Her body [was] like a hard-worked machine': Women's work and disability in coalfields literature, 1880-1950.

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‘Her body [was] like a hard-worked machine’: Women’s work and disability in coalfields literature, 1880-1950

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Abstract

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This essay considers the representation of women’s work and disability in British coalfields literature in the period 1880-1950. Industrial settings are a rich source for literature concerned with bodily health, injury and disability and offer insights into the gendering of the working body whether male or female. Situating this largely realist body of novels, stories and plays in its historical context, this article will focus on intersections between work, class and gender. It shows how the vital, but unpaid, work of women in

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domestic labour was depicted as an extension of the industrial machine, which had clear consequences in terms of high mortality and morbidity rates amongst women.

Keywords: Disability, Illness, Women, Literature, Industrial, Domestic, Work, Coal, Wales, Scotland, England

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This essay will explore the relationship between work and disability in the context of literary depictions of the domestic labour of coalfields women. Coalfields literature explores the overlap between industrial and domestic spheres, in which women's work in the collier's home becomes an unpaid extension of the coal industry. Women's domestic labour is shown to be essential to the collier, while also bringing the dangers of the industry into the home. Working-class realist literature flourished in the 1930s,[1] and was typified by support for socialist political ideology. In this literature, the injuries and ill health suffered by women as a result of domestic labour were directly linked to the wider pattern of capitalist exploitation of the working-class by the coal industry. This essay will largely focus on working-class realist fiction of the interwar period, but will contextualise coalfields literature by a consideration of literature within the longer period 1880-1950. Coalfields literature of the late Victorian period is largely conservative and authored by middle-class writers from outside the community, which gives an important context to understanding the emergence of the more radical working-class writers in the 1930s. In order to explore the relationship between gender, work and disability, first a brief review of the historical context of women's work in the coalfields is necessary, as well as an explanation of parameters for defining both disability and industrial work.

Coalfields literature focuses on the domestic labour of women, but it is worth noting that in the period 1880-1950, some women were employed in colliery surface work roles.[2] This work carried risks of serious injuries from faulty machinery or crush accidents with heavy coal waggons (John 1980). These women would not have had the same access to workplace injury schemes or Trade Union representation as men, and would therefore be particularly disadvantaged by occupational injury.[3] Furthermore, lighter surface

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work was often reserved for disabled men, so that women surface workers were seen to be 'usurping the rightful jobs of [disabled] men' (John, 1980: 200).[4] Women therefore faced multiple barriers to seeking employment in the coal industry, from legal restrictions to social pressures. Arguably one of the most pressing constraints, however, was that many women were already fully occupied by the very arduous and time-consuming domestic labour required in a coalfields household. The domestic nature of this work did not make it any less dangerous to women's health, and these tasks were often directly related to the needs of the industry.

Women's domestic labour was vital in supporting family members employed as miners through cleaning coal-embedded clothing, drawing hot baths and other tasks that formed the constant 'battle against the dirt' (G. Jones, 1979: 79). These tasks were made exceptionally onerous by homes that lacked sanitation such as running water,[5] and the exceptionally dirty nature of the coal industry, in which washing after each shift was essential. Men in the household might also be working different shifts, which meant that baths were needed at different times of day. Women would therefore spend a considerable portion of their day carrying heavy buckets of water from communal taps to the home. In the words of a miner's wife in one story: 'One collier's more work in the house than four clean-job men' (Davies, 1996: 238). The constant preparation of baths was one of the most dangerous tasks for women's health, as Neil Evans & Dot Jones highlight: 'a midwife of twenty-three years' experience in the Rhondda Valleys thought that most of the premature births and "extreme female ailments" she attended were the result of exertions with heavy tubs and boilers' (1994: 6). Domestic service of the mines also came at a cost to the wider family: 'one south Wales coroner claimed that he conducted more inquests into the deaths of children who were scalded than he did into miners who were killed underground' (Evans & Jones, 1994: 6). Caring for children and elderly or disabled family members was an expected part of women's domestic labour, as well as managing the overall household finances, shopping, preparing food and mending clothes. Balancing these various tasks was both physically and emotionally strenuous labour, and it is therefore unsurprising that 'physical impairment among women servicing the coal industry as wives and

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mothers was […] unusually high' (Curtis & Thompson, 2017: 27).

