

Troubled Marriages in Charles Dickens's *Hard Times*

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Abstract

This paper differs from the researches of other critics who study Charles Dickens's novel *Hard Times* as a political novel that critiques industrialism and the autocratic discourse that oppresses the poor, while at the same time overlooks the social discourse related to marriage and divorce. This paper sheds light on two cases of troubled marriages in the novel and how these failed marriages cause depression and low self-respect for couples. Dickens expresses his boredom and dissatisfaction with his wife, Catherine Hogarth, through the desire of his characters, Stephen and Louisa, for a divorce or legal separation. The poor Stephen cannot divorce his alcoholic wife because it is costly and realizes that the laws of divorce have been made for the rich. The innocent Louisa marries old Bounderby to please her father and to provide financial aid for her dissolute brother and finds out that she has been exploited by the patriarchal rules of her society that ignores her female identity.

Keywords: Marriage, Divorce, Industrialism, Political, Social.

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حالات زواج مضطربة في رواية تشارلز ديكنز

أوقات عصيبة

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ملخص

يختلف هذا البحث عن أبحاث النقاد الآخرين الذين يدرسون رواية تشارلز ديكنز أوقات عصيبة كرواية سياسية تنتقد الثورة الصناعية والخطاب الاستبدادي الذي يظلم الفقراء ويتجاهلون في نفس الوقت الخطاب الاجتماعي المتعلق بالزواج والطلاق. يلقي هذا البحث الضوء على حالتين من حالات الزواج المضطربة في الرواية وكيف تسبب حالات الزواج الفاشلة هذه الاحباط وقلّة الاعتدال بالذات للأزواج. يعبر ديكنز عن حالة الملل وعدم الرضى مع زوجته كاثرين هوغارث من خلال رغبة شخصياته ستيفن ولويزا بالطلاق أو الانفصال القانوني. لا يستطيع الفقير ستيفن أن يطلق زوجته المدمنة على الكحول بسبب كلفة الطلاق العالية ويدرك أن قوانين الطلاق تم صياغتها للأغنياء. تتزوج البريئة لويزا المُسن باونديري من أجل إرضاء والدها وتقديم الدعم المالي لأخيها المستهتر لتجد أنه تم استغلالها من خلال قوانين مجتمعتها الأبوية التي تتجاهل هويتها الأنثوية.

الكلمات الدالة: زواج، طلاق، الثورة الصناعية، سياسي، اجتماعي.

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Introduction

Charles Dickens's Victorian novel *Hard Times* (1854) portrays the harsh realities of the life of working people in mid-nineteenth century England as a result of the totalitarian system of industrialism. The novel has been discussed in terms of its "intervention in the condition of England debate of the 1840s and 1850s, and especially debates about industrialization and the class conflict it produced" (Clausson, 2010: p. 158). Dickens condemns the factory owners, who seem to be heartless and cruel, and treat the workers as thoughtless machines. Critics like Rodensky (2009) suggest that "Dickens's novels reproduce the language of the lower classes" (p. 584) because they promote sympathy for the poor and oppressed. Fielding and Smith (1970) also emphasize that Dickens expresses throughout the novel "his attitude to the workers themselves, the lives they led, and the conditions they worked in" (p. 404). Other critics like Eagleton (1978) shed light on the struggle between upper and lower classes by arguing that Dickens draws on "the ideological realms of both dominant and dominated classes" (Pp. 125-126). Despite the fact that Dickens criticizes material society throughout his political novel, he still focuses on the social problems at that time through referring to cases of unsuccessful marriages that influence the social life of couples. This paper examines two cases of troubled marriages in Dickens's novel: the poor Stephen Blackpool and his alcoholic wife, and the Bounderbys, and how these couples suffer from low self-esteem and depression as a result of these bad marriages.

