in time,"⁵ though the story itself contradicts this dictum: love conquers, indeed, but only through a tragic accident brought about by impatience and lack of common sense.

Mrs. Davis is also faulty in style and form. She probably would have preferred to let her story grow organically out of the characters, as Mark Twain and William Dean Howells recommended.⁶ In 1861 she complained to the editor of The Atlantic Monthly that she needed "room" to develop a story and did not like to be restricted in length.⁷ But she was restricted--so her subsequent contributions to the magazine indicate--and she learned to adapt.

Her plots became more slick and melodramatic and her style more sprightly as her matter became less consequential.

But it was Mrs. Davis' "gloominess" that caused her the most trouble, and it is here that we can trace the pressures of the age most clearly. Again it was the editor of the Atlantic, James T. Fields, who first brought it up. Fields understood as well as anyone the literary tastes of Boston, and in 1861 these were the tastes to which any aspiring young writer had to submit if he wanted much of an audience. The editor originally rejected Miss Harding's A Story of To-Day, but later printed it in the magazine after the ending had been brightened. "When I began the story," she wrote to him upon receiving the rejection, "I meant to make it end in full sunshine. . . . But 'Stephen Holmes' was drawn from life and in my eagerness to show the effects of a creed like his, I 'assembled the gloom' you complain of. I tell you this in order to ask you if you think I could alter the story so as to make it acceptable by returning to my original idea. Let [Lois'] character and death (I cannot give up all, you see) remain, and the rest of the picture be steeped in warm healthy light. A 'perfect day in June.' "8

The author's solution to the problem of satisfying her editor turned out to be a formula which she used repeatedly thereafter. The hero, Stephen, undergoes a change of heart and marries his Margaret in spite of the wrenching of both plot and character that this requires. Thus the story ends in a tedious orgy of sentimentality that should have been omitted entirely. But that is not all. As a balm to her wounded integrity, the author kills off an important secondary character, Lois, with all the excessive pathos of the death of Little Nell. Although right triumphs in a burst of "sunshine," it does not do so without a forfeiture to fortune. In a similar way Mrs. Davis tempered the optimism of the happy endings in Paul Blecker, 1863; Natasqua, 1871; John Andross, 1874; Doctor Warrick's Daughters, 1896; and many of her other novels and short stories. The solution is not satisfactory to the twentieth-century reader, and it probably constitutes the chief reason her stories are not read today.

But there is no doubt that readers of the 1860's wanted "sunshine." The following letter by Mrs. Davis to an unknown recipient illustrates what the author had to face. The work referred to is probably Waiting for the Verdict or Dallas Galbraith.

Phila. May 3, '69

I am glad that my printed words have given you pleasure, and glad too, that you told me so.

Such greetings have a personal, friendly warmth about them which printed praise somehow lacks, and which makes them doubly welcome and heartening to a woman. Indeed, I doubt if they are not always welcome

even to those great artists in literature whose ears have grown dull to popular applause.

I especially like your sincerity in saying that you found my fancy too sombre. So do I. And yet every grape has its own flavor, and if you sweeten your dry wine to remove the acrid tang and you have nothing left but mawkish water, what then?

Apart from fancy, however, and in every day fact, I find your kindly words very pleasant and thank you for them sincerely.

I hope that you and yours may always consider me your friend.

R. H. Davis⁹

The fact is that Mrs. Davis had tried to sweeten her wine and continued to do so, and the resulting mawkishness is apparent.

