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Troubled Masculinity at Midlife: A Study of Dickens's *Hard Times*

HATADA Mio

*Hard Times*で提示される“Fact”と“Fancy”の2つの対照的な世界、あるいは価値観は、一見すると相反するもののように思われるが、この小説は両者の対立よりもむしろ、両者がいかに密接な関係を持っているかを暗示しているように思われる。そして、主要な登場人物は複雑に絡まり合ったこれら2つの世界に、それぞれのやり方で関わりを持ち、反応を示す。興味深いことに、2つの絡み合う世界は、主要な人物（その多くは中年の男性である）の抱えている問題とも密接な関係を持っている。本稿では*Hard Times*における2つの世界を、作品中で直接姿を現すことのないSissyの父親の存在を手がかりに、中年期の男性が経験する masculinity の危機、という観点から再考している。

キーワード：aging, masculinity, gender

Introduction

It is well known that F. R. Leavis included *Hard Times* in his work *The Great Tradition*, calling it “a completely serious work of art” (Leavis 258) with the “subtlety of achieved art” (Leavis 279). Much earlier, John Ruskin estimated the novel as “the greatest” of Dickens’s novels, and asserted that it “should be studied with close and earnest care by persons interested in social questions” (34). Many other critics make much of the aspect of *Hard Times* as a critique of the contemporary society, and it has often been treated with other industrial novels such as Elizabeth Gaskell’s *North and South* (1855). Humphry House, for instance, points out that Dickens was “*thinking* much more about social problems,” and that “*Hard Times* is one of Dickens’s most thought-about books.” He goes on to assert that “in the ’fifties, his novels begin to show a greater complication of plot than before” because “he was intending to use them as a vehicle of more concentrated sociological argument” (House 205). David Lodge, too, affirms, “*Hard Times* manifests its identity as a polemical work, a critique of mid-Victorian industrial society dominated by materialism, acquisitiveness and ruthlessly competitive capitalist economics,” which are “represented... by the Utilitarians” (Lodge 69–70).

Nobody can miss the “Two Worlds” in *Hard Times*: one is the Utilitarian world of Coketown, the other is the fanciful world of the circus. To borrow Angus Wilson’s words, “The contrast between Mr Gradgrind’s dead world of fact and Slearly’s circus world of imagination is well established,” in the novel (Wilson 194). These two contrastive worlds, or values, are apparently contrary to each other, but

the novel seems to present the intertwinement of the two rather than their opposition. Some chief characters in *Hard Times* present their several attitudes towards, and relationship with, these intertwined values. The intriguing point here is that the issue of the two values is intertwined, again, with the issue of the predicaments of these characters, most of whom are middle-aged males.

The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to reconsider *Hard Times* in terms of the masculinity and manliness of men at midlife, and shed new light on the world presented in the novel. The first chapter will discuss a middle-aged horse-riding showman, who represents, in a most striking manner, the intertwinement of the worlds of fact and fancy. After thus recognizing the significance of middle-aged male characters in *Hard Times*, we will witness, in the following two chapters, how their troubled relationship with the two values are closely connected with the adversity they experience in the middle of their lives.

Chapter I

Aging and Masculinity

Hard Times notifies us, in its 5th chapter of Book I entitled “The Key-note,” that its chief scene of action, Coketown, is “a triumph of fact”:

It was a town of machinery and tall chimneys, out of which interminable serpents of smoke trailed themselves for ever and ever, and never get uncoiled.... It had... vast piles of building full of windows where there was a rattling and a trembling all day long, and where the piston of the steam-engine worked monotonously up and down, like the head of an elephant in a state of melancholy madness. (27)

Fact, fact, fact, everywhere in the material aspect of the town; fact, fact, fact, everywhere in the immaterial. (28)

While emphasizing the flat monotonous machinery, and fact-centred values of the industrial town (which had been already introduced in a quite memorable speech in the opening chapter), the author infuses the images of “serpents” and “an elephant” into its description, suggesting a certain scope for some elements other than “fact” to sneak in there. Moreover, the reader is later told that the great factories in Coketown look like “Fairy palaces” when they are illuminated (66).