In order to explore disability and women's work in coalfields literature, it is important to give consideration to domestic labour and its relationship to the industry. The gendering of work (masculine work is public and paid) can exclude the experiences of women as contributors to industrialisation in coalfields scholarship, and can further lead to treating certain types of impairment or injury as more authentic of the industrial experience.[6] This essay will therefore be considering a broader interpretation of industrial work (including that of women in the home), and particularly the way in which coalfields literature encourages one to consider a more nuanced picture of the relationship between work and disability. Just as our understanding of industrial work needs to be expanded, adopting a broad definition of disability is important to a consideration of coalfields women, whose disabilities were often related to chronic ill health, complications from childbirth and strain injuries from over-exertion. As Susan Wendell has argued, chronic illness is particularly relevant to women who 'are more likely than men to be disabled by chronic illnesses' (2013: 162). Including chronic illness in the definition of disability can be problematic. Oliver and Barnes (2012) have argued that 'many sociologists, particularly those working within a medical or sociology of health and illness perspective in the UK […] have opted, largely uncritically, for an "illness" or social deviance perspective' and that this 'has served to reaffirm the orthodox personal tragedy view of disability within mainstream sociology and stifle the development of studies which focus on the structural forces, economic, political and cultural, that have created and continue to sustain disability' (51). Wendell acknowledges these difficulties, but counters that 'some unhealthy disabled people, as well as some healthy people with disabilities, experience physical or psychological burdens that no amount of social justice can eliminate. Therefore, some very much want to have their bodies cured, not as a substitute for curing ableism, but in addition to it' (162). It therefore remains important to be aware and accommodating of the differences in the portrayal of disabled women. To exclude chronic illness from a consideration of coalfields disability would be limiting, whether the study concerns men or women, and might again problematically categorise certain

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experiences and disabilities as more authentic of the industrial experience. While the focus here is on women with disabilities, it is worth noting that the most common cause of disability amongst miners was not from accidents but the debilitating effects of chronic lung diseases such as silicosis and pneumoconiosis (McIvor & Johnston 2007).

Having outlined the methodological approach of this essay, it is pertinent to ask how female disability was defined in the coalfields literature of the period. The perception of disability in coalfields communities was strongly focused on ability to work and work itself was often gendered male. As former miner Jack Jones put it in his novel *Bidden to the Feast*, '"Work" as the people of the Row[7] thought, was done only down pits and in ironworks' (1938: 182). This narrow definition of 'work' not only excluded women and a large proportion of disabled people of either gender, but also men working in other forms of employment. Coalfields literature of this period was largely written by men, with little or no surviving coalfields literature by working-class women,[8] and as such the surge of working-class coalfields writing of the 1930s is itself gendered male. Many of these coalfields writers, however, were open to exploring the gendered definition of work and gave consideration to the work of women as well as disabled people of both genders. Indeed, coalfields novels of this period typically focus on a central family and their domestic life. Thus, the domestic becomes industrial, a space to work through industrial issues of politics, class and social change. The effects on women in terms of health and premature ageing become political concerns related to critiques of capitalism, industrialisation and class inequality.

Class, morality and the female 'invalid': 1880-1920

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Realist coalfields literature flourished in the interwar period, arising as a new genre with clear contrasts in form to earlier examples of industrial literature. To contextualise the portrayal of women's work and disability it is helpful to conduct a comparative exploration of literature in the earlier 1880-1920 time period which reveals striking differences in depictions of disability in relation to class and gender. Class plays a vital role in depictions of female disability in

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coalfields literature, intersecting with the class background of the writer and the context of the time period in which it was written. Raymond Williams argued that the Welsh industrial novel was distinct from the earlier type of Victorian industrial novels because of the focus on social relations and the formative influence these have on the characters. For Williams, the family 'gives the writer his focus on primary relationships but of course with the difficulty that what is really being written, through it, is the story of a class; indeed effectively, given the local historical circumstances, of a people' (2003: 105). Late Victorian coalfields novels display conventional concerns about women and class, bound by religious orthodoxies; in comparison, the coalfield novels of the inter-war period represent the lives of women in mining communities in socialist terms and their experience of disability as a seemingly inevitable consequence of capitalism. The late Victorian coalfields novels do not focus on the hard domestic labour of coalfields women, and examples of female ill health are often part of a morality tale about class-appropriate marriages. Harry Lindsay's *Rhoda Roberts: A Welsh Mining Story* shows how a miner's daughter, Rhoda, develops an unspecified ailment linked to the marriage proposal of the upper-class colliery owner's son. Rhoda believes that 'she would be so exalted above her proper station in life that she would surely pine away and die' (1895: 336). Ramsay Guthrie (pseudonym of Rev. J. G. Bowran), similarly makes this point in the case of the colliery manager's wife in *Kitty Fagan: a romance of pit life*: 'Mary Reaveley was a sweet and gentle creature, frail in form, confiding in her ways. "An ailin' body" she had been ever since she passed with Shadrach from the miner's cot to the manager's house' (1900: 16). In this way, ideas about female health are firmly linked to gender specific notions about class. The leisured lifestyle of the upper-class wife is shown to be unhealthy and unsuitable to women from a working-class family.