Historical Background

Hard Times provides an autobiographical account of the life of Charles Dickens who suffered from his terrible marriage to Catherine Hogarth for twenty-two years before their separation. Dickens speaks of the failure of his marriage (as cited in Mackenzie & Mackenzie, 1979): "it is all despairingly over. A dismal failure has to be borne ... What a blighted and wasted life my marriage has been" (p. 299). The reason of the failure of Dickens' marriage could be attributed to the fact that the couple had a large family to support – Catherine gave birth to ten children and had five miscarriages –in addition to the stressful life. Holbrook (1993) argues that Dickens "had difficulties with his children, and his marriage had been at an end for some time" (p. 164). Therefore, this large number of children could be the reason that the couple did not have a healthy marriage because it might have given states that Catherine was jealous of Dickens as a famous writer, "this constantly pregnant wife never seems to have enjoyed

motherhood, while she was jealous of Dickens's creative work and could not cope with his fame" (p. 168). Although it might be true that Catherine was less intellectual than Dickens and jealous of his creativity, bearing a large number of children and taking care of them would have given her no opportunity for any other work. The discontent of Dickens with his marriage could be clearly viewed in *Hard Times* as Stephen suffers at the hands of his alcoholic wife and Louisa never finds love in her marriage to Josiah Bounderby.

The Troubled Marriage of Stephen Blackpool

The marriage of the poor Stephen Blackpool to his unnamed drunken wife does not seem to be more successful than the marriage of Dickens. Dickens presents Stephen throughout the novel as a tragic character that struggles to retain his honesty and integrity in a morally bankrupt industrial society. Stephen is presented as "a good power-loom weaver, and a man of perfect integrity" (Dickens, 2002: p. 57) (*). He is one of the workers, who are generally called the "Hands" (p. 56), in the factory of the wealthy and powerful Bounderby, a greedy banker and manufacturer. Stephen looks older than forty years old not only because he had hard times as a worker in Bounderby's factory, but also because of his nineteen year long marriage to an idle and drunken woman. No wonder that "Dickens seems to appeal for sympathy for his [Stephen's] hard life" (Smith, 1972: p. 163) and to admire him for his simplicity, integrity and endurance. On the other hand, Mrs. Blackpool is presented as irresponsible, lazy and dirty wife that drives Stephen into despair and depression. She is described as follows:

Such a woman! A disabled, drunken creature, barely able to preserve her sitting posture by steadying herself with one begrimed hand on the floor, while the other was so purposeless in trying to push away her tangled hair from her face, that it only blinded her the more with the dirt upon it. A creature so foul to look at, in her tatters, stains and splashes, but so much fouler than that in her moral infamy, that it was a shameful thing even to see her. (Dickens: 60)

The horrible marriage of Stephen seems to cause him suicidal depression and low self-esteem. This makes him visit Bounderby to ask him for advice on how to divorce his wife. However, Stephen gets shocked to

* This quotation and all subsequent quotations from the primary text are taken from the same edition. See full documentation in references.

hear that the law has been made by the rich and does not help the poor, and so it would be better for him to cope with his bad marriage. Bounderby surprises Stephen by announcing, "it's [the law] not for you at all. It costs money. It costs a mint of money" (p. 67), and once Stephen realizes the impossibility to break the vow of marriage, he declares, "'tis a muddle. 'Tis just a muddle a'together, an' the sooner I am dead, the better" (p. 67). The fact that Stephen cannot obtain a divorce from his addicted and immoral wife because the law of the rich does not help him reminds us of the miserable situation of the lower classes in nineteenth century England and the influence of urban industrial civilization on the social life of workers. Stephen cannot afford the financial expenses of divorce, and therefore, it would be impossible to free himself from the vows of marriage. Therefore, Dickens seems to criticize the Victorian industrial society dominated by materialism and ruthless capitalists controlling the social life of workers and treating them as objects with no human identity.

The refusal of Bounderby to help Stephen obtain a divorce represents a turning point in the life of the unfortunate Stephen as it destroys his dream of marrying the virtuous and honest Rachael, a poor factory worker. Stephen seems to be emotionally dependent on Rachael and he turns to her to soothe him whenever his strength weakens. The dependence of Stephen on Rachael is described as follows: "He [Stephen] had spoken to Rachael only last night, it was true, and had walked with her a little way; but he had his new misfortune on him, in which no one else could give him a moment's relief, and, for the sake of it, and because he knew himself to want that softening of his anger which no voice but hers could effect" (p. 72). Dickens presents Stephen and Rachael as working class lovers and victims of the strict laws of the industrial state who deserve our sympathy. Capitalists like Bounderby thwart the love of Stephen and Rachael only because they belong to the lower class, and therefore treat them like machines. Spector (1984) argues that "Stephen and Rachael are automatons compounded of such Victorian middle-class virtues as industry, honesty, self-denial, chastity, and deference" (p. 365). Rachael proves to be the complete opposite of Stephen's careless wife in the sense that she is responsible and sensitive. Moreover, she represents a source of hope for Stephen and the driving force for most of his actions.

