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## The famished class

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## Lindsay Ruter – Critical Essay

### The Famished Class: A Historical Reading of the

#### Korl Sculpture within *Life in the Iron Mills*

The korl woman portrayed within Rebecca Davis' work, *Life in the Iron-Mills* is an essential element to understanding the story and its social implications. Additionally, one's understanding of the possible representations the sculpture has is vital to one's understanding of the class struggles existing during this time. According to editor of *Life in the Iron-Mills*, Cecelia Tichi, "korl", as referred to throughout the story is colloquial speech for "scorl" or "scoria" a product of smelted iron ore (18). The sculpture Hugh creates from this substance represents several different ideas and issues prominent during this time, as well as bringing to light the work conditions and class divisions made evident within *Life in the Iron-Mills*.

When discussion of the sculpture first arises, Kirby, one of the mill-owners, Dr. May, one of the town physicians, and Mitchell, one of Kirby's brother-in-laws are observing the sculpture they have come across of the korl woman. The three men are closely examining it and inquisitively attempting to interpret what it could represent. They mention how the korl woman has a "flesh-tint", with "not one line of beauty or grace in it: a nude woman's form, muscular, grown coarse with labor, the powerful limbs instinct with some one poignant longing" (53). Also, the men recognize the apparent "tense, rigid muscles, the clutching hands the wild, eager face, like that of a starving wolf's" (53). Dr. May immediately attributes these characteristics—most notably the clutching hand—to hunger and thirst. He continues to describe the wrist of the korl woman as "bony" as he strains to understand the meaning of Hugh's creation. Dr. May,

armed with his medical knowledge asks, ““Where did the fellow learn that sweep of the muscles in the arm and hand?”” (53). He proposes this rhetorical question in a very curious way as though only one who had studied medicine would be educated enough to know the structure and composition of the arm muscles in a detailed enough way to sculpt them as so. Kirby immediately rebukes Dr. May’s idea that the sculptor must have had a special gift to be able to sculpt the arm muscles in such detail with his “sneer” and remark, ““They have ample facilities for studying anatomy”” (53). Kirby is unwilling to see the korl woman (or its creator) as commendable or deserving of recognition. This could be a direct correlation to how he views his laborers as well as his naïve perspective and perception of the working class. Kirby’s statement regarding the workers having ““ample facilities for studying anatomy”” demonstrates his lack of knowledge regarding educational opportunities and the possibility for upward mobility in terms of the conditions the working class is subjected to. He seems to think the working class chooses to be working class and has sufficient means of improving their quality of life—when they obviously do not.

The korl woman is described as being “hungry” by Hugh, though Dr. May begins to insist if the woman is described as “hungry” Hugh has “given no sign of starvation to the body. It is strong,—terribly strong” (53). Dr. May does not understand the hunger being described is a metaphorical hunger, not a literal hunger, and this causes him to dismiss the korl woman and her hunger as significant. A conversation between the men continues regarding what the woman could be “hungry” for and soon talks of the social issues of the time arise and Kirby proceeds to comment: “I do not think. I wash my hands of all social problems—slavery, caste, white or black” (55). Kirby seems to think he has

some how *dirtied* his hands, when in all reality he is completely ignorant of the current social problems and has not considered how the sculpture's supposed hunger could possibly represent his workers' desire for better working condition, treatment, and chances for upward mobility.

Alexis de Tocqueville writes, "The master and the workman have then here no similarity, and their differences increase every day. They are only connected as the two rings at the extremities of a long chain" (87). De Tocqueville demonstrates through this comment the radical class division and very clear separation between the working-class and middle-class. He also makes evident his view of the current social problems as being a different kind of aristocracy, which "by no means resembles those kinds which preceded it" (87). He indirectly argues against Kirby's perspective of the working class having the ability to educate themselves and rise above their current financial situations:

The poor have few means of escaping from their condition and becoming rich; but the rich are constantly becoming poor, or they give up business when they have realized a fortune. Thus the elements of which the class of the poor is composed, are fixed; but the elements of which the class of the rich is composed are not so. To say the truth, though there are rich men, the class of the rich does not exist; for these rich individuals have no feelings or purposes in common, no mutual traditions or mutual hopes: there are therefore members, but no body (87).

De Tocqueville stresses the difficulty the poor have in rising above their current stations, and how the rich take their fortunes for granted. He speaks of how the poor are unified in their common goal of achieving a better life, while the rich essentially separate themselves because as a class they have no common goals, and therefore, no unification.