The link between health, faith and the danger of seeking sudden, excessive class advancement (i.e. away from the domestic labour of the working class to the leisured status of an upper-class wife) is a common feature in coalfields novels of the late Victorian period. John Saunders's *Israel Mort, overman* (1876) gives the example of a former female colliery worker, Mrs Jehoshaphat,[9] who marries the

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colliery owner and becomes an 'eccentric [and] morbid' (283) invalid. She is the daughter of a miner, of 'low birth' (282), who has performed 'degrading female labour' (282); her lack of class refinements results in her rejection from upper-class society and divorce from her husband. *Israel Mort* argues that Mrs Jehoshaphat has no stable moral framework, that she was 'unable, through bodily infirmity, to seek health of mind and body in an out-of-door life; having no deep inner religious faith or fixed moral principle' (283). Here, the writer links Mrs Jehoshaphat's immorality and 'low' character to her declining health, but the root cause of her loss of morals is related to a social elevation to which she was not able to adapt. Martha Stoddard Holmes has shown Victorian melodramatic writers 'use emotional excess to mark disabled women as unfit for marriage' (2010: 35). Mrs Jehoshaphat's status as invalid is indeed marked by emotional outbursts and irrational behaviour, which have led to divorce. Given that the novel is overtly Methodist in its moral framework, her disability is framed as a consequence of her unfitness to be an upper-class wife and her loss of direction brought about by neglecting her family's faith.

These late-Victorian novels act as cautionary tales in which women who marry outside their class, and more dangerously to men of a different faith (Anglican instead of Methodist), are not only ailing and frail but remain childless. In this way, women's central domestic task – their reproductive role – is shown to be at risk. In fact, Rhoda Roberts alludes to this point when rejecting the proposal of the upper-class colliery owner's son, that there would be 'sickness and death to others' (338), implying they would not be able to bear healthy children together. Cindy LaCom has argued of Victorian novels that 'as the female body came to function as a representation of feminine morality, the disabled body was increasingly read as a sign of either sexlessness or sexual deviance' (192). As can be seen in these examples from coalfields novels, these women are not only sexless or sexually suspect because of their invalid status, but become invalids in the first place through their exposure to poor moral choices, such as liaisons with men of higher social class. In this way, working-class women are shown to be in a morally dangerous environment, whether working in the colliery or tempted towards class advancement by marriage, and coded references to

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sexual and reproductive harm are couched in metaphors of invalidism.

Fears about the sexual danger facing working-class women, both by the brutal colliery environment or by the temptation to marry out of it, continue into some examples of post-WWI coalfields literature. Scottish ex-miner and Labour MP James C. Welsh's first novel *The Underworld: the story of Robert Sinclair, miner* suggests female colliery workers exchange sexual favours to their advantage: '[work] matters were always easier to these girls of easy virtue, for they got better jobs, and could even flout the authority of lesser gaffers,[10] if their relations with the higher ones were as indicated' (1920: 49). The implication is that the colliery environment is unfair and exploitative, that it would be difficult, and even financially disadvantageous, for women to maintain an idealised moral chastity and innocence. In this way, the novel combines earlier Victorian moralising over women's work, with an anti-capitalist argument about the unjust exploitation of workers. A young girl, Mysie, who starts work on the same day as the protagonist Robert Sinclair, later goes on to have a relationship with the colliery owner's son. She becomes pregnant, and despite his offer of marriage, her feelings of shame and inner conflict make her terminally ill. She believes she should have married Robert, a man of her own class and background, and her choice of the colliery owner's son leads to 'the remorse and the agony that would never die' (121). Mysie's symptoms, such as fever and blood from coughing, imply her illness is tuberculosis, which would be in keeping with the literary trope of treating tuberculosis as a disease associated with heightened emotions and excessive sexuality (Sontag 1991). Welsh was a relatively early example of an ex-miner novelist, and he takes a different stance to later working-class coalfields writers who generally reject such heavy-handed moralising about sexual relationships and women in work. In Welsh's criticisms of capitalist exploitation, however, his work shows early signs of alignment with the more politically radical realist novels of the 1930s and 40s.