A Psychoanalytical Interpretation of Stephen Blackpool

Psychoanalysts believe that sick individuals develop mental and physical disorders that may develop into depression. Azzone (2013) states that "Psychoanalysis tried to trace most cases of depression back to specific negative emotional experiences". (p. 10) No doubt that the mental and physical disturbances of Stephen in Dickens's novel can be read as a result of his failure to find happiness in marriage and his love to Rachael. This terrible emotional experience develops into depressive disorder that makes Stephen suffer from anxiety and low self-esteem. This could be seen clearly when Stephen prefers to wander about in the rain, after his inability to acquire a divorce, than to go home and nurse his sick wife. Sigmund Freud (1987) refers to a sick individual that suffers from depressive disorder as having "psychic traumata" (p. 477) that affects his behavior and relationship with others. The depression of Stephen and the stress that his wife has placed upon him make him contemplate murdering his wife by making her drink a deadly poison: "His eyes fell again on the bottle, and a tremble passed over him, causing him to shiver in every limb". (p. 75) Furthermore, Stephen does not seem to be psychologically ready to prevent his wife when she attempts to drink poison: "All this time, as if a spell were on him, he was motionless and powerless, except to watch her" (p. 78), and if Rachael, who was nursing his wife instead of him, was not there, he would have let his wife to drink the poison. Kearns (1992) describes the wife of Stephen as a "witch-like madwoman" (p. 861) who is seen by Stephen as "a dead woman ... tormented by a demon in her shape" (p. 72). While Stephen views his wife as a devil that is the cause of his misery and troubled marriage, he looks at Rachael as an angel that provides him with glimpses of hope and contentment. Rachael maintains her love and sympathy for Stephen because she views him as an epitome of honesty and integrity. The painful death of Stephen at the end of the novel by falling down a mine shaft can be read as an escape from his stressful life and horrible marriage, while Rachael continues to suffer from loneliness and sorrow.

The Troubled Marriage of Louisa and Bounderby

The marriage of Louisa, the daughter of the wealthy merchant Thomas Gradgrind, to Bounderby represents another case of unsuccessful marriage that ends in a tragic manner. Gradgrind uses his paternal power to convince his sensitive daughter to accept the marriage proposal of an older man she despises and suggests that a disparity of thirty years virtually dissolves. When Louisa asks her father, "Do you think I love Mr. Bounderby?" (p. 87), Gradgrind requests her to consider the facts and refers to some statistics

about marriage in England and Wales. Gradgrind informs his daughter that many cases of marriage in England and Wales are unequal matches between young women and older men,

It is not unimportant to take into account the statistics of marriage, so far as they have yet been obtained, in England and Wales. I find, on reference to the figures, that a large proportion of these marriages are contracted between parties of very unequal ages, and that the elder of these contracting parties is, in rather more than three-fourths of these instances, the bridegroom. (p. 88)

Dickens seems to satirize the philosophy of Gradgrind about life and marriage by presenting him as “a man confined to his facts and figures” (Pulsford, 1995: p. 153). Gradgrind takes advantage of Louisa by ignoring her feelings and imbuing her with irrelevant facts and statistics to please his friend Bounderby. The fact that Louisa accepts the marriage proposal of Bounderby makes Gradgrind feel victorious by the decision that Louisa has reached, and therefore expresses his satisfaction and happiness by telling Louisa, “I may assure you now, my favourite child, that I am made happy by the sound decision at which you have arrived” (p. 91). The ignorance of Grandgrid can be seen in his belief that marriage has little to do with love and that material objects represent the key to happiness.

