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WOMEN, SOCIAL CLASS, AND THEIR RELATION AS INDIVIDUALS IN *HARD TIMES*

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Charles Dickens's novel *Hard Times* exposes different female characters belonging to different social classes, as in the Victorian period the difference of classes was something prominent giving rise to major inequalities in the fields of education, wealth, power, working and living conditions, life-style, culture... This essay focuses on the personal development of some female characters portrayed in this novel, showing their individuality, their internal conflicts, their relations as individuals. Although long after this period the roles of women started to change and to acquire more importance, maybe the one they have always deserved, in the Victorian period, women were relegated to subordinate positions in each of the social classes they shared with men.

The essay is divided in four different sections. It begins with an introduction to the novel and an introduction to the period when it was written – a framework of the situation of England in the Victorian period, Dickens's own time, which is the period in which the novel is set as well. This part focuses on the real image of an England affected by the social changes it was undergoing at that time as a consequence of Industrialization. The second part of the essay could be considered as a second introduction since it is the one that focuses on women's roles in the Victorian period. This part deals with the differences existing between men's and women's spheres and the role women played. Following the introduction, the analysis is focused on three female characters showing their role in the novel, their evolution and their reactions.

I have followed a historical, sociological and feminist approach in this essay in order to reflect the period I am dealing with, and to show the framework of society regarding gender, but focusing mainly on the roles played by women at that moment.

INTRODUCTION

- **ON DICKENS'S NOVEL *HARD TIMES***

Hard Times (1854) is a novel written by Charles Dickens (1812 – 1870), one of the most popular English writers of the Victorian era. Dickens was a middle class writer and at that time, the middle and upper classes were afraid of the working classes who, as they remained shut out from the political process, started to be hostile towards the aristocracy as well as towards the middle classes. Skilled workers, in the mid-century, were the ones who acquired enough power to create Trade Unions in order to improve their status. The reason why Dickens places himself between the middle-class and the working class may be because when he was young, he had firsthand knowledge of the injustices that the working class was suffering. He was worried about poor people and how they were being treated as a consequence of the Industrial Revolution.

This novel reflects how the Industrial Revolution affected the existing social classes at that time and it also carries out a critique against utilitarianism. Utilitarianism emerged with the Industrial Revolution and it was a contemporary movement to Romanticism. Both ideological movements co-existed during these decades. Romanticism, best represented by Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth, believed in sentimental education and relied on empiricism and on the association of ideas in personal, first-hand experience. On the contrary, Utilitarianism, with Jeremy Bentham or James Mill, believed that formal and scientific education is the only way to improve society. For them, the most important thing was whatever was useful and pragmatic; they put emphasis upon the material, context, reason and memory. John Stuart Mill (James Mill's son) tried to make the most from the two movements. He was educated in utilitarian ideas but, when he suffered a nervous breakdown, he recovered thanks to romantic poetry. He reached the conclusion that the Utilitarians' ideas were

useful but this education was not enough because the spiritual dimension and imagination were also necessary. Moreover, as he was honest and open-minded, he appreciated the values of anti-Utilitarians such as S. T. Coleridge or Thomas Carlyle, and tried to incorporate some of these values in the Utilitarian system. What Dickens does in this novel, on the other hand, is to criticize Utilitarianism from a Romantic point of view.

Moreover, Dickens was a “witness” of the problems of this period although his life had taken place far away from the industrialized north, the place where industrial conflicts were taking place. His lack of awareness of the North supposed a handicap for him to write this novel. *Hard Times* appeared in *Household Words*, a magazine created by him, and was published weekly between April and August. The novel was dedicated to Thomas Carlyle, known as “the greater teacher of the age”, who was linked with the early generation of Victorian writers such as Charles Dickens, or John Ruskin. *Hard Times* is divided into three ‘books’ and the respective titles of the three sections are *Sowing*, *Reaping* and *Garnering*, which follows a logical as well as a chronological order.

- **THE VICTORIAN CONTEXT**

The Victorian Age (1832 – 1901), the period of Queen Victoria’s reign which lasted over 63 years, follows the Romantic period, a period in which important changes took place in the life of the people which were showed in cultural productions. England changed radically from being agrarian to become an industrialized nation. By the mid-nineteenth century, Britain had become the first urbanized society in the world because of the Industrial Revolution.