The Industrial Machine: Childbearing and the Commodification of Women's Bodies

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During the inter-war period, the relationship between work,

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dis/ability and sex or reproduction persists. Here, a greater emphasis is placed on working-class women within a wider pattern of systematic exploitation of the working-classes, as opposed to the moral choices of the individual as seen in Welsh's example or those of the late Victorian period. Women's work in industrial society extended to the biological: producing the next generation of workers was an essential (and debilitating) role of miners' wives. The literature criticises the treatment of working-class children as commodities, and of their mothers as industrialised producers of children. In the common metaphor of the industrial machine, the symbiotic relationship between living workers' bodies and inorganic mechanical processes, women are shown as integral components in a system of production that consumes bodies and turns out coal – the fuel of empire and industrial growth. Andrea Henderson has argued that from the late eighteenth century onwards, there was an increasing conflation between childbearing and 'economic modes of production' and that 'these mechanically produced commodity-children posed a threat to bourgeois humanist ideals of the sort that were soon to find their full expression in Romanticism' (1991: 100). Similar anxieties persisted in the twentieth century, but this time it is the communities themselves which speak out against the commodification of the family. Gwyn Jones's novel *Times Like These* (1936) criticises the way that women are seen as 'so much raw material to the coalowners; so many breeders of slaves' (135). In this production-line, women's role of work is to give birth to and raise children to feed into the coal industry. His contemporary, Lewis Jones, a miner and political activist, includes this symbolic production-line in his first novel *Cwmardy* (1937):

> *The hill became a symbol to him. He saw it as a belt taking live men up to the pit, then bringing them down dead to the cemetery. The pit became an ogre to him. He likened it to some inhuman monster that fed on men and spewed up mangled bodies to be buried in the graveyard. He conjured the hill and the pit as common enemies of the people, working in connivance to destroy them. (136)*

Here the mechanised landscape, and monstrous pit, can be related to rhetoric on capitalism, consuming workers' lives in a cyclical

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industrial process in which coal production directly produces 'mangled bodies' (136) with mechanical regularity. During the same section of the novel, Len's sister Jane becomes pregnant with the child of the overman's son, symbolising the sexual exploitation of women by mine management. The overman's son abdicates his responsibilities as a father, and Jane subsequently dies in childbirth along with the baby. His heartlessness is contrasted to the response of Jane's father, Big Jim, who had vowed the child would be raised as if it were his own – a symbol of his masculine power and disdain for the overman and his family's sexist bourgeois attitudes towards sex outside marriage.

The penalties of childbearing on coalfields women are often deployed in the interwar literature as a symbol of the oppressive capitalist system working against the interests of the working classes. Childbearing was a significant cause of women's disability, and coalfields regions had the highest rates of infant and maternal mortality in the UK (Gier & Mercier 2007). Dot Jones has shown in a study of Welsh women in the period 1881-1911 that: 'the mortality rates of women who worked in the home were higher than those of their menfolk who worked in the pit, in direct contrast to national mortality trends' (109). Gwyn Jones's *Times Like These* focuses on childbearing to emphasise the health cost of coalfields life that only women face; there is pathos in the human suffering since women are shown to have little control over their biological and social conditions. At the local hospital the difference between the male and female wards is emphasised:

> *When a fellow was up against it, he had to make a good show. Most told themselves: There's fellows in here worse than me. But in the women's ward it was different. Everything was still and feeble. Most of the women were suffering some one of other of the penalties of childbearing. All were very ill. The ward was too small. Whenever a new case was brought in, vomiting and groaning after the anaesthetic, every woman there felt sick and horrified; but they had to bear it. When a patient died there, they tried to shut their eyes and ears, too weak for hysterical rebellion. (293)*