The possibility of imaginary factors in Coketown is most conspicuously represented by Sleary’s travelling circus, which is currently staying there. As early as the 2nd chapter, we find the daughter of one of the showmen, Sissy Jupe, cutting an improper figure at the Utilitarian Gradgrind’s school. Her answers to the questions posed by Mr. Gradgrind are all unsatisfactory to this “eminently practical” man

of calculation (29). After the sudden disappearance of her father, however, the girl is taken into Mr. Gradgrind's house and comes to play a significant moral role in the family.

Although Sissy's father Mr. Jupe never comes out onto the stage before us, except through the words of his daughter or of other members of the circus, it is worth focusing on the missing father here rather than on the girl herself. This is because he is the very person who manifests that even the fantasy world of circus cannot be free from hard reality, just as Coketown, a town of fact, cannot discard the elements of fancy completely.

One of the noteworthy points about this showman is that he has "had it in his head" that his daughter should be educated properly. According to a member of the circus: "How it got into his head, I can't say; I can only say that it never got out. He has been picking up a bit of reading for her, here—and a bit of writing for her, there—and a bit of cyphering for her, somewhere else—these seven years" (39). Mr. Sleary's circus, to which he belongs, consists of a few families, all the members of which take part in the show, including their children. Mr. Sleary's daughter Josephine, who is eighteen, was already "tied on a horse at two years old," "made a will at twelve" (41), and is now an active performer in the group. Sissy herself has not started performing acrobatics, but it is highly probable that she will be apprenticed to the circus and will lead her life, just like Josephine, in the circumstances she was born into. Mr. Jupe, however, seems to have held doubts about it long before he begins to suffer his inabilities. His insistence on sending his daughter to school shows that he has somehow felt that living only in the circus world is not enough. This horse-riding man's decision, in addition, causes a closer contact of the Utilitarian world of Coketown with the fanciful world of the circus.

Another point of interest raised by Sissy's father is the problem of aging and masculinity. When Mr. Gradgrind and his friend Mr. Bounderby go to visit Mr. Jupe to talk about removing the girl from the school, as she is not suitable to its motto, they find that the father has disappeared while Sissy was out running an errand for him. One of his circus colleagues tells them that as Sissy Jupe's father has been unable to "do what he ought to do," being "short in his leaps and bad in his tumbling," he "has lately got in the way of being always goosed [hissed]" (36). He adds that Mr. Jupe could not stand it and has chosen to leave the circus group, leaving behind his beloved daughter Sissy.

The sudden disappearance of Sissy's father somewhat reminds us of the episodes of various showpeople in Dickens's *The Old Curiosity Shop*. The heroine Nell, on her flight from London into the country, first encounters two Punch and Judy show performers, who are sitting on the churchyard grass "to make some needful repairs in the stage arrangements" (123). The showmen deliberately try to finish this work before they go to the hotel because they know that "it would destroy all the delusion, and take away all the interest." A group of performers on stilts called "Grinder's lot" wear the "public costume... of the Highland kind" on the stage, while they are found by Nell attired quite differently off stage (133).

The Old Curiosity Shop, in addition, presents a quite intriguing aspect of the issue of aging and the world of showpeople. One of the showmen, Mr. Vuffin tells his friends, "Once get a giant shaky on his legs, and the public care no more about him than they do for a dead cabbage-stalk" (143). He explains that "used-up giants" are "usually kept in caravans [sic.] to wait upon the dwarfs" (143-4). They keep the aged giants not because they pity them but because they have a calculating policy: "It's better that, than letting 'em go upon the parish or about the streets... Once make a giant common, and giants will never draw again..." (143). This scene foregrounds the severe fact that aged and weak-legged giants are no longer valuable in the show-world, and the only thing they can do is to avoid "ruining the trade" by hiding themselves from public view (144).

