

# PAL: Perspectives in American Literature - A Research and Reference Guide - An Ongoing Project

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## Chapter 5: Rebecca Harding Davis (1831-1910)

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### Primary Works

Books: *Margret Howth*. 1861; *Waiting for the Verdict*. 1867; *Dallas Galbraith*. 1868; *Life in the Iron Mills and Other Stories*. 1872; *Kitty's Choice or Berrytown and Other Stories*. 1873; *John Andross*. 1874; *A Law unto Herself*. 1878; *Natasqua*. 1886; *Kent Hampden*. 1892; *Silhouettes of American Life*. 1892; *Doctor Warrick's Daughters*. 1896; *Frances Waldeaux*. 1897; *Bits of Gossip*. 1904.

Short Fiction: "Life in the Iron-Mills," *Atlantic Monthly*, 1861; "David Gaunt." 1862; "John Lamar." 1862; "Paul Blecker." 1863; "Ellen." 1865; "The Harmonists." 1866; "In the Market." 1868; "A Pearl of Great Price." 1868; "Put out of the Way." 1870; "Earthen Pitchers." 1873-74; "Marcia." 1876; "A Day with Doctor Sarah." 1878; "Here and There in the South." 1887.

Essays: "Men's Rights." 1869; "Some Testimony in the Case." 1885; "Women in Literature." 1891; "In the Gray Cabins of New England." 1895; "The Disease of Money-Getting." 1902.

*Life in the Iron-Mills*. Ed. Cecelia Tichi. Boston: Bedford, 1998.

### Selected Bibliography 1980-Present

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Pfaelzer, Jean. *Parlor Radical: Rebecca Harding Davis and the Origins of American Social Realism*. Pittsburgh : U of Pittsburgh P, 1996.

Rose, Jane A. *Rebecca Harding Davis*. NY: Twayne, 1993. PS1517 .Z5 R67

Schuldiner, Michael. ed. *Literary Calvinism and Nineteenth-Century American Women Authors*. Lewiston, NY: Mellen, 1997.

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## A Student Project Irma Guerrero

Rebecca Blaine Harding was born in Washington, Pennsylvania on June 24, 1831. She was "the eldest of five children of Richard W. and Rachel Leet (Wilson) Harding." (Langworthy 445) Her mother was known to be genteel woman. "According to family legend, Rachel's grandfather, 'Panther Jim' Wilson, had fought at Valley Forge and her grandmother had danced with Lafayette." (Bits of Gossip, 6) and her father was an Irish immigrant who came to America in search of his fortune. Rachel's father did not approve of her romance with Richard, because he was "a 'foreigner' who had 'gone into business' in far-off Alabama"(Rose, 1), therefore they eloped nine years after they met. After their marriage they moved to Big Spring and at the age of six her parents moved to Wheeling, Virginia. Being raised in Wheeling allowed her to witness all the impoverishment's that went along with working in the steel mills.

The only school Harding attended was a seminary for women. In order for her to attend she lived with an aunt, in Washington Pennsylvania from 1845 to 1848. When she graduated she was named valedictorian of her class. Before then she had not attended public schools, instead she was taught either by her mother or tutors. Reading authors such as: Harriet Beecher Stowe, the Warner sisters, and Maria Cummins initiated her interest in literature. Without any other knowledge on the works of literature she began to write. However, it took thirty years before her first story was published. The story *Life in the Iron Mills* was published anonymously at first. When people first read the story many thought that it had been written by a man. At the request of James T. Fields, editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*, Harding submitted more stories. This started the series of : *A Story of To-Day*, which was later published as a book and renamed *Margaret Howth*. Although, she published more than one hundred stories, these two are the works she is most remembered for.

At the time of her first publication, she received a letter from an apprentice attorney, Lemuel Clark Davis, admiring her work. Over time he continued to correspond with her eventually he went to her home in Wheeling to meet her. In 1862, she had traveled to Boston, to spend the summer with the Fieldses. While in Boston they introduced her to Hawthorne, Alcott, and Emerson. Before reaching home she stopped in Philadelphia to visit Lemuel C. Davis.

During this visit they became engaged and were married on March 5, 1863. They had three children the first son named Richard Harding Davis, after her father was born on April 18, 1864, Charles Belmont Davis was born on January 24, 1866 and their daughter Nora Davis was born in 1872. Of the three children Davis' sons were both published authors. Richard became famous as a professional author whereas, Charles made practicing law his profession. In 1870 L.C. Davis stopped practicing law and became "the managing editor of *Philadelphia Inquirer* ; from 1893 until his death in 1904 he was editor of the *Philadelphia Public Ledger*. " (Langworthy 446)

From 1861 to 1893 she continued to write for Peterson's Magazine, writing potboiler romances and melodramatic

suspense stories. She wrote mainly to help support her family, although she was against the women's suffrage movement. "In *Pro Aris et Focis*-A Plea for Our Altars and Hearths (1870) Mrs. Davis stated her belief that in marriage and childbearing women find their true vocation." (Langworthy 445-446) Her last published work was a short story in 1909, which appeared in Scribner's. Throughout the rest of her life she always tried to write another story which would bring her fame once more, just as *Life in the Iron Mills* had, but she was never able to duplicate the success of her first publication.

At the age of 79 she died of "edema of the lungs induced by heart disease". (Langworthy 446) She was visiting her eldest son Richard at his home in Mount Kisco, New York. In her obituary which ran in *The New York Times* on September 30, 1910 the day after her death, read "...mother of Richard Harding Davis, the novelist and dramatist, and herself a novelist and editorial writer of power, died her to-night of heart disease at Cross Roads Farm, the home of her son." (N.Y. Times September 1910)

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"Harding Rebecca." *Dictionary of American Biography*. 1958 ed.

"Harding, Rebecca." *Notable American Women 1607-1950*. 1971 ed.

"Harding, Rebecca." *The Oxford Companion to Women's Writing in the United States*. 1995 ed.

"Harding, Rebecca." *Reference Guide to American Literature Third Edition*. 1994 ed.

Rebecca Harding Davis. NY: Twayne, 1993. PS1517 .Z5 R67

"Rebecca H. Davis, Novelist Is Dead." *New York Times* 30 September 1910.

#### Study Questions

1. What is the purpose of the rhetorical questions posed by the author/narrator at various points in the story "Life in the Iron-Mills," ? Do they refer simply to the prospect of salvation for a man convicted of stealing, or do they imply the naturalistic view that Hugh's theft is excused by his unfortunate environment and heredity? Some students may recognize what is probably religious rhetoric in the questions: perhaps the teacher can simply encourage students to seek additional possibilities.

2. Write a paper discussing the story as a transitional work between Romanticism and Realism, using traits outlined in the Introductions to Chapters 5 and 6 of PAL.

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