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A key difference is that male patients are shown recovering from injuries that vary in type and seriousness, whereas the women are mostly injured by childbearing, and therefore witnessing other women in pain or dying from the same cause as themselves. The women feel 'sick and horrified' because they may be observing their own fate, not least because they were in many cases repeatedly exposed to such risks through multiple births. The quiet tolerance of these horrifying conditions, however, is clearly being gendered feminine. The men 'make a good show' and are impatient to recover. In contrast, Olive, a central character in the novel, is shown accepting her fate following a dangerous miscarriage: 'Olive was what is called a good invalid. The natural gentleness of her spirit helped her not to chafe and worry herself' (282). In this way, the novel conforms to the gendered expectation that women are better equipped to deal with passivity and inactivity, and that in turn disability is itself characterised by passivity and inactivity. Tom Shakespeare describes this as the 'traditional account' of gendering disability, resting on 'the notion of contradiction: femininity and disability reinforce each other, masculinity and disability conflict with each other' (1999: 57).

The Domestic Collier: Domestic Labour as Industrial Labour

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While *Times Like These* demarcates gender along traditional lines, women's contribution through labour – domestic and maternal – is also figured using industrial metaphors that show their disablement as occupational injury. In this imagery, the injuries and hardships the men commonly encountered in the pit are symbolically recreated on female bodies worn down by the burdens of financial concerns and physically strenuous domestic labour. Miners' wives are part of a pattern the novel calls 'breaking' (25), that is, the ageing and physical decline of women before their time through their service to the coal industry in providing children and caring for collier husbands. Olive's mother-in-law Polly Biesty is shown in this decline, using the industrial metaphor of a worn-down machine:

> *Polly Biesty was not quite so old as her husband, in the sad years called "breaking." It is the aptest word for the state – when her body, like a hard-worked machine, was at every point*

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giving way to strain. Her hair was white, beautiful, a good setting for her pleasant, care-marked face. She moved heavily, almost lurchingly, when things were at their worst with her. (21-22)

The use of this industrial metaphor of the 'hard-worked machine' links her work in the home to a form of industrial production. Polly's son, Luke, helps her with the housework during a period of unemployment from the colliery, and 'it had startled him that his mother had for years carried out the labour single-handed. He began to appreciate the toll that the industry exacts from the womenfolk of miners' (25). Through the device of the young man's testimony, the novel asserts that a young and fit miner would find this work laborious, countering the perception that this work is less arduous because it is women's work or because it is carried out in the home. Indeed, the narrative explicitly states that it is the industry which exacts this 'toll' from women, in order to blur the distinction between work in the pit and work in the home, showing that both are related to industrial labour.

Images of women engaging in industrial-scale domestic labour at times draw on images that blur women's bodies with collier bodies. Rhys Davies's short story 'The Nightgown' (1942) portrays the masculinising effect of domestic labour on the collier's wife. In this story a miner's wife is being worn away by the demands of caring for her self-centred husband and five ravenous sons. She attempts to buy an expensive silk nightgown for herself, paying in small instalments, but dies from strain and malnourishment and the nightgown is only ever worn as her shroud. She is masculinised by the demands of her male family:

As the sons grew, the house became so obstreperously male that she began to lose nearly all feminine attributes and was apt to wear a man's cap and her sons' shoes, socks, and mufflers to run out to the shop. Her expression became tight as a fist, her jaw jutted out like her men's and like them she only used her voice when it was necessary. (1992: 237)

So in addition to dressing and looking like her male family, she is stripped of her voice, her means of expressing herself as a woman.

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Buying the nightgown is a symbol of recapturing something feminine, or perhaps something more beautiful than functional amidst the toil. But it comes at the cost of 'robbing still further her own stomach' (242), until she 'began to go bad' (243). An industrialised round of housework is shown to consume the body of this woman; the heedless greed of the men, who 'only stopped eating when she stopped producing' (240), seems to be consuming her own flesh, shrinking her body in much the same manner as the mine was seen to consume bodies in Lewis Jones's *Cwmardy* (above). The production of food is systematic and repetitive like an extension of the industry. The way she feels about her decline into death is described in an industrial simile, her breaking body represented as the victim of a colliery accident: 'she felt as if the wheels of several coal waggons had gone over her body, though there was no feeling in her legs' (243). This could further be an allusion to the deaths and injuries of female surface workers, where crush injuries from coal waggons were one of the common causes of death amongst women workers (John 1980). The men do not notice her plight, nor that 'she attended on them in a slower fashion, her face closed and her body shorter, because her legs had gone bowed' (243). This bowing of her legs, often used in coalfields literature as a symbol of a miner, further implies she is a form of domestic miner, worn down by her work as surely as any male collier. She dies in the act of cooking, and she is found lying with a blackened face – the soot from the frying pan creating a further echo of the miners' coal-blackened face. The nightgown is discovered by her husband and he assumes it is 'in with the medical benefits' (244), signifying both his lack of attention and an ironic reference to industrial compensation. Women's bodies were thus figured as damaged and broken by industrial conditions, by means of images overtly linked with colliery toil and accidents.

