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HARD TIMES: A DICKENS FABLE

OF PERSONAL SALVATION

There was a library in Coketown, to which general access was easy. Mr. Gradgrind greatly tormented his mind about what the people read in his library. . . . They wondered about human nature, human passions, human hopes, and fears, the struggles, triumphs and defeats, the cares and joys and sorrows, the lives and deaths of common men and women! They sometimes, after fifteen hours work, sat down to read mere fables about men and women, more or less like themselves, and about children, more or less like their own. They took Defoe to their bosoms, instead of Euclid, and seemed to be on the whole more comforted by Goldsmith than by Cocker. (I, 3)¹

The "hands" of Coketown focus their eyes and minds upon these fables, by the eighteenth-century novelists who had provided Dickens with the fables of his own youth, in order to fill a void in their disembodied and denatured lives. They choose these fables, instead of the "hard facts" books of Euclid and Cocker, as a means of restoring a sense of their own humanity. Because they live in a world where they are designated only as "hands" and treated like machines, they need some reassurance that they are truly human beings. The central meaning of *Hard Times* is involved with this quest for self and for salvation.

For Gradgrind, a fable is an untruth. But for the people of Coketown, fables embody the ultimate moral truth of a natural life that is so very human when compared to their own mechanistic states of existence. The people of Coketown, especially Louisa Gradgrind, long to recapture the

dreams of childhood—its airy fables; its graceful, beautiful, humane, impossible adornments of the world beyond: so good to be believed in once, so good to be remembered when outgrown, for then the least among them rises to the stature

of a great Charity in the heart, suffering little children to come into the midst of it, and to keep with their pure hands a garden in the stony ways of this world. (II, 9)

If there is one "fact" which emerges from Dickens' fable, *Hard Times*, it is that the "airy fables" of childhood, the "mere fables" of Defoe and Goldsmith, are no "impossible adornments" but are the representation of an essential truth. Sissy Jupe is "the least" of the members of the Gradgrind household, but she "rises to the stature of a great Charity in the heart" of Louisa and she cultivates her own garden of love, which grows and blooms even though it is planted in a Stone Lodge.

Hard Times is a fable, a short narrative which explicitly presents a moral truth, but it is also an affirmation of the importance of fables in the lives of all men.² The *Christmas Carol* is Dickens' most explicit fable as it psychologically dramatizes Scrooge's quest to liberate the natural emotions of his youth that have been buried beneath the grasping utilitarian rationalizations of his adult life. The *Christmas Carol* is a fable of Scrooge's experience of personal salvation through the liberation of his own human nature, and the "hands" of Coketown find the same sort of liberation in the books that they find in their lending library.

Because of its compressed metaphorical style—W. W. Watt calls it Dickens' "symbolic shorthand"³—*Hard Times* is the most fable-like of all of Dickens' novels. The moral truth of *Hard Times* emerges through imagery and symbolism because the action of the novel, be it mental or physical, is always defined through those images and symbols.

Each of the symbolic leitmotifs of *Hard Times* functions on three separate levels of meaning. First, characters in the novel, in both their physical and moral existences, are defined through the use of imagery. Second, imagery defines the relationship of one character to another or the effect that the action or the mere presence of one character has upon another. Third, the same images that define characters and the relationships between characters also expand and define the world of the novel in which those characters live and act. On this third level of meaning the recurring images of *Hard Times* actually become symbols of the relationship between man and his world.

The motif of shipwreck as it appears in *Hard Times* defines imagistically the relationship between Louisa Gradgrind and James Harthouse as well as the effects of that relationship. After James Harthouse has insinuated himself into the Bounderby household and "established a confidence" with Louisa, the narrator pauses briefly to describe him:

... he had not, even now, any earnest wickedness of purpose in him. Publicly and privately, it were much better for the age in which he lived, that he and the legion of whom he was one were designedly bad, than indifferent and purposeless. It is the drifting icebergs setting with any current anywhere, that wreck the ships. (II, 8)

The image catches the essence of Harthouse's character. He is an aimless, "drifting" man who reads a few blue books in order to gain the patronage of the "hard facts" men of the Gradgrind school. He is a man who projects a smooth and placid surface personality, but who is, beneath the surface, a completely impersonal opportunist. The image, however, also foreshadows the serious danger of his relationship with Louisa. Finally, this image shows Harthouse as an emblem of the moral shipwreck of the age; an age in which men indifferently follow their own inclinations no matter what harm their actions might cause to the lives of other people.