The somberness of Mrs. Davis' writing was also noted in the reviews of her books. "The author is oppressed," said a reviewer of Waiting for the Verdict in the Nation (November 21, 1867), "with the conviction that there exists in the various departments of human life some logical correlative to that luxurious need for tears and sighs and sad-colored imagery of all kinds which dwells in the mind of all those persons, whether men or women, who pursue literature under the sole guidance of sentimentality, and consider it a sufficient outfit for the pursuit." And a reviewer of Dallas Galbraith in the same magazine (October 22, 1868) commented: "Mrs. Davis's stories are habitually spoken of as 'earnest' works, and it is not hard to detect in reading them a constant effort to deserve the epithet." On the whole, however, the reviewers, even these, were just. Mrs. Davis did sometimes evoke tears for tears' sake, as in the death of Lois in A Story of To-Day. And her style was frequently over-earnest. One of the most complimentary reviews appeared in The Atlantic Monthly (July 1874), on John Andross: "Mrs. Davis writes well; with all her grimness she has a very agreeable humour." But, the reviewer continues, "The interest rather flags, it must be said, in the last half of the novel." It is significant that Mrs. Davis' work was never puffed or over-rated, though excessive praise was common in the reviews of other writers.

By the 1890's tastes had changed, but Mrs. Davis' approach remained as it was. The reviewer of Doctor Warrick's Daughters in the Nation (June 11, 1896) noted the change in the times with repugnance and praised the author's old-fashionedness: "The author says of her heroine, 'If she had lived now, she would probably have had the prevalent desire for notoriety, and mistaken it for an inspiration and have written an indecent novel to set forth a great truth, or rushed before the public to show how feebly she could kick against Christianity or marriage, or the Tyrant Man.' This is preëminently what

Mrs. Davis has not done; nor is there anything she could have taken from us that we would have parted more gladly withal." The revolutionary character of Mrs. Davis' writing was no longer noticeable or objectionable. She had anticipated the tastes of the nineties and subsequent decades, but she had made her compromise with the sixties, and although she continued to write about as well as she began, she did not progress.

The pressures on Rebecca Harding Davis as an author were neither logical nor aesthetic. But they were certainly part of the cultural climate of the nineteenth century. Perhaps we can recognize them clearly today, not because we have no pressures but because many of the pressures of the twentieth century are the reverse of those of the nineteenth.

Southern Illinois University
Southwestern Illinois Campus

Footnotes:

¹ The significant biographies of Mrs. Davis are those in the DAB and the National Cyclopedia of American Biography and in Ella May Turner, Stories and Verse of West Virginia (Scottsdale, Pennsylvania, 1940), 75-76. See Ruth M. Stemple, "Rebecca Harding Davis: A Check List," Bulletin of Bibliography, XXII (1957), 83-85.

² The Atlantic Monthly, VII, 430.

³ Ibid., XI (May 1863), 585.

⁴ Bits of Gossip (Boston, 1905), 36.

⁵ Scribner's Monthly, I (December 1870), 167.

⁶ Everett Carter, Howells and the Age of Realism (Philadelphia, 1954), 124-132.

⁷ James C. Austin, Fields of the Atlantic Monthly (San Marino, California, 1953), 370-371.

⁸ Ibid., 370.

⁹ A copy of this letter is in the State of West Virginia Department of Archives. The original has not been found. Mrs. Davis' experience was similar to that of Nathaniel Hawthorne, whose The Scarlet Letter was censured for its "unrelieved gloom." According to Randall Stewart, Nathaniel Hawthorne: A Biography (New Haven, 1948), 224, "Hawthorne was in complete agreement with this criticism: he felt the unmitigated gloom of the tale to be both an obstacle to popularity and an artistic defect as well." In the present writer's opinion, Hawthorne's next novel, The House of the Seven Gables, was greatly injured by the introduction of irrelevant brightness. Is it not this very gloom which Melville celebrates as Hawthorne's "blackness"? And were not the gloominess of Moby Dick and Pierre part of the reason for Melville's subsequent unpopularity? Hawthorne became well acquainted with the author of

"Life in the Iron Mills," and read her books in spite of a dislike for most female writers. Mrs. Hawthorne, on the other hand, objected to Rebecca's writing on the grounds of "bad style," "crudeness," and "bald passion." (Stewart, 96-97.)

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