Sissy's father, who is unable to perform well due to his age, is no better than these aged giants. Once a man loses the ability to perform his duty, he feels himself utterly worthless and has lost his own *raison d'être*, unless he can attain the position of "sage," which derives from the association of "wisdom and scholarship with old age" (Covey 61). In the circus, the leader Sleary appears to be something close to this when he declares to Mr. Gradgrind that "there ith a love in the world, not all Thelf-interetht after all, but thomething very different... People mutht be amuthed. They can't be alwayth alearning, nor yet they can't be alwayth aworking" (282). Mr. Jupe's aging, however, does not help him in this way. His behaviour is deeply related to the change in the general notion of masculinity that Kay Heath points out: "When masculine status was no longer an assured matter of class and became determined instead by personal qualities such as energy and autonomy, even the first sign of senescence was a threat, and ageing challenged men's ability to maintain mastery and therefore masculinity" (27). It seems to be no accident that Mr. Gradgrind and Mr. Bounderby are met by "a young man" of the circus, Mr. Childers, and "a diminutive boy," Master Kidderminster (34-35). These young members appear to symbolize the threat and fear which the aging man must feel of losing his position and being supplanted by the younger generation. As the story proceeds, we witness that both Mr. Bounderby, who is "seven or eight and forty" (21) and Mr. Gradgrind, a year or two older than his friend, undergo some hardships that menace their masculinity. The troubles they experience as middle-aged men chiefly take the form of various kinds of assaults from younger people and from female characters.

It would not be too much, therefore, to say that the absent circus member Mr. Jupe is actually the key person in the novel. He not only raises the significant question of man's compound relationship with the world of reality and the world of fancy, but presents the issue of man's aging and masculinity, which concerns both of these worlds. In the following chapters, we will analyze how other middle-aged characters, Mr. Bounderby, Mr. Gradgrind and Stephen Blackpool, one of the Hands in Coketown, suffer peril to their masculinity, referring to their relationship with fact/fancy.

Chapter II

The Rise of the Younger Generation

Just as Mr. Jupe feels desperate and hides himself from the world because of the embarrassment his age has brought about, other male characters experience unfavorable situations caused by those much younger than themselves.

One of them is Mr. Gradgrind. Nobody can forget his confident and impressive speech at the very beginning of the novel: "In this life, we want nothing but Facts, sir; nothing but Facts!" (9) The speaker, Thomas Gradgrind, is presented as "A man of realities. A man of fact and calculations," with an "inflexible, dry and dictatorial" voice (9–10). He, both as the owner of his school and as a father of five children, presses his principle on "the tender young imaginations that were [are] to be blown away" (10).

The offense from the younger against him, however, shows its faint symptom even in the very opening scene at Gradgrind's school. One of the schoolchildren, Sissy Jupe, makes him frown by telling him that her father is a horse-riding man. The girl blushes deeply without a word when she is asked the definition of a horse, and Mr. Gradgrind blames the girl for being "possessed of no facts" (11). The girl's failure, on the other hand, indicates that Mr. Gradgrind's principle has not so much penetrated into every child as he desires. Moreover, in answer to the following question concerning wall paper and carpets, "a few feeble stragglers" (13), one of whom is Sissy, reply against his expectation, despite the obvious suggestions preceding the question. That is, Mr. Gradgrind, together with a government officer, has asserted that they are not to paper a wall or use a carpet with representation of horses or flowers, because they neither see horses walking up and down the sides of rooms nor walk upon flowers in reality: "you are not to have anywhere, what you don't have in fact. What is called Taste, is only another name for Fact" (13). This small scene at the schoolroom foreshadows that Mr. Gradgrind and his principle will be shaken to the core by the younger generation.

His principle, which is repeatedly emphasized, suffers another small split in his own children's immoral behaviour: Mr. Gradgrind finds two of them, Louisa and Thomas, peeping in at the circus booth. When scolded by their father, they both show "jaded sullenness," but the girl looks at the father more boldly than her brother: "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" (19). This depiction strongly suggests again that Mr. Gradgrind's theory is defective and doomed to failure at some point. As Louisa is female, as well as a junior, we will mention her case later, and turn our eyes to the boys for now.