Andrew Carnegie, a man of great wealth and power during the 1850s, and author of "The Gospel of Wealth" views the large income gap between the rich and poor as extremely unnecessary. An idea of this nature coming from a man of great

accomplishment, wealth, and power is a radical idea of this time: “This, then is held to be the duty of the man of wealth: To set an example of modest, unostentatious living, shunning display or extravagance; to provide moderately for the legitimate wants of those dependent upon him; and, after doing so, to consider all surplus revenues which come to him simply as trust funds...(154)” Carnegie seems to feel it is his duty as one of wealth to use it for the benefit of others, rather than use it to purchase unnecessary items of luxury. He realizes the hardships endured by the working-class and expresses though he did accumulate his own wealth, he could not have succeeded in doing this without educating himself and having the influence of his close friends and family (147-148). Carnegie’s attitude on this subject of distribution of wealth is drastically different from that of most other wealthy and powerful men of this time, and his compassion for the working-class is quite unique. He recognizes the circumstances the mill workers are working under. Carnegie’s unique perspective regarding this subject could very possibly be due to his experiences when he immediately came to the United States in 1848 and his familiarity of factory work and similar industry. These factors cause Carnegie to have somewhat of an understanding of the conditions Hugh and the mill workers are enduring and empathize with their circumstances.

The korl woman represents several different themes surrounding working class oppression and the poor conditions the working class endured during this time. Additionally, *Hugh’s* creating of the sculpture contributes to the possible symbolic meanings and potential significance of the korl woman in his eyes demonstrating his opinion of the issues of the time and what the sculpture represents for him specifically.

It could be argued that Hugh's creation of a sculpture resembling a strong woman (inferred to be a mill-worker), hungering and thirsting for something could indicate an attempt by him to portray himself under the guise of a sculpture created of a woman. This substitution would detract from the possibility of a blatant portrayal of a mill worker man, and possibly Hugh himself. It may also show a correlation to how the other men in the factory perceive Hugh. It would have been more socially acceptable for a man of Hugh's description to mould something of a woman to demonstrate his sexual identity as a man, rather than risk being called "homosexual" as well as "girly". Hugh is described as "already lost the strength and instinct vigor of a man, his muscles were thin, his nerves weak, his face (a meek woman's face) haggard, yellow with consumption" (48).

Furthermore, he was ridiculed by his co-workers and was not popular: "In the mill he was known as one of the girl men: "Molly Wolfe" was his sobriquet" (48). Because Hugh molded the sculpture of a strong woman, Hugh could have been suggesting and portraying how he is seen by the other men in the mill, and possibly even how he sees himself. It is possible Hugh sees himself in the very same way the other men see him as a man, and therefore strong, yet his feminine characteristics cause his sexual identity to be more androgynous, rather than strictly masculine like the other men in the mill. Creating the sculpture and portraying it as female leaves the piece more open for interpretation and it was less likely the men would realize Hugh was portraying a view of himself and his hunger for a purpose, a meaning in his life, a reason to live, and a hunger for a better life.

The art work Hugh creates is significant on many different levels. One of the most apparent ways the sculpture is remarkable is because of Hugh's lack of formal education and especially his lack of education in the arts. It is a very rare feat especially during this

time for a man of his status to possess such extraordinary skills and talents. Cecelia Tichi comments, “Davis also urges readers to consider the opportunities—or lack of them—available in a self-proclaimed democratic society for the schooling of a raw, native talent desperate for knowledgeable mentors and guidance” (293). Working-class persons possessing talent in any area, most specifically in the arts had very little opportunity to demonstrate their skills due to their social placement and lack of means for suitable education. Because of these factors, their work was disregarded, underappreciated and dismissed as even being respectable as a creation. It seems artwork done by unknown, uneducated artists was so rare, when it was seen, especially by persons of a higher social status; it was incomprehensible that such an inferior person could craft such a figure:

Hugh Wolfe represents raw, native talent from that portion of the population toiling without the benefit of formal art education or patronage. Through her portrayal of Wolfe’s encounter with the group of wealthy visitors to the mill, Davis surely wished to stimulate considerations of the plight of a self-taught artist unable to advance without assistance” (Tichi 297).

Hugh went against social norms by choosing to create the korl woman. He knew his seemingly insignificant place in society, but decided to disregard that for a brief time to use express how this life was impacting his famished class.

As gathered from the work *Life in the Iron-Mills*, several different representations, meanings, and possible significance can be interpreted of the sculpture of the korl woman. A common theme of most interpretations is of the sculpture’s observable strength, yet tremendous hunger and great longing for something more. The significance of such a statue could be argued several different ways. However, in the context of this story, along with the obvious significance as it being a representation of the social issues of the time,

it can be seen as a subtle way for Hugh to reveal his abilities to his superiors and, for a short time, rise above the restrictions that have been put on his life and his dreams.