The Industrial Revolution is defined as the application of power-driven machinery to the manufacturing of goods and commodities. In the 18th century all Western Europe began to industrialize to some extent but in England the process was most highly accelerated (Rempel, 2015).

While before the Industrial Revolution people made all by hand, with simple machines, or with animals, when the Industrial Revolution began, things started to be done with complex, fuel-driven machines. These were applied to textile industries, to factories... Workers had to work long hours to obtain low wages and the working conditions they had were unpleasant and even dangerous. The evolution from rural to industrial life created problems for the rural society because a large part of the population became landless and destitute; so their lives changed drastically. There was a considerable improvement of the transportation system throughout the period that was completed by the introduction of the railway system.

Moreover, during the reign of Queen Victoria, Britain was clearly patriarchal. It is important to take into account that the division of classes was prominent in Victorian society. The upper and middle classes were afraid of the working classes who, thanks to the Industrialization, started to gain power. It was in the late 30s that a working class movement emerged: Chartism (1838 – 1848). It was a working class national movement that emerged as a consequence of the political reforms of 1832 when the middle classes were allowed to vote but not the working classes. It was related to the Trade Unions. Chartists demanded six reforms, universal male suffrage being one of the main points. But the consensus on chartist petitions ignored women's suffrage because they were considered to be at a secondary level. Chartists, like their Establishment adversaries, denied women an equal role. Some leading Chartists such as William Lovett or John

Cleave believed in votes for women, but it was never a part of the Chartist movement (Simkin, 1997-2015).

ROLES IN THE VICTORIAN PERIOD

At the beginning of the Victorian period, Queen Victoria and her femininity became an icon. The 19th century saw a development in the question of the place that women occupied in English society: the private sphere. This fact led to question the identity of the sexes, male and female, as well as their corresponding spheres, the public and the private sphere. Women demanded not only more political and legal rights, but also educational, economic and social opportunities. They wanted to have more opportunities than the role of being mother and wife. Queen Victoria reflected these two sides; on the one hand, she was portrayed as an ideal wife and mother; but on the other hand, she was a monarch.

Although the essay is not going to focus on the changing political situation of women in the Victorian age, it is important to keep in mind some basic concepts. “Although petitions to Parliament advocating women’s suffrage were introduced as early as the 1840s, women did not get the vote until 1918. But prior to that, until the passage of the Married Women’s Property Acts (1870 – 1908), married women could not own or handle their own property” (Greenblatt, 2012 : 1031). Victorians, apart from being worried about legal and economic limitations on women’s lives, they were worried about the nature of woman (Greenblatt, 2012: 1033). As Justin M’Carthy said in an essay on novels in the *Westminster Review* (July 1864), “The greatest social difficulty in England today is the relationship between men and women. The principal difference between ourselves and our ancestors is that they took society as they found it while we are self-conscious and perplexed. The institution of marriage might almost

seem just now to be upon trial”. This assertion goes beyond marriage and focuses on “the family itself, and, most particularly, the traditional roles of women as wives, mothers and daughters” (qtd in Abrams [ed], 1993: 902). Men and women had different roles in society; thus, the public sphere was for men, which relegated women to the private sphere. Men’s role focused on business, commerce and politics; whereas women’ role in the upper and middle-class was to be wife, mother and daughter. On the other hand, women peasants, servants and working-class women had to work, often for a salary too. Ada Nield Chew refers to women work as “under-paid, over-worked ‘Factory Girl’. The rates paid for the work done by us are so fearfully low as to be totally inadequate to. We eat, we sleep, we work, endlessly, ceaselessly work, from Monday morning till Saturday night, without remission” (qtd in Greenblatt [ed], 2012: 1606). John Ruskin (1951: 98) also supports these existing differences between men and women, and their roles in their spheres respectively.

The man’s power is active, progressive, defensive. He is eminently the doer, the creator, the discoverer, the defender. His intellect is for speculation and invention; his energy for adventure, for war, and for conquest, wherever war is just, wherever conquest necessary. But the woman’s power is for rule, not for battle, - and her intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement, and decision. She sees the qualities of things, their claims, and their places. He guards the woman within his house.