The proof of Dickens' conscious use of the imagery of shipwreck as an indicator of the result of the extramarital love relationship between Harthouse and Louisa can be found in the running headlines Dickens appended to Chapter XII of Book Two of *Hard Times*.⁴ On the night of her meeting with Harthouse during her husband's absence, a meeting witnessed by Mrs. Sparsit, Louisa flees through a driving storm to her father. As she sinks in his arms, she begs him to save her, and the scene ends with Thomas Gradgrind looking at "the pride of his heart and the triumph of his system, lying, an insensible heap, at his feet" (II, 12). The running headline that Dickens appended to this page of *Hard Times*, "Shipwrecked", refers to the condition of both father and daughter. Louisa, because of her love for Harthouse, a love which can bring her nothing but ruin, has been cast adrift in the world. She can't return to a husband she despises nor can she accept an immoral relationship with the man she loves. "She has suffered the wreck of her whole life upon a rock" (III, 1).

For Thomas Gradgrind, the broken and insensible heap which lies before him symbolizes the shipwreck of his whole philosophy of life. The other running headline that appears in this chapter, the "Great Failure of the House of Gradgrind", is reminiscent of the failure of another great house, the house of Dombey, which also failed because of a shipwreck, a shipwreck caused by the obstinacy and insensitivity of its proprietor. Ironically, the shipwrecks that occur in *Dombey and Son* and in *Hard Times* prove to be the ultimate salvation of the men that they ruin. Only after the great houses of Dombey and Gradgrind have fallen can these two men realize the error of

their similarity obsessive philosophies of life, and through that realization, in both cases accomplished by a loving but rejected daughter, open themselves for the first time to love. Dickens shows Louisa and her father at the moment of shipwreck, which is also the moment of realization and the first step in the process of salvation.

Another motif of intricately related imagery in *Hard Times* involves the play of light upon the characters, settings, and events of the novel. The differing tones and effects of the exterior lighting reveal the inner light within particular characters to comprise a stream of imagery that defines character and character relationships as well as theme. In the opening scene, as the sun shines into M'Choakumchild's classroom it falls upon Bitzer, who

chanced to sit in the same ray of sunlight which, darting in at one of the bare windows of the intensely whitewashed room, irradiated Sissy. . . . But, whereas the girl was so dark-eyed and dark-haired, that she seemed to receive a deeper and more lustrous colour from the sun, when it shone upon her, the boy was so light-eyed and light-haired that the selfsame rays appeared to draw out of him what little colour he ever possessed. . . . His skin was unwholesomely deficient in the natural tinge, that he looked as though, if he were cut, he would bleed white. (I, 2)

The ray of sunlight illuminates all of the natural beauty and vitality of Sissy, but also reveals the vapidity and unnaturalness of Bitzer. The way the darting ray of sunlight reveals character in this scene is strikingly similar to the opening jewel scene of George Eliot's *Middlemarch* in which the vitality of Dorothea Brooke's character is revealed through the operation of the same natural imagery of the sun.

As the action progresses in *Hard Times* and new characters enter the world of the novel, the presence or absence of sunlight serves as an instantaneous means of character definition. When James Harthouse first arrives in Coketown, he is observed "languishing down the street on the shady side of the way" (II, 1). His attempted seduction of Louisa is an act which cannot bear the pure and natural light of the sun so it takes place "among the leafy shadows . . . in the long sultry summer days" (II, 7). Harthouse avoids the sunlight because of its power to reveal the inner substance of men.

Finally, the sunlight becomes a symbol of the unnaturalness of the world of *Hard Times*. In Coketown, every afternoon "the sun began to sink behind the smoke" and "the darkness seemed to rise slowly out of the ground, and creep upward, upwards, up to the house-tops, up the church steeple, up to the summits of the factory chimneys, up to the sky" (II, 1). The daily cycle of

nature has been reversed. Just as the machines and blazing fires of the mills obliterate the humanity of the people, the smoke obliterates the natural light of the sun. As George Bernard Shaw noted, Coketown's "rich manufacturers . . . like to see the sun blacked out with smoke, because it means that the furnaces are busy, and money is being made. . . ." The whole philosophy of life upon which Coketown exists is bent upon destroying what is natural in men; this intent is symbolized by the perversion of the sun in the world of the novel:

But the sun itself, however beneficent, generally, was less kind to Coketown than hard frost, and rarely looked intently into any of its closer regions without engendering more death than life. So does the eye of heaven itself become an evil eye, when incapable hands are interposed between it and the things it looks upon to bless. (II, 1)

This deadly sun is a symbol of the perversion of all that is natural in the world. And, because the very centre of that perversion is Thomas Gradgrind, the sun is unable to penetrate "the shade of Stone Lodge" (I,4) until after that house has fallen.