Care Work and Emotional Labour

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Care work and emotional support is another form of labour that tended to fall more heavily on female family members and could have a detrimental effect on their health. Nevertheless, disability could complicate these care networks and cause reversals in the traditionally gendered role of women as carer. Furthermore, losing the domestic labour of a female family member could have a serious

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impact on the mining household because of the interdependent relationship between mining work and domestic support work. Curtis and Thompson, for example, have shown that because of the typical structure of mining families: "impairments to adult and adolescent females would have adversely affected domestic functioning" (2017: 33). In the example of 'The Nightgown' the husband immediately begins the search for a new wife following the death of his first wife, asking neighbours for recommendations. His unromantic attitude to wives again links the domestic sphere with the industrial, in which seeking a wife for the necessary cooking and cleaning tasks is similar to seeking a domestic worker or employee. This story paints a bleak picture of the cyclical destruction of women's lives in service to coal mining and an uncaring male family. While this cyclical, destructive pattern of industrial living is a common theme in the interwar coalfields literature, it is more common to find examples of literature that show male family members care about the effect of hard domestic work on their female relatives and understand the impact of losing their labour. In the above example of *Times Like These*, unemployed miner Luke takes on a caring role and the heavy domestic chores for both his mother, Polly, and his wife, Olive. Former miner Jack Jones comments in his autobiography on his concern for the health of his mother when she is nursing his father with pleurisy:

> *In less than two weeks dad was out of his senses, and mam had to watch him night and day. Me and Billa took charge of dad's working place in the pit, which we worked as well as any two men. […] For weeks our mam didn't have a chance to take her clothes off, so one Saturday night me and Billa made her go to sleep upstairs in our bed, leaving us to watch dad and tend on him. She wouldn't at first, but we made her go, for we knew that if we didn't we should have her bad in bed as well, and then it would be domino on all of us. (95-96)*

Jones contrasts the loss of his father's labour, which he and his brothers are able to cover at the mine, with the loss of his mother's labour which would be 'domino', or the end, for all the family. In his writing, Jones often emphasises the pivotal role of the mother to the mining household, not just for providing physical labour, but for her

knowledge and emotional support skills guiding and organising the family.

The impact of care work and emotional support has been analysed by feminist theorists concerned about financial and structural inequalities, which are primarily detrimental to women. Arlie Hochschild (1983) coined the term 'emotional labour' to describe the commodification of women's emotional skills and capacities in the workplace, which crucially fail to be remunerated economically. Emotion in care work is a contested area in disability scholarship, as is the question of dependency and interdependency in the relationship between care giver and care recipient (Hopkins *et al* 2005). From a disability perspective one of the more troubling aspects of emotion in care is the demeaning discourse constructing disabled people as pitiable and passive, in contrast to a noble, self-sacrificing care giver. Divesting care-work relationships of emotion, however, has been criticised from a feminist perspective for potentially devaluing female emotional labour that is already at risk of exploitation. In coalfields literature, one novel to explore the complexity of care work and interdependency in detail is Joe Corrie's *Black Earth*. A miner, Jack, is paralysed in a roof fall accident and his wife, Maggie, becomes his primary carer. Underpinning the narrative is a political emphasis on the cost the coal industry has exacted from this family. As Jack's friend puts it: 'The price of coal is too high, they say in the papers, ay, by God it is, too bloody high for the men who hew it' (1939: 228). As such, the struggles that Jack and Maggie face are framed as a consequence of uncaring capitalism and the price in lives harmed by the dangerous work.