Ruskin’s thought that woman’s place is in the home because there man can protect her from the outside. He states that “wherever a true wife comes, this home is always round her” (Ruskin, 1951: 99). In *The Princess*, Tennyson voices the doctrine known as “separate spheres” when he says that “Man for the field and woman for the heart: Man for the sword and for the needle she: Man with the head and woman with the heart: Man

to command and woman to obey” (qtd in Greenblatt [ed], 2012: 1033). These words portray the true and sad image of woman in the Victorian period. Sad because many intelligent women felt they were not given the importance they deserved. So, they wondered, which is the nature of woman?

John Stuart Mill, who was the most prominent Victorian philosopher and defender of women’s right, argues in *The Subjection of Women* that “what is now called the nature of women is eminently an artificial thing – the result of forced repression in some directions, unnatural stimulation in others” (Mill 1912: 451). Mary Wollstonecraft was an earlier Feminist writer who reasoned along similar lines observing that women constitute an oppressed class with regard to the established hierarchy of social classes. The nature of woman is an artificial thing because it has been caused by the way society is established, relegating women to the second place and preventing them from developing their abilities. Mill (1912: 428) does not agree with this conception of men and women’s difference explaining that this difference is wrong in itself, and arguing the necessity to establish a principle of equality. Furthermore, he states that “men do not want solely obedience of women, they want their sentiments” (Mill, 1912: 443). Men wanted a woman who loved them, they did not want a slave, but a favourite that may be at the same time be wife and mother. “No matter what part in society individual women in fact play, traditional images focus on their domestic (and sexual) roles” (Stubbs, 1979: ix).

But the vision of woman itself changes with regard to the different social classes. On the one hand, women from middle- and upper-class had nothing more important to do than to be mothers and wives. On the other hand, women from the lower-classes had a working life laboring as servants in the houses of the rich, or working in factories long hours for low payment and under appalling conditions. Bad

working conditions and underemployment led many women to prostitution. Although prostitution was something important in that period, this essay does not focus on this phenomenon because the novel of *Hard Times* does not project any woman of these characteristics literally. In the metaphorical sense, though, the reader deals with a character that is prostituted. In *David Copperfield*, for example, Dickens portrays the image of fallen women in the characters of Emily and Martha. But what Dickens does in that novel is to describe these characters as victims and subjects of betrayal instead of considering them a source of disease when they lose their chastity.

“The ideal woman that male authors dream of is always an angel” (Gilbert, 1984: 20) and not a monster. In the Victorian period, the prototypical female character is ‘The Angel in the House’, a submissive woman under patriarchal values. Michael Slater has argued that in the decade 1847 to 1857 Dickens was “apparently preoccupied with women as the insulted and injured of mid-Victorian England” and that the novels in his period feature more women characters in more prominent positions than do other of his novels. But he also sees Dickens as “voicing no general condemnation of prevailing patriarchal beliefs and attitudes¹.” Dickens’s position is ambiguous because he was an author who defended social values but at the same time he liked women in the domestic sphere. That may be the reason why Dickens’s female characters are often represented as black and white, rarely as grey. The reader can find mixed feelings of love, hatred and guilt. To understand Dickens’s view of women, an important aspect to consider is the difficult relationship he had with the women of his family. He did not forgive his mother for putting him to work, he resented that his sister was allowed to study while he was required to do manual work; and finally, he had a difficult relationship with his wife Catherine, and their marriage ended in separation.

¹*Dickens and Women* (Stanford, 1983), pp. 243-4, quoted in Peck (1995: 199).

In *Hard Times*, Dickens presents Louisa, a mistress and a “whore” (like Nancy in *Oliver Twist*); and Sissy and Rachael, both secondary characters who have nothing to do except to radiate “simple love and truth” (Slater, 1983: 259). The three characters live in a patriarchal society and have to face different situations because they belong to a different social class. It is the only novel of Dickens's middle period that does not present to the reader a heroine to admire or love, although we do have Sissy, and Rachael.

REPRESENTATION OF FEMALE CHARACTERS IN *HARD TIMES* AND THEIR SEARCH FOR INDIVIDUAL AUTHENTICITY.