Louisa's younger brother Tom is a case that shows that his father's educational principle has a certain flaw. Unlike Bitzer, a model student at Gradgrind's school, Tom seems to have felt dissatisfaction with

the way he has been brought up. When it is decided by Mr. Gradgrind that his son should go to Mr. Bounderby's bank to be employed there, the boy says, "I'll enjoy myself a little... I'll recompense myself for the way in which I have been brought up" (55). He later confesses to Mr. Harthouse that he even persuaded his sister to marry Mr. Bounderby "because my liberty and comfort, and perhaps my getting on depended on it" (134). The match itself is the one suggested by their father, but it is Tom who backs it up for his own selfish reasons. He takes advantage of his sister's love towards him, without thinking about her own happiness.

Young Tom Gradgrind becomes deeply in debt because of gambling, and he often takes money from his married sister, who is always glad to do whatever she can for her brother. He finally steals money from the very bank he works at, and contrives to cast suspicion on one of the Hands, Stephen Blackpool. Even after his crime is discovered by his father, the son does not show any sign of regret but just grumbles at him: "So many people are employed in situations of trust; so many people, out of many, will be dishonest. I have heard you talk, a hundred times, of its being a law. How can I help laws?" (174)

To aggravate Mr. Gradgrind's predicament, the aforementioned Bitzer is involved in this issue. Bitzer, who succeeds in giving the definition of a horse at the opening schoolroom scene, seems to be the literal incarnation of Gradgrind's "fact and calculation" principles. He grows "into an extremely clear-headed, cautious, prudent young man" with "no affections or passions," who is "safe to rise in the world" (116). As a light porter at Mr. Bounderby's bank, he ingratiates himself with Mrs. Sparsit, who has been turned out of Mr. Bounderby's house due to his marriage, and earns some extra money from her for serving as a spy and informer.

Later, towards the end of the novel, Bitzer reappears after Thomas confesses before his father that he himself has robbed the bank. The shocked father recommends Thomas to go abroad, and the son is about to leave, when Bitzer rushes towards him, interfering with his departure. Although Mr. Gradgrind hints that he will pay him for overlooking his son, Bitzer flatly refuses the offer, choosing instead to be promoted to Tom's position in Mr. Bounderby's bank: "What you must always appeal to, is a person's self-interest. It's your only hold. We are so constituted. I was brought up in that catechism when I was very young, sir, as you are aware" (277). Moreover, when Mr. Gradgrind tries to soften this model student of his school by referring to the pains the school bestowed upon him, he is again rejected by his old pupil: "My schooling was paid for; it was a bargain; and when I came away, the bargain ended" (278). Here, the ultimate success of Gradgrind's educational motto works, in turn, against the very person who has advocated and lived up to it, and gives him a fatal blow.

Thus, children educated under Gradgrind's system represent, in their several ways, the defects and failures in the advocator's theory. After Mr. Gradgrind is informed by the dying Stephen that his own son Tom was in charge of the robbery at the bank, he appears "Aged and bent... and quite bowed down," and

yet he looks “a wiser man and a better man, than in the days when in this life he wanted nothing but Facts”(266) At this stage of his life, he realizes that there are significant things other than Facts, things that “could hardly be set forth in a tabular form” (92), of which he had a presentiment in Sissy Jupe when she came to his school.

A friend of Mr Gradgrind's, Mr Bounderby, another representative figure in the industrial city, is also placed in a plight by younger people. This middle-aged man presents a different case of a striking mixture of fact and fancy from his friend's. He is described as being as “perfectly devoid of sentiment” as his friend (20). Though Mr. Bounderby is now “a rich man: banker, merchant, manufacturer, and what not,” he boasts of having been “born in a ditch” (21). He explains that his mother forsook him, leaving her son to the care of his grandmother, who was a drunkard and “the wickedest and the worst old woman that ever lived” (22). He is extremely proud of himself being “a self-made man” (20), which is not to be criticized if it is true. Mr. Bounderby's myth, however, finally turns out to be a completely false story, on which his present position as a successful industrialist relies.