Dickens suggests throughout his novel that a successful marriage should be founded upon mutual love and understanding. The unequal match between Bounderby and Louisa does not seem to be the only reason for a troubled marriage, but the fact that Bounderby’s obsession with materialism makes him fail to realize that Louisa does not love him. The obsession of Bounderby with money makes him believe that love can be made the same way things are made in his factory. In other words, the fact that he showers Louisa with material objects makes him feel that they are sufficient to win her love. Dickens satirizes Bounderby’s perception of how love is obtained:

Love was made on these occasions in the form of bracelets; and, on all occasions during the period of betrothal, took a manufacturing aspect. Dresses were made, jewellery was made, cakes and gloves were made, settlements were made, and an extensive assortment of Facts did appropriate honour to the contract. The business was all Fact, from first to last. (p. 96)

The arrangement of Bounderby for marriage through “manufacturing” love with dresses and jewelry shows his aridity and lack of emotion by treating Louisa as a machine in his factory. Dickens highlights the problems of industrialism on personal relationships through critiquing the fact

philosophy of Bounderby and its failure to deal with the emotional life of individuals. Green (1970) argues that "Dickens ... was using his Bounderby as an exaggerated, inhuman symbol of a whole system of philosophy and human relations that he abhorred". (p. 1379) The heartless Bounderby seems to celebrate the automation of family life through his failure to understand the humanity of Louisa and negating the importance of understanding and love in human relations.

Bounderby proves to be hypocritical after inventing a story about his humble childhood as a poor, who has been abandoned by his mother, and succeeded in overcoming poverty through determination and hard work. The claim of Bounderby to be self-made man makes him attempt to convince his audience in the marriage ceremony that he is a good match for Louisa, despite the fact that he is thirty years her senior. Bounderby addresses his guests, "I have watched her [Louisa] bringing-up, and I believe she is worthy of me. At the same time – not to deceive you – I believe I am worthy of her". (p. 97) This marriage speech shows the arrogance and prejudice of Bounderby by imbuing his guests with stories about his mythical past to show his audience that Louisa was lucky to marry him. Bounderby presents himself as a proud prosperous man and hopes that "every spinster may find as good a husband as my wife has found". (p. 97) However, the fact that the mother of Bounderby uncovers the true background of her son and that she has never deserted him destroys the myth of the self-made man and proves that he is not worthy of Louisa. Furthermore, the decision of Bounderby to take a honeymoon trip to show Louisa how his factories operate emphasizes the lack of compassion and love in their relationship. The unhappy marriage of Louisa to Bounderby makes her victim of the unwanted advances of James Harthouse, a wealthy and manipulative man who visits Coketown with an attempt to get into the parliament. Like all other capitalists in the novel, the wealth of Harthouse represents a source of pride for him and he uses all his power with an attempt to seduce Louisa. Harthouse speaks to Louisa trying to persuade her, "your cruel commands are implicitly to be obeyed; though I am the most unfortunate fellow in the world, I believe, to have been insensible to all other women, and to have fallen prostrate at last under the foot of the most beautiful, and the most engaging, and the most imperious" (p. 189). Dickens presents Harthouse as a morally bankrupt aristocrat and a parasite who pursues Louisa not out of love, but because of the tedium and emotional emptiness in his life. Furthermore, it would be important to note here the role of the former upper-class elite, Mrs. Sparsit, the housekeeper of Bounderby, to bring Louisa down through defaming her reputation with an attempt to regain her powerful position at Bounderby's

house. Green (1970) states, “the house- keeper’s desire for Louisa’s disgrace – her wish to push her into adultery with Harthouse so that she herself can regain her old position of power as Bounderby’s adviser – is several times represented as a flight of stairs”. (p. 1384) The selfish Sparsit attempts to ruin the marriage of Louisa through inventing a story about Louisa having an affair with Harthouse with the hope of winning Bounderby for herself. The jealousy of Sparsit and her constant attempts to destroy the reputation of Louisa could be seen clearly throughout the novel as she imagines staircase down that she wishes Louisa to fall.