The analysis presented down below focuses on three female characters who have different social status and whose life follows different paths. But there is one moment when their lives come together, something important for the evolution of each one as individuals in a patriarchal society.

LOUISA: THE FAILED ANGEL IN THE HOUSE

Louisa, the main female protagonist of the novel, does not portray the image of the typical Victorian woman. She conveys to the reader how harmful it is to live under the ideals of the tyranny of those rich people who only look for their own interests. “You are not impulsive, you are not romantic, you are accustomed to view everything from the strong dispassionate ground of reason and calculation”, her father says (*HT*, 87)². She is the elder daughter of Thomas Grandgrid, a Member of Parliament and a wealthy and retired merchant in Coketown. Thomas Gradgrind is sponsoring a school and his philosophy is based only and exclusively on Facts. The education of Louisa and

²Charles Dickens, *Hard Times* (2013 ed). Hereafter abbreviated as HT.

her brother Tom is based upon Facts, something she disagrees with because it represses her to develop her true self:

“What do I know, father,” said Louisa in her quiet manner, “of tastes and fancies; of aspirations and affections; of all that part of the nature in which such light things might have been nourished? What escape have I had from problems that could be demonstrated, and realities that could be grasped?” (...). The baby-preference that even I have heard of as common among children, has never had its innocent resting-place in my breast. You have been so careful of me, that I never had a child’s heart. You have trained me so well, that I never dreamed a child’s dream. You have dealt so wisely with me, father, from my cradle to this hour, that I never had a child’s belief or a child’s fear” (*HT*, 91, 92).

With the Industrialization, factory workers, “the Hands”, etc; were treated as if they were manufactured goods or objects. Louisa, in this way, feels like them and she tries and makes his father understand “that she is a living creature and therefore no Houyhnhnm, but in vain” (Leavis, 1972: 272).

Louisa’s father is also Louisa’s mentor, the one in charge of guiding her. She is only able to develop her rational side, the one imposed over her, forgetting the emotional side to which she does not have access until the moment she realizes she is not happy with her life. The figure of Louisa’s mother, Mrs Gradgrind, on the contrary, is almost absent. Hirsch (1989: 57) argues that the absence of the mother “gives the space in which the heroine’s plot and her activity of plotting can evolve.” Mrs Gradgrind might be expected to suggest the alternative to patriarchal discourse. But in *Hard Times*, the mother is represented as an object rather than as a person: “Mrs

Gradgrind, weakly smiling and giving no other sign of vitality, looked (as she always did) like an indifferently executed transparency of a small female figure, without enough light behind it” (*HT*, 22). She does not share her husband’s system of education, rather, she disapproves of it; but as she is ill, she does not have enough energy either to face him or to help her children. “But if Dickens is cavalier about her presence, he strongly marks her absence from that nineteenth-century site for Mother, as idealized figure in her children’s memories or in their imaginative dreams of virtue” (Peck, 1995: 204). *Hard Times* does not focus on the figure of the mother; it rather represents female characters who live with male figures and who have to evolve by themselves because male figures act as a blockage rather than an ease. As Louisa is portrayed as an object, she “might move from being a subject who is subjected-to, as we call it, to one who is able to chart, within certain limits of course, her own destiny” (Freeman, 1993: 188). We could say that Louisa lives a similar experience to Jill Ker Conway’s according to Freeman’s book *Rewriting the Self: History, Memory, Narrative*.

She is the one that represents the pattern of what Charles Dickens criticizes: Utilitarianism criticized from a Romantic point of view. What he criticizes is what Louisa represents through the novel and that, at the end, is discovered not to work: Utilitarian ideas. But as she evolves, this Utilitarianism that Louisa embodies is destabilized by her affair with Harthouse. It is when this character appears in her path that she realizes she is repressed and she wants to escape from this utilitarian world. As pointed out in the introduction, advocates of Utilitarianism believed that education is the only way to improve society, and Louisa is the character that at first lives under these ideals; but in the end, she opens her eyes and refutes this belief, this education based on Facts. Reading the whole novel, the reader realizes that Louisa is a character that learns through experience; her journey is from blindness to insight.