A blow by youth on this boaster comes, for one thing, from his friend's son, Tom Gradgrind. As we have seen above, this young man is employed at Mr. Bounderby's bank, but is “the usual exception” among “trustworthy, punctual, and industrious” clerks (115–6). According to Bitzer's secret information to Mrs. Sparsit, Tom “has never been what he ought to have been, since he first came into the place. He is a dissipated, extravagant idler. He is not worth his salt” (117). He not only idles away, but also inflicts actual damage upon his employer by his robbery.

Tom Gradgrind's robbery, by the way, involves another middle-aged man and disturbs his course of life greatly. One of the Hands, Stephen Blackpool is asked by this young man to hang about outside the bank for an hour or so on certain nights. Stephen does as he is told, but nothing happens at that time. Later, however, he comes to be suspected as a robber, because people have witnessed him loitering around the bank, as Tom intended. His employer draws up a placard, “offering Twenty Pounds reward for the apprehension of Stephen Blackpool” (238), and the spokesman of the union condemns him as a “proscribed fugitive, with a price upon his head; a fester and a wound upon the noble character of the Coketown operative” (240). The poor worker has been fired even before this, and this false infamy caused by the idle youth plunges him into a deeper abyss of misfortune.

Besides suffering damage by the crime of his young employee, Mr. Bounderby experiences hardship through his wife, who is his friend's daughter and, therefore, young enough to be his own daughter. Her casual association with James Harthouse, a newcomer to Coketown, leads to her becoming attracted to the youth. Not knowing how to cope with her own feelings and the embarrassing situation, she leaves her husband and returns to her father's house.

James Harthouse is a man of “a good family and a better appearance,” who has tried several jobs and

visited various places around the world, but whatever he did or wherever he went, he “found it a bore” (220–21). He seems to belong to a group of purposeless and idle young characters who sometimes appear in Dickensian novels. Those young men often threaten or defeat their elders not by merits in their character but by their mere youth. Henry Gowan in *Little Dorrit*, for instance, becomes a rival of middle-aged Arthur for the beautiful Minnie. The latter, without even confessing his love for the girl, retreats and gives up the position of lover to the younger man. In *David Copperfield*, a couple of intergenerational marriage, just as the Bounderbys, is disturbed by the existence of the young wife’s cousin. Although she never falls into an immoral relationship with the youth, his existence occasions doubt in people around the couple. The cousin, Jack Maldon, is described as “rather a shallow sort of young gentleman... with a handsome face, a rapid utterance, and a confident, bold air” (221), who goes to India for a certain position but soon comes back because he “couldn’t bear the climate” (483). James Harthouse, another impatient youth, becomes interested in Louisa and approaches her, bringing about a breach between her and her husband.

Mr. Bounderby’s marriage is thus terminated by the appearance of a young man, though it is he himself who decides that he will not accept Louisa unless she comes back to him by the time he sets. As his wife chooses to stay on at her father’s, Mr. Bounderby packs up her things and sends them back to Mr. Gradgrind’s, putting an end to their matrimonial life. The failure of this marriage is foreshadowed in Mrs. Sparsit’s opinion about marriage on the occasion of Stephen Blackpool’s visit to Mr. Bounderby. The first question she asks of the poor worker, who has come to consult about his wife, is “Was it an unequal marriage, sir, in point of years?” (74) When she learns that it was not, she goes on to say “I inferred, from its being so miserable a marriage, that it was probably an unequal one in point of years” (75). Although this is Mrs. Sparsit’s personal opinion, it surely predicts the misery in Mr. Bounderby’s life with a young wife. However loveless and cold their matrimony has been, Mr. Bounderby suffers damage by losing a wife with a good background, who has, so to speak, added to his status. Moreover, the motif of intergenerational marriage, or “January-May marriage,” as Esther Godfrey calls it, centering on “a romantic triangle consisting of the husband, wife, and young male rival for the young wife’s affection” (7), raises again the fear of the aging man about his position or authority being usurped by those younger than himself.

Thus, middle-aged men in *Hard Times*, who hold their own particular relationships with the worlds of fact and fantasy, have their several misfortunes brought on by the younger characters. Through these experiences, they have their masculinity, which accompanies authority and self-confidence, shaken and crucially threatened. The next chapter will discuss their relationships with female characters, another significant aspect concerning the issue of masculinity.