The relationship between Jack and Maggie draws on some of the problematic tropes of pity, tragedy and the sacrificial care giver, but complicates this through the detailed exploration of Jack and Maggie's thought processes. Jack is shown to be acting morose and confrontational based on fear that Maggie would see him as 'a burden, and in the way' (183) and psychological trauma from the accident: 'at times he was sure there was something wrong with his mind, the things he thought about Maggie and [his son] Jim. Sometimes he would blame the accident on them' (182). Jack's behaviour includes spitting, pulling wallpaper off the walls and

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gambling away the family ‘lift’[11] money, which at £9 was an irreplaceable financial loss. Maggie is most upset by the change in Jack’s personality and the loss of spousal emotional support: ‘If only he had just patted her on the hand and said she was doing well she would have been happy. But it was indifference to them all that hurt her’ (182). The novel debunks the myth that care work is easy for women, resisting the image of the perfect nurse,[12] and mocks the self-righteous local women for the way that ‘they all imagined themselves tending to their own invalid husbands like Florence Nightingales’ (249). The impact of care work is shown to adversely affect Maggie’s health, and she seems destined for the same fate that Jack’s doctor has seen so often before, in which: ‘many a woman had spent a whole lifetime attending to such a man, had grown bent and old years before her time in his service, and had been rewarded perhaps by a curse at the finish’ (215). The novel emphasises that the reality of the difficulties Maggie and Jack face are more complicated than a simple binary between angelic care giver and helpless care recipient. *Black Earth* concludes on Jack’s suicide, which he views as an act of defiance and retaking control, dying ‘with a smile on his face’ (284). Lennard Davis refers to the erasure of disability in narratives as the ‘normalising coda of endings’ (2013: 12), a conclusion that returns normality to the fiction (tying up the plot) often by erasing or transforming disability. Jack’s death is a narrative ending and yet it is also a discordant conclusion because ‘the same thing might happen to any [miner]’ (228). Jack is shown to be part of a wider cyclical pattern of industrial injury, and thus the novel’s detailed exploration of the after-effects of one accident gives perspective to the impact of high injury rates in mining. Jack and Maggie demonstrate that mining injuries impact on the whole family’s wellbeing and, further, that Maggie’s emotional labour is equally challenging to the practical tasks needed to assist Jack.

In coalfields literature care work is depicted as part of the intergenerational, cyclically damaging nature of hard working conditions, low wages and unhealthy environment. The hard labour of both men and women causes premature ageing and injuries that often result in the need for care. Welsh writer Gwyn Thomas’s novella *The Dark Philosophers* (1946), set in the coalfields

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community during the Depression, shows that Mrs Radnor's life of hard-work never translates into the college education and bright future for her daughter she had envisioned. She is depicted as part of a cycle of poverty from which it is almost impossible to escape; she is so over-worked that she is made ill and her daughter must give up college to find work and take care of her. Martha Stoddard Holmes (2007) commented that nineteenth-century novels portrayed the value of caring interdependency over selfish individualism, which here in this twentieth-century example can be seen paralleled in the value placed on Mrs Radnor's reciprocal relationship with her daughter, described as putting 'more intelligence, strength and valour into trying to win a civilized standard of decency for herself and a child, than ever any of history's revered baboons put into the exploitation of their kingdoms, strip mills or coal mines' (197). It is the injustice of spending a life of hard, fruitless work, compared to upper-class indulgence and waste, that angers one of the 'dark philosophers', Walter:

> *Think on that woman for a moment, brothers. She lived on the wind for God knows how many years, eating probably as much good food in a year as the rich would eat in an evening. For what? To give her kid a flying start in life, a start that would make her fly, too. And look how she flies. She's on her back and the only life she's got in her, as like as not, is the love she gets from her kid. (157)*

Poverty is shown to be a repressive cycle, in which the morally good acts of love and caring are not rewarded, set in contrast to the gluttonous rich who consume more than their fair share. The relationship between Mrs Radnor and her daughter is bound up by love and duty, and the philosophers suggest that 'with a nice daughter like Margaret she would soon be well again' (169). This thought gives Mrs Radnor a brief moment of 'glad, hopeful brightness' (169) before in an image reminiscent of extinguishing a candle, it vanishes 'as if a strong mouth had bent low and breathed on [her face]' (169). This oppressive image emphasises the burden of poverty she has faced all her life, the dark thought that not only does she not have much chance of physical recovery, but also that her daughter likely faces a similarly bleak future. In this way, care-

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giving is depicted as a form of sacrifice in the literature, but one that is tied into the wider themes of coalfields literature about the intergenerational injustices of poverty and exploitative working conditions.