There is a moment in the novel in which she is between the devil and the deep blue sea when she is asked in marriage by Bounderby, “a banker, merchant, manufacturer and what not. A big, loud man, with a stare, and a metallic laugh” (*HT*, 21); and the most remarkable thing, a man very much older than her. “Louisa, my dear, you are the subject of a proposal of marriage that has been made to me” (*HT*, 87). “Father,” said Louisa, “do you think I love Mr Bounderby?” (*HT*, 88). She tries to make his father realize she does not love Mr Bounderby.

The question I have to ask myself is, shall I marry him? [...] “Certainly, my dear.” “Let it be so. Since Mr Bounderby likes to take me thus, I am satisfied to accept his proposal. Tell him, father, as soon as you please, that this was my answer. Repeat it, word for word, if you can, because I should wish him to know what I said” (*HT*, 91).

She does not marry for love but for interest; but not for her own but for her brother's and father's interest. Louisa is a puppet in men's hands; she is their victim. “Again, she is living through them without understanding their mode of operation and without seeing that there are quite different ways of interpreting her life than the ones she had been using” (Freeman, 1993: 187). She embodies the innocence of childhood. If her pattern to follow is her father, she has to do, out of respect and education, what he commands. From this moment onwards, Louisa becomes a wife, apart from being a daughter and a sister. Louisa's marriage follows the pattern of nineteenth century women's role: be married and stay at home. As Vicinus (x) says, “young ladies were trained to have no opinions lest they seem too formed and too definite for a young man's taste, and thereby unmarketable as a commodity”. Once again, the public sphere is for men and the private sphere is for women. Stubbs (1971: 5) corroborates this, arguing that “identification of men with the external world of work and women with the internal world of feelings was

intensified and exaggerated in the Victorian period through the absolute exclusion of middle-class women from any form of labour.”

Still Louisa does not represent the typical female figure of the period; indeed, she represents a generation of married women who face something atypical of this period, divorce. Dickens himself experienced at firsthand not divorce but separation when he separated from his wife Catherine. It was likely that he had started to have an affair with an actress before the marital separation (Tomalin, 2011). In the Victorian period, only the upper class, the rich people, could afford to pay for divorce; for poor people it was something impossible because they had neither rights nor cash. The novel illustrates this fact with a poor character, Stephen Blackpool, who wants to get a divorce from his wife, but he cannot afford it because he has no money and the laws are for the rich.

“But it’s not for you at all. It costs money. It costs a mint of money”. “How much might that be?” Stephen calmly asked. “Why, you’d have to go to Doctors’ Commons with a suit, and you’d have to go to a court of Common Law with a suit, and you’d have to go to the House of Lords with a suit, and you’d have to get an Act of Parliament to enable you to marry again, and it would cost you (if it was a case of very plain sailing), I suppose from a thousand to fifteen hundred pound,” said Mr Bounderby. “Perhaps twice the money.” “There’s no other law?” “Certainly not” (*HT*, 70, 71).

The best representative of the rich in the novel is Mr Bounderby, a wealthy man who has power. Although he is now a self-made man, readers are not to forget his humble origins. He is a selfish man looking only for his own interest and being superior to other characters. It is a clear example that it is money that rules society in this novel.

Although Dickens was never a radical, he criticized unjust social conditions feeling compassionate with the victims of English society and he also contributed to important social reforms. Through the novel, he wanted to expose social problems. He wanted English society to be aware of the conditions of poor people. In *Hard Times*, he was influenced by the social criticism of Carlyle and his critique of capitalist dehumanization.

As Louisa is not happy with Bounderby, she comes back home reproaching her father her situation:

“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!” (*HT*, 185).

This passage shows the reader that Louisa’s character is more complex than she seemed; the heartless character is being stronger than before, the alienated character is evolving.

She transforms herself, she is no longer “The Angel in the House” of the beginning of the novel. As Ciugureanu (2011: 354) says, “when a woman opposes the patriarchal world, [...] she becomes an object of ridicule, of grotesque figure, a monster, a stereotype pitted against that of the angel of the house.” “What does it mean for human beings to be able to create all these new things? It means that in addition to being subjects in the sense of being subjected-to the determinative power of culture, we are subjects who have the power – in principle, if not always in practice – to recreate both culture itself and our place within it” (Freeman, 1993: 186). Although she is

repressed by masculine figures, she comes to know what she wants and what her role in society is; but she fears how to act and behave towards her father especially because he was the one who encouraged her to marry that middle-age man who tripled her age. Louisa's character exemplifies what Freeman (1993: 185) observes, that "one may become aware of being determined and, at the same time, liberated from the very forces responsible".

SISSY: EMPATHY AND FANCY

Cecilia Jupe or Sissy, the key point in the development of Louisa, embodies tenderness. "I am a poor girl," returned Sissy. "I was separated from my father – he was only a stroller – and taken pity on by Mr Gradgrind" (*HT*, 202). She is described by herself with these words, although in the novel, characters see her with different eyes: "A young woman [...] plainly dressed, very quiet, very pretty. [...] She was even prettier than he had at first believed. Her face was innocent and youthful, and its expression remarkably pleasant" (*HT*, 198).

She is the daughter of a clown in Sleary's circus and the social group the circus world belongs to works as an antithesis to Gradgrind's school, since their philosophy is based on fancy rather on Facts, something Thomas Gradgrind does not accept. He tries to impose over Sissy his model of education when she is "adopted"; although it is something very difficult or almost impossible for an innocent girl who is a product of another environment. This represents "how wide the gulf is between Gradgrind's and Bounderby's world of facts and money, and Sleary's circus world of simplicity of spirit and natural affection" (Selby, 1993: 29). Yuval Noah Harari (2015) states that

"money is probably the most successful fiction ever invented by humans, but it has no value in itself just as human rights are not a biological reality. So money

is not a physical or biological reality because you cannot eat it, you cannot drink it, it has no value. We humans have created a reality consisting of stories, of fictional entities that exist only in our imagination. And the amazing thing is, that, as history went along, the fictional reality became more and more powerful, until today, the most powerful forces in the world are these fictional entities”.

The novel of *Hard Times* shows the reader the difference between facts and fancy, without establishing that fact is more important than fancy although Dickens barely defends fancy through Sleary’s mouth. For Dickens, fancy cannot be excluded from fact. Just as fiction cannot be excluded from fact, fact is also necessary for a balanced life. As a result, the youngest Gradgrind daughter, raised both by the factual Gradgrind and the fanciful Sissy, it is the one that represents rightness³.

Sissy’s entrance in the Gradgrind world shows an innocent and inexperienced character entering the world of utilitarianism and industrialism. She is a character that knows very little about the real world and its dangers, and her attendance of school was worthless: “you are extremely deficient in your facts. Your acquaintance with figures is very limited. You are altogether backward, and below the mark” (*HT*, 83). But in spite of being deficient in her facts, Sissy is true to herself. “Sissy’s incapacity to acquire this kind of ‘fact’ or formula, her unaptness for education, is manifested to us, on the other hand, as part and parcel of her sovereign and indefeasible humanity” (Leavis, 1972: 261). She represents innocence and truth defeating worldly wisdom and hypocrisy. She has not been dominated by the mercenary values of the upper classes and the educated members of society. Presented as an illiterate and ignorant person, the events in the novel make the reader realize that she has the knowledge most worth having, the knowledge of the heart and a spontaneous intelligence of the truth of human motives

³ SparkNotes Editors (2016)

and needs. She does not progress as well as Mr Gradgrind would like, but it is because utilitarianism does not fit with her.

Louisa and Sissy's relationship could be defined as a hate-love relationship that becomes very special since Sissy's becomes the female heroine who saves Louisa; a development that makes her relationship authentic. They perceive the world from a different perspective since they belong to a different social class. Louisa's life is based on Facts and she has to accept, rather for obligation than for desire, what is imposed on her. On the contrary, Sissy's life is based on Fancy and she does what makes her happy. But in spite of that, the novel discovers Sissy will help Louisa's evolution to develop her true self.