Chapter III

Women on the Offensive

Just as males in middle life in *Hard Times* go through predicaments caused by the younger generation, so they have to endure a variety of assaults from the opposite sex. This chapter will deal with the cases of sometimes silent but often severe blows from female characters on middle-aged men and how these cause them great anguish.

Mr. Gradgrind, who has witnessed the failure of his fact-centred education theory in the behaviour of his own son Tom and the model student Bitzer, suffers another blow from his daughter Louisa. The previous chapter mentioned that Louisa hides inside herself “a fire with nothing to burn, a starved imagination keeping life in itself somehow” (19). This “fire” will continue to lurk in her, never being completely extinguished. It is, for instance, shown in the form of “a strong, wild, wandering interest peculiar to her” (61), when she is asking Sissy some questions about the girl’s background. The light of interest Louisa emits here, however, will be drawn deeply into herself after her marriage with Mr. Bounderby is decided: “From that moment, she was impassive, proud, and cold – held Sissy at a distance – changed to her altogether” (102). Her distance from Sissy is, as it were, an indicator of her distance from her inner “fire.”

At the end of Book II, when Louisa comes back to Mr. Gradgrind, not knowing herself what to do about her relationship with James Harthouse, Mr Gradgrind witnesses “the pride of his heart and the triumph of his system lying, an insensible heap, at his feet”(212). Although Louisa has accepted, through her father’s advice, to “consider this question... simply as one of tangible Fact” (97), the match with a man far older than herself, the suffocation of her inner “fire,” cannot make her happy. The collapse of Louisa’s marriage is a definite disproof of Mr. Gradgrind’s theory. After this, when he speaks to his daughter, who has recovered, he is totally changed: he speaks “in a subdued and troubled voice, very different from his usual dictatorial manner... often at a loss for words” (216). At this point in life, Mr. Gradgrind experiences the breakdown of the whole framework his life has been based on, which extinguishes the “authority” and “resolve” associated with masculinity (Tosh 47). Here, we can see his masculinity threatened by a woman, his own daughter.

It is not her father’s masculinity alone that Louisa assaults, albeit unconsciously. Her husband, who is almost as old as her father, feels troubled by his young wife, although he had been quite pleased when the match was first arranged. He complains to his friend that he does not consider himself “at any time as dutifully and submissively treated by your [Mr. Gradgrind’s] daughter, as Josiah Bounderby of Coketown ought to be treated by his wife” (232). His words suggest that Louisa’s attitude towards her husband has subtly affronted the pride of this boastful man.

Another overt example of silent power held over a man by a woman is presented in the relationship between Mr. Bounderby and his housekeeper, Mrs. Sparsit. Mrs. Sparsit's present position derives not from her birth but from her husband's premature death and her feud with her only relative. Mr. Bounderby, while repeatedly boasting about his own low birth, never fails to refer to the high connection of his housekeeper. His attitude and ideas about this lady is typically shown in the words he utters when Sissy Jupe omits to curtsy to Mrs. Sparsit:

Now, I don't care a button what you do to *me*, because I don't affect to be anybody. So far from having high connections I have no connections at all, and I come from the scum of the earth. But towards that lady, I do care what you do; and you shall do what is deferential and respectful, or you shall not come here. (50–51)

The highly-connected lady seems to mitigate Mr. Bounderby's anger by saying that it is just an oversight not worth speaking of, "shaking her head with her State humility" (51). The phrase "State humility," on the other hand, emphasizes that she does care how she is treated by others, and that Mr. Bounderby is totally under her thumb, though she does not require of him anything on the surface.