Dickens sympathizes with the innocent Louisa and presents her as a victim of society that seems to be corrupt and corrupting. Matrimonial happiness means nothing to both Gradgrind and Louisa’s wretched brother Tom as they exploit the marriage of Louisa to the snobbish Bounderby to satisfy personal interests. While Gradgrind benefits from the union of Louisa with the aging factory owner and banker Bounderby to advance in business as a manufacture forsaking his daughter’s happiness, the dissolute Tom uses the boundless love of his sister to him for his benefit to earn money for drink and gambling. Louisa sacrifices her happiness through marrying a man she hates and prefers to maintain love for her brother and help him with the money he needs. She tells Tom, “you may be certain that I will save you at whatever cost”. (p. 170) Louisa prefers to work as a protector for Tom and experience a relationship that lacks romance rather than lose the love of her brother. In a moment of confession, Tom speaks to Harthouse about persuading Louisa to marry old Bounderby to gain money, “you know she didn’t marry old Bounderby for her own sake, or for his sake, but for my sake. Then why doesn’t she get what I want, out of him, for my sake?” (p. 158). Tom exploits one of the main weaknesses of Louisa: Her unconditional love to him and fails to share the same feeling with her. It would be important to note here that Louisa turns into a machine that has no personality or feelings to satisfy the personal needs of others. Rogers (1998) points out: “Dickens shows that the utilitarian emphasis on self-interest as the basis of human action results in social fragmentation”. (p. 399) This seems to be clear in the novel as Gradgrind uses Louisa to advance in business, Tom to gain money for his dissolute life, and old Bounderby to relieve boredom, which results in damaging her life and she becomes what Cixous and Clement (1986) call the “indifferent hysteric” (p. 39) as she turns to be unresponsive to pain and suffering.

Dickens suggests in his novel that marriage that lacks romance and love will be doomed to failure. Kearns (1992) argues that “desire is explicitly forbidden within Dickens’s industrial state” (p. 861) and this could be the reason of troubled marriages in the novel. The return of Louisa to her father’s house saves her both from the unhappy marriage to old Bounderby and the undesirable advances of the aristocratic Harthouse. Louisa realizes that her life has become intolerable, and therefore decides to deny her dissolute brother any further financial support, stops interacting with the manipulative and caddish Harthouse, and escapes her husband’s house looking for protection at her father’s house. In a moment of awakening and confession to her father, Louisa laments her miserable upbringing and curses her father’s philosophy of self-interest that ruined her life,

How could you give me life, and take from me all the inappreciable things that raise it from the state of conscious death? Where are the graces of my soul? Where are the sentiments of my heart? What have you done, O father, what have you done, with the garden that should have bloomed once, in this great wilderness here! (p. 193)

Louisa refuses to continue to be treated as a heartless machine and decides that others should recognize her humanity and female identity. Unlike Stephen who fails to obtain divorce from his alcoholic wife because of his lower class, Louisa succeeds in acquiring permanent separation from the unfeeling Bounderby, and thereby freeing herself from the strict patriarchal power of her father and his narrow-minded philosophy. It would be important to note here that divorce in 1854 was difficult to obtain, especially for the wives and the poor, because it was costly and complicated issue that was still discussed in the Parliament. Furthermore, wives who succeed in obtaining a divorce have no legal rights or a right to custody of their children. Shanley (1982) points out that “Parliaments’ fear of the disruptive potential of female sexuality was as great as its distrust of the unrestrained passions of the poor”. (Pp. 365–366) Members of Parliament at that time felt that divorce will lead to the decline of morality, especially for wives and the poor, and therefore made divorce more difficult. Dickens seems to express boredom with his irresponsible and clumsy wife, Catherine, during a time when the first divorce reform bill was still disputed in Parliament while he was writing his novel. Therefore, the desire of the characters in the novel for a divorce or legal separation may express the desire of Dickens and his boredom with marriage.

Conclusion

In conclusion, one of the main concerns of Dickens in his novel seems to be related to marriage and divorce. Dickens expresses his feelings about his unsuccessful marriage to Catherine through creating characters that face the same destiny he had. Dickens requires his readers to sympathize with these characters who appear to suffer from despair and low self-esteem, and presents them as victims of the strict rules of corrupt society. The worker Stephen finds himself unable to divorce his alcoholic wife because he belongs to the lower class and cannot afford the expenses of divorce. Dickens seems to satirize the laws of his time that permitted divorce for the rich and prohibited it for the poor. Louisa also finds herself under pressure to marry the aging Bounderby to please her father and provide financial aid for her dissolute brother who needs money for drink and gambling. The fact that Dickens presents characters who suffer from troubled marriages because they find it difficult to obtain divorce or legal separation shows his dissatisfaction with the laws of his society regarding marriage and divorce and suggests that a change would be necessary.

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