Louisa and Sissy share in common not only their mother's absence, but also the desertion of their father, although in a different way. Sissy becomes orphaned and Louisa, as Selby (1993: 11) says, "prostitutes herself to Bounderby's money and power." When Louisa returns home, at first, she does not accept Sissy as being part of her life in the family house on equal terms. There is an element of jealousy in Louisa's lack of understanding towards Sissy. This situation changes when Sissy helps Louisa to adapt to a change based on seeing the world from a different perspective from the one taught by her stubborn father. Sissy functions in the end as a female role model for Louisa. This shows a lower-class character capable of helping the other, and even capable of love in spite of rejections. Louisa is a cold person suffering the consequences of a mistaken upbringing by her selfish father whose only aims are Facts and money. Both characters influence each other. Sissy feels Louisa is a better person because she knows more, but the reader realizes Sissy is the character from which Louisa is going to learn most.

RACHAEL: THE HONEST AND UNLUCKY WOMAN

Rachael, the character who represents the working class, is the one in charge of showing the most inhuman side of the middle class. Rachael, a woman with “a quiet oval face, dark and rather delicate, irradiated by a pair of very gentle eyes, and further set off by the perfect order of her shining black hair. It was not a face in its first bloom; she was a woman five and thirty years of age” (*HT*, 62). She represents the factory woman worker of the 19th century and she is defined as

a working woman, [...] a woman of pensive beauty, always dressed in black, but sweet-tempered and serene, and even cheerful; who, of all the people in the place, alone appeared to have compassion on a degraded, drunken wretch of her own sex; [...] a woman working, ever working, but content to do it, and preferring to do it as her natural lot (*HT*, 252).

Rachael’s character could be compared to Agnes in *David Copperfield’s* novel. Agnes is David’s true love and second wife, but in the case of Rachael, she is less fortunate. Although Rachael is Stephen’s true love, she does not become his second wife for two reasons: first because Stephen cannot obtain divorce from the drunken woman and then because he “has been killed by falling down an unfenced mineshaft” (Flint, 1987: 11). But if Stephen had not died what would have happened with these characters? Rachael and Stephen cannot live their true story of love because the law keeps Stephen in his unhappy marriage.

Rachael, like Louisa, is a character that suffers in the novel. She questions Louisa’s interest, being Bounderby’s wife, of wanting to help Stephen: “Say, young lady, if you please,” pursued Rachael, “why, in an evil hour, you ever came to Stephen’s that night.” “I felt compassion for him,” said Louisa, her colour deepening, “and I

wished to know what he was going to do, and wished to offer him assistance” (*HT*, 214). Instead of helping, her intervention is seen more as a handicap than anything else. Rachael’s understanding of the middle class is clear and convincing: “the like of you don’t know us, don’t care for us, don’t belong to us” (*HT*, 214). But Rachael does not know that Louisa does not embody the ideals of the class she belongs to. Louisa defends herself from Rachael’s accusation: “Rachael, you will not distrust me one day, when you know me better” (*HT*, 216). Rachael is a humble woman and Louisa is an innocent one in the hands of the greediest persons of Coketown. It is understandable that Rachael should not trust Louisa because of the differences existing among them. Whereas Louisa is a character who represents the middle class, Rachael belongs to the working class. There is a widening gulf between “the middle-class woman, with no economic function to perform in the home and debarred by a patriarchal ideology from working outside it, became a dependent in a more direct way than ever before, [...] and the working-class woman who had become a wage-earner outside home, albeit an exploited one, and whose life was untouched in any material way by the ideals of Victorian domesticity” (Stubbs, 1979: 3).

CONCLUSIONS

Most often, depictions of the lives of 19th-century women are described in negative terms because they are in a limited sphere. *Hard Times* is a clear example of it because this novel gives an accurate portrait of the limitations women in that period had. In the novel, Dickens suggests Louisa has been prevented from developing her feminine traits. But, in some cases, images of women in the private sphere are not consistently negative on women who use this positive image to demand more access and recognition. Charlotte Brontë, a woman writer of the 19th century, was one of the first modern women to contradict patriarchal society through her writings; a society in which women

were considered social adornments. She refused to live under the patriarchal rule and created a woman with a personality similar to the one she possessed: free thought, intellect and with a strong moral character. “Through her character, Brontë gave the gift of the modern woman, a woman determined to make her own way, and live her life by her own set of standards, dictated not by society but by herself, and herself alone” (Lowes, 2008).

The novel *Hard Times* provides the reader different female characters, different social class, and together with it different perspectives and feelings. There are different authors’ opinions regarding the different female