Mrs. Sparsit's silent and weird power is especially in full swing concerning the marriage of Mr. Bounderby and Louisa. Mr. Bounderby, on hearing that his marriage with Louisa is settled in the Gradgrind family, puzzles his brains over "the necessity of imparting it to Mrs. Sparsit" (103). He even prepares for the moment by purchasing a bottle of the strongest smelling-salts. His anxieties prove how sensitive he is about Mrs. Sparsit's reaction towards this issue and how significant Mrs. Sparsit is in his life. His careful arrangements before the announcement of his betrothal demonstrates the silent but prevalent power of Mrs. Sparsit over Mr. Bounderby. The high-born lady, however, is far from being astonished, but keeps her tranquil manner, which devastates the arrogant capitalist:

'I hope you may be happy Mr. Bounderby. Oh, indeed I hope you may be happy, sir!' And she said it with such great condescension, as well as with much compassion for him, that Bounderby, — far more disconcerted than if she had thrown her work-box at the mirror, or swooned on the hearth-rug, — corked up the smelling-salts tight in his pocket, and thought, 'Now con-found this woman, who could have ever guessed that she would take it in this way!' (104)

As Mr. Bounderby does not need a housekeeper at his place any longer, he offers Mrs. Sparsit the apartments at his bank and the same "annual compliment" as she has received so far, which would not lower her on the social scale (105). This proposal, too, is accepted quite calmly on the lady's side. She

maintains her “highly superior manner” (105), and seems to be “resolved to have compassion on him, as a Victim” concerning his marriage with young Louisa (106). Mrs. Sparsit’s irresistible power is apparent in that “it was in vain for Mr. Bounderby to bluster, or to assert himself in any of his explosive ways”: the lady has a strong hold over him (106).

After Mr. Bounderby’s marriage, Mrs. Sparsit’s role as a silent ruler and watcher becomes more and more manifest. She now has a private sitting-room on the upper floor of Mr. Bounderby’s bank, “at the window of which post of observation,” she greets him “with the sympathizing recognition appropriate to a Victim” (113). The passing townspeople, moreover, regard her “as the Bank Dragon, keeping watch over the treasures of the mine” (113). She gives Bitzer, who is now employed at the place, “the respectable role of general spy and informer in the establishment” and spreads her reign over the bank, and, as a consequence, over Mr. Bounderby as well (116).

The issue of a woman having a sharp and observant eye reminds the reader of another memorable Dickensian character, Miss Mowcher in *David Copperfield*. Although she starts as a rather comical “pursy dwarf” with torrential words, her “sharp eye” pierces the disguise of the cunning servant Littimer, and leads to the arrest of that villainous man (306, 786). Mrs. Sparsit’s eye, however, does nothing to correct the ills in her master’s house; she just ignores the misconduct between young James Harthouse and Louisa who has become Mrs. Bounderby: “She kept her black eyes wide open, with no touch of pity, with no touch of compunction, all absorbed in interest. In the interest of seeing her, ever drawing, with no hand to stay her, nearer and nearer to the bottom of this new Giant’s Staircase” (198). While watching Louisa gliding down the staircase, Mrs. Sparsit has “not the smallest intention of interrupting the descent” but maliciously waits “for the last fall” (199). Her sharp eye is far from indicating the wisdom or cleverness of its holder; it rather assumes the aspect of an evil eye.

Another woman who exercises a strong or rather fatal power over this arrogant man is his mother. She is first introduced to the reader merely as “an old woman from the country, in her plain holiday clothes”, who has “come into Coketown on an expedition of rare occurrence” (78). She says that she visits the town once every year to have only “a glimpse” of her son, and goes back without even greeting him. This year, she has to leave without even “a glimpse”, for her son does not come out of his house at his usual time—she has come all the way to the town in the morning and has to go back the same long way in the afternoon. The old lady has made this annual expedition because her son has pensioned her on condition that she is “to keep down in my [her] own part, and make no boasts about him, and not trouble him”(253). She does not, however, feel any dissatisfaction with this; she declares, “I am well contented, and I can keep my pride in my Josiah to myself, and I can love for love’s own sake!” (253)

We find, of course, some other Dickensian characters that have to live separately from their parents—some of them even have to leave their parents under the care of institutions such as the almshouse or

workhouse. These cases, however, seem far better than Josiah Bounderby's, because the problem with him is that he pensions his mother off to the country in order to maintain his myth of being "a self-made man" (20). He has created a false story of his childhood, that his mother "deserted him in his infancy, and left him to the brutality of his drunken grandmother" (252), and has made people around him come to believe it.