Conclusion

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Exploring the relationship between women, work and disability in coalfields literature has required rethinking the interaction of the industrial with the domestic. The disabilities that women encountered were often a direct consequence of the necessities of the coal industry, and the environment that it generated in industry-dependent communities. Coalfields' writing of the late Victorian period conforms in many ways to the analysis of wider Victorian literature and the treatment of disabled women (Stoddard Holmes 2004, La Com 1997). A distinctive element is the focus on class and the relationship between invalidism, social advancement and religion. These working-class women are shown to be in danger when social advancement separates them from men of the same background and faith (in these cases Methodism). This danger is expressed by depicting these women developing invalidism and further gendered by the focus on damage to reproductive health. These implications persist into some examples of post-WWI writers such as James C. Welsh, but overall the focus on coalfields women shifted towards twentieth-century political concerns.

Coalfields literature blurs the boundaries between the industrial and the domestic, depicting female disability as a consequence of the demands of the industry. The depiction of disability retains many traditionally gendered binaries (feminine as passive/ dependent and masculine as active/ independent), but this gendering of disability is complicated by class. Working-class women provide essential, and often arduous, physical labour; consequent ill-health and premature ageing is shown to masculinise, rather than feminise, women (such as in 'The Nightgown'). Significantly, some twentieth-century portrayals of women's work make use of industrial imagery to describe the labour and physical deterioration of female bodies, depicting women metaphorically as a form of domestic collier. Women are further incorporated into the imagery of the industrial machine, the cyclical process that ingests young healthy bodies,

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turning flesh into coal, then ejecting wounded and deceased bodies. Women are shown producing the children that feed the machine, and are damaged themselves, both by disabilities arising from childbirth and by the strain of domestic responsibilities. These images of childbearing accorded with certain symbolism of capitalist exploitation in the interwar literature. The damage to women's bodies is repeatedly framed as something inflicted upon them, particularly by men who have more power and control over them. The harm caused by the industry is further framed as intergenerational and cyclical. Women's care work is shown as part of this cycle, both in regards to the role of child rearing in creating a new generation of workers, and the care of family members injured by the coal industry. The additional financial and emotion strains of care work are shown to adversely affect carers' health and to cause tensions in personal relationships (such as Jack and Maggie in *Black Earth*). Disability in coalfields women is framed as an inescapable consequence of an industry that infiltrates every aspect of domestic and family life, demanding heavy physical and emotional burdens of women. In this way, coalfields literature reveals the complex relationship between women's work, industrialisation and disability.

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Footnotes

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[1]This was particularly true of the novel, short story and play. There is also a large body of poetry and ballads by colliers across the nineteenth- and twentieth-

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century, with notable nineteenth-century poets such as Thomas 'Tommy' Armstrong and Joseph Skipsey, and twentieth-century poets such as Huw Menai or Idris Davies.

[2]The 1842 Coal Mines Act had legally restricted the employment of women to the surface; it was ideologically motivated to protect women from what was perceived as a sexually and morally dubious underground work environment. As Anne McClintock put it: 'pit-women became the centre of a ferocious debate over women's work and sexuality' (1995: 114).

[3]Curtis and Thompson (2015) have found examples of schemes that included the female family members and children of miners but many only provided for working men.

[4]Similar arguments about female employment were made following WWI in attempts to find work for injured veterans (Borsay 2005, Bourke 1990).

[5]Dot Jones notes that 'as late as 1920 only 2.4% of the 26,822 working-class homes in the Rhondda had baths' (117).

[6]Recent research has helped to change this, notably Curtis & Thompson 2017 and Turner & McIvor 2017.

[7]Miners' terraced houses

[8]Women novelists from middle and upper-class backgrounds, however, made a significant contribution to Welsh industrial fiction from 1880-1910 (Bohata & Jones 2017), along with non-fiction writers such as the political activist Elizabeth Andrews.

[9]An unusual choice of surname, Jehoshaphat means 'Jehovah has judged'; in the Old Testament it features as the name of five men and a place where humanity will gather for judgement (Douglas & Merrill 2005). The name's link to judgement is in keeping with the novel's themes of judgement and redemption.

[10]A slang term for mining officials.

[11]Money collected by voluntary donations from other mining families.

[12]The female nurse had been idealised as a morally superior middle-class figure, an image propagated especially since Florence Nightingale's 'Angels of Mercy' in the Crimean War (Swenson 2005).

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