Opposed to the imagery of the sun in Dickens' intricate modulation of lighting effects in *Hard Times* are the images of the dark cavern and the yawning abyss. Gradgrind looks out upon the schoolroom early in the novel through eyes which are set in the "commodious cellarage of two dark caves" (I, 1). The image defines the tunnel vision of Gradgrind, which can only look straight ahead at the cold facts of his own philosophy of life. The doorways to his mind are buried in the darkness of his obstinate philosophy and walled in by hard facts. He cannot see the glancing ray of light which enters the schoolroom and differentiates between Sissy and Bitzer. Later in the novel as Tom and Louisa sit together before the fire at Stone Lodge fighting against the ever-present temptation to "wonder", it is "as if the brother and sister were overhung by a dark cavern" (I, 8). Gradgrind has thrust his own children into the stony and dark cavern of his obstinate philosophy of life. Theirs is an existence upon which the natural light of the sun never shines and they are surrounded by the hard, stone walls upon which only the shadows of reality can dance. The culmination of this motif in *Hard Times* is the dark abyss that lies at the base of Mrs. Sparsit's staircase. Ironically, only after Louisa has fallen into this abyss can the light begin to penetrate into the dark caves of Gradgrind's mind.

Despite the darkness of Gradgrindian philosophy and the obscurantism

of the sun by the smoke of Coketown, however, a salvific light does exist in the world of *Hard Times*. This light of salvation is the inner light of natural goodness and love, which only shines forth when one person is able to love another without any selfish motive. The relationship of Stephen Blackpool and Rachel is specifically defined in terms of a light-darkness motif. When Stephen returns to his room after his fruitless discussion of the divorce laws with Bounderby, he finds Rachel sitting by the bedside of his drunken wife and "the light of her face shone in upon the midnight of his mind" (I, 13). Late in the novel, after the fall of the house of Gradgrind and the moral shipwreck of Louisa, Sissy Jupe becomes an active moral force, and the inner beauty that the sunlight of the opening scene revealed appears once more: "the once deserted girl shone like a beautiful light upon the darkness of the other" (III, 1). Both Rachel and Sissy become guiding lights for the two muddled and shipwrecked people who look to them for aid. The light that shines from within Rachel and Sissy is the light of love, the most powerful and natural light that exists in the world of *Hard Times*.

The image of the fire, which is always associated with Louisa, relates directly to the image of Sissy's inner light. As Louisa stands before her father, who has just caught her and Tom in the disgraceful act of watching the horse show, a look of "jaded sullenness" appears on her face, but also "struggling through the dissatisfaction of her face, there was a light with nothing to rest upon, a fire with nothing to burn, a starved imagination keeping life in itself somehow, which brightened its expression" (I, 3). At the outset the fire is defined as an image of Louisa's imagination, an imagination that is starved and unnaturally restricted by the prohibition upon "wonder" which is the rule of the Gradgrind philosophy. Throughout the novel Louisa often sits and looks into the fire, alone with the forbidden visions of her imagination, but these visions can give her no satisfaction because there is no natural emotion or vitality in her life with which she can feed the fire. Eventually, she is forced to express to her mother the futility of her visions in the fire:

I was encouraged by nothing, mother, but by looking at the red sparks dropping out of the fire and whitening and dying. It made me think, after all, how short my life would be, and how little I could hope to do in it. (I, 8)

The fire image is an emblem of her life, for imagination, the creative power of feeling, is the natural essence of life. But for Louisa life is dying slowly into ashes because her imagination is being starved under her father's passionless regime.

The ultimate result of the starvation of Louisa's inner fire occurs in the climactic scene of Book One of *Hard Times*. The morning after Louisa's father returns from Bounderby's bank, a fitting place for the closing of a marriage bargain, he summons Louisa away from the warmth of her fire to the deadening cold of his Observatory and presents her with Bounderby's proposal of marriage. Stunned by the horrible shock of this unimaginable proposal, which her father has presented as sheer matter of fact, Louisa momentarily feels "impelled to throw herself upon his breast, and give him the pent-up confidences of her heart". But she realizes that she cannot penetrate "the artificial barriers he had for so many years been erecting, between himself and all those subtle essences of humanity" which Gradgrindery does not recognize. This crucial realization of her father's complete lack of understanding is embodied once again in a poetic image:

Removing her eyes from him, she sat so long looking silently towards the town, that he said, at length; 'Are you consulting the chimneys of the Coketown works, Louisa?'

'There seems to be nothing there but languid and monotonous smoke. Yet when the night comes, Fire bursts out, father!' she answered, turning quickly.

'Of course I know that, Louisa. I do not see the application of the remark'. To do him justice he did not, at all. (I, 15)

This fire image is Louisa's final plea for understanding from her father before she accepts Bounderby's odious proposal. It describes her existence as well as the existence of all the people of Coketown whose lives are covered over by the smoke of the mills. Just as her father considers her only the perfect finished product of his philosophy of life, so also do the mill owners consider the smoke emblematic of the money that the furnaces are putting into their pockets. What is not considered at all is the fire of human emotion and love, which exists in Louisa and in all of the people who work in the dark cavern beneath the monotonous smoke of Coketown. It is a touch of supreme irony on Dickens' part that Louisa makes her final plea in the form of a poetic image, the one thing that Gradgrind could never understand, because for him the human fire of imagination does not exist. He can only accept the image literally and, with his obtuse acceptance, he extinguishes his daughter's passionate hopes for understanding. She in turn accepts Bounderby.

The fire that died in Louisa on that cold morning when she accepted Bounderby is not rekindled until the very end of the novel when she is able once again to sit "watching the fire as in days of yore, though with a gentler

and humbler face" (III, 9). The images she sees in the fire are visions of the future, but now they are real and not just imaginary hopes. The visions are bittersweet, as befits the images of reality, but all of them grow out of Louisa's new-found emotions of love, the emotions that were not present to feed the imaginative fires that had produced her earlier hopeless visions. She sees Rachel, alone, but always cheerful and compassionate, among the people of Coketown. She sees her brother Tom, alone also, but able before he dies to redeem himself through his love for her. And she sees Sissy, who has been the agent of her redemption and who has rekindled the fire within her through love. But the most important vision she sees in the fire is of herself, finally able to fulfill with Sissy's children her own capacities for love and "wonder".

F. R. Leavis was indeed correct when he wrote of Dickens and of *Hard Times*:

He writes with a poetic force of evocation registering with the responsiveness of a genius of verbal expression what he so sharply sees and feels. In fact, by texture, imaginative mode, symbolic method, and the resulting concentration, *Hard Times* affects us as belonging with formally poetic works.⁶

The intricate network of expressive light (and darkness) imagery is but one aspect of the rich poetic style of *Hard Times*. The sun that illuminates Sissy and Bitzer in the opening scene of the novel is the same sun that cannot penetrate the oppressive shade of Stone Lodge or the deep shadows in which Hart-house attempts to seduce Louisa. That same natural sunlight is excluded from the dark cave of Gradgrindian philosophy and is obscured by the suffocating smoke of Coketown's money-producing furnaces. Though this natural sun is not allowed to shine throughout most of the novel, it is replaced by the inner light of human love that shines forth from Sissy and Rachel and holds the promise of salvation for the Gradgrind family and for Stephen Blackpool. Sissy and Rachel become the active beacons of hope for the shipwrecked souls of the novel. Sissy's inner light of natural goodness rekindles the dead fires of imagination and love in Louisa and saves the younger Gradgrind children from the same moral shipwreck their older sister experienced.

This network of tightly interwoven images defines the action, the theme, and the world of the novel. These images define the two harshly opposed forces at work in the novel; the warm, natural force of human love and childlike "wonder" and the dark, suffocating and passionless force of "hard facts" and political economy. They also define the world of the novel as composed of two distinct levels of existence; the hard surface of smoke and machines

devoid of human life but valued so highly by Gradgrind and his followers, and the sub-surface world which, though cut off from the light of the sun, is illuminated by the warmer light of human love. The concept of the dual surfaces of reality is a continuing motif in the novels of Dickens, but never before has he created a whole world defined in those terms. Thus, Dickens' poetic style makes *Hard Times* the most satisfying of his fables of personal salvation. And, as a fable of conversion, *Hard Times* also is Dickens' most powerful and realistic statement that man by redeeming himself can redeem the whole ugly world that he has selfishly built.

The most important conversion that occurs in *Hard Times* is the conversion of Thomas Gradgrind. Because of his position as the prime mover and social and political leader of life as it exists in the world of Coketown, his conversion has the most far-reaching implications for the possibilities for change in the world both within and outside of the novel. From the very beginning of *Hard Times*, Gradgrind is portrayed as a man still open to the possibility of conversion from his harsh philosophy of life: "His character was not unkind, all things considered; it might have been a very kind one indeed, if he had only made some round mistake in the arithmetic that balanced it, years ago" (I, 5). Gradgrind formulated his false philosophy of "hard facts" with good intentions, but he ruled out of it all that was natural in the human self. Conversion, then, for Gradgrind is dependent upon his ability to return to the original, natural pattern from which he had deviated because of his own statistically motivated choice.

There is a deep irony involved, then, in Gradgrind's statement to Sissy that she "will be reclaimed and formed" (I, 7) as a member of the Gradgrind household. In reality, the direct opposite is true. Sissy's role in the Gradgrind household will be the reclamation and formation of Gradgrind to the natural specifications of the heart. She accomplishes this reformation by means of her influence upon the Gradgrind children, and by reclaiming the children she also is able to reclaim the father. Here, in a very real sense, the child does become the father of the man, as the Gradgrind children, especially Louisa, taught to love and "wonder" by Sissy, in turn teach their own father the importance of human emotion. After Louisa's return from Bounderby and her poignant plea to her father for love, Gradgrind finally is able to confess the error of his life. He tells Louisa:

'Some persons hold . . . that there is a wisdom of the Head, and that there is a wisdom of the Heart. I have not supposed so; but, as I have said, I mistrust myself now . . . I have been absent from here, my dear, a good deal of late; and

though your sister's training has been pursued according to—the system . . . it has necessarily been modified by daily association begun, in her case, at an early age. I ask you—ignorantly and humbly, my daughter—for the better, do you think?’

And Louisa answers:

‘If any harmony has been awakened in her young breast that was mute in mine until it turned to discord, let her thank Heaven for it’ (III,1).

Through daily association with Sissy a new music of the heart has been awakened in the Gradgrind family and has started to awaken in Mr. Gradgrind himself.

But the influence of Sissy alone is not enough to accomplish the conversion of Thomas Gradgrind. He also must participate in and suffer through that conversion himself. As it happened to Scrooge in *The Christmas Carol*, Gradgrind's whole world must collapse before he can come to the realization of his essential self, which is necessary for earthly salvation. He experiences the moral shipwreck of the two most perfect products of his life and because of this experience he is able to realize the moral shipwreck of his own life and of the world he has created. He becomes from his experience “a wiser man, and a better man” (III, 7) and his conversion is a religious one as he now makes “his facts and figures subservient to Faith, Hope and Charity” (III, 9). Because his conversion has been accomplished through Sissy's ability to awaken the natural religion of his heart, Charity is probably the virtue that now plays the most important role in Gradgrind's life. Perhaps Mr. Sleary expresses it best:

‘It theemth to prethent two thinth to a perthon, don't it, Thquire? . . . one, that there ith a love in the world, not all Thelf-interethth after all, but thomething very different; t'other, that it hath a way of ith own of calculating or not calculating’ (III, 8).

In his inimitable way, Sleary states the reality of the basic flaw of Gradgrind's Hobbesian philosophy.

The importance of Gradgrind's conversion for the world of the novel is obvious. If the progenitor of the philosophy that has created all of the injustices of Coketown can be changed, so can the conditions be changed. Significantly, for the theme of personal salvation and as justification of Dickens' clumsy and unsympathetic handling of Slackbridge and the union, the promise of change does not come from that quarter at all, but from the hope that is

present in the conversion of Gradgrind. Dickens, in portraying Slackbridge as a crude rabble-rouser and the union movement as an unacceptable alternative, at least for a conscientious man like Stephen Blackpool, places added emphasis on the salvation of Gradgrind as the central hope for the world of *Hard Times*. Dickens was fully aware that great social change could only be accomplished after the need for change had been firmly impressed upon the minds of the individual men who control the destiny of the nation; the minds of the manufacturers had to be opened to the injustices they had created before the unions could ever persuade them to alleviate those conditions. And thus, in *Hard Times*, Dickens again gives expression to that single moral truth that social salvation depends upon the ability of individual men to redeem themselves.

FOOTNOTES

1. All quotations from *Hard Times* are noted within the text. In order that any edition of the novel may be consulted, I have put in parenthesis after each quotation the book number in Roman numerals and the chapter number in Arabic numerals. Where a number of quotations from the same chapter appear together, the notation follows the final quotation.
2. See F. R. Leavis, "Hard Times: An Analytic Note," *The Great Tradition* (New York: The New York University Press, 1963), p. 227.
3. W. W. Watt, Introduction to *Hard Times* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, Winston, 1958), p. xxxii.
4. See George Ford and Sylvere Monod (eds.), *Hard Times* (New York: Norton Critical Edition, 1966), p. 242.
5. George Bernard Shaw, Introduction to *Hard Times*, as reprinted in George Ford and Sylvere Monod (eds.), *Hard Times* (New York: Norton Critical Edition, 1966), p. 333.
6. F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition*, p. 234.