His myth is finally revealed to be a flat lie by his own mother Mrs. Pegler, who has been ignorant that her son has utilized her absence to stigmatize her as a cruel mother. It is, in addition, another woman who brings about the occasion: Mrs. Sparsit, who has believed in Mr. Bounderby's myth, goes all the way to find the old lady in the country, believing it to be of service to Mr. Bounderby. In the conversation at Mr. Bounderby's, it is disclosed that his mother is not an "unnatural and inhuman" parent but a loving and caring one who "could pinch a bit, as it was her duty and her pleasure and her pride to do it, to help him out in life" (252, 253). This exposure is a fatal blow to this boastful man, all the more because it is witnessed by many people such as his friend Mr. Gradgrind, his employee Tom, the circus girl Sissy, and even one of the Hands, Rachael: "Detected as the Bully of humility, who had built his windy reputation upon lies, and in his boastfulness had put the honest truth as far away from him as if he had advanced the mean claim (there is no meaner) to tack himself on to a pedigree, he cut a most ridiculous figure" (254). Thus, he is plunged into the worst predicament he has ever experienced through the words and deeds of women around him. Incidentally, the fact that he is embarrassed by his mother, who is, needless to say, his elder, is another notable point in this episode, as it is particularly typical of the middle-aged to be troubled both by their juniors and seniors.

Another character who is much annoyed by a woman is Stephen Blackpool, one of "the Hands" in Coketown. Different from Mr. Gradgrind and Mr. Bounderby, who are full of self-confidence and authority, Stephen holds "no station among the Hands," but is just "a good power-loom weaver, and a man of perfect integrity"(66). He is forty years old, but is described as looking older, maybe because of the "hard life" he has had: "It is said that every life has its roses and thorns; there seemed, however, to have been a misadventure or mistake in Stephen's case, whereby somebody else had become possessed of his roses, and he had become possessed of the same somebody else's thorns in addition to his own" (66). The chief source of his current unhappiness is his drunken wife, due to whom his home has become a place for him to "dread to go to" (82). Old Stephen, as he is usually called, feels that he is always in "a muddle" which he can "never get beyond" (68). The only existence that has animated his difficult life is Rachael, his co-worker, whose word, he thinks, is "a bright good law" (68). He even feels that "if he were free to ask her, she would take him" (82). Rachael is, as it were, the sole fanciful facet in his existence, surrounded by hard reality. Stephen's fancy, however, is not allowed to soar high, just as Gradgrindian children's fancy is fettered by the strict educational theory. When he goes to consult Mr.

Bounderby about the way to get rid of his wife and marry another woman, he is told that the law that will help him “costs a mint of money” (76). The poor Hand’s fancy is crushed before it blooms.

Conclusion

As we have seen, the sudden disappearance of the horse-rider Mr. Jupe, who is, as it were, an intermediary between the real world of fact and the fanciful world of the circus, raises the issue of aging males and their threatened masculinity. In relation to that, we discussed and analyzed various cases of middle-aged men whose position, authority, or self-confidence are imperiled by their juniors and females, focusing on the practical and fact-centred Mr. Gradgrind, the boastful Mr. Bounderby with his fictional life story, and the Coketown Hand Stephen Blackpool, who is fettered in muddling reality and not allowed any room for fancy to brighten his life. Although Angus Wilson deplores the fact that Dickens fails in fully presenting Louisa, “potentially one of Dickens’s most successful women,” as “he has to abbreviate and truncate so that Louisa’s story is only a sketch for a more profound study” (Wilson 194, 195), it is natural that the author should not lay stress on her, because his real interest seems to lie in men at midlife, among whom he himself belonged at the time he wrote this novel. Besides being a superb social novel, *Hard Times* is one of those that “reveal Dickens’s increasing preoccupation with aging” (Heath 42), in terms not only of its “May-December marriage” theme, but also of the various hard times that its middle-aged male characters have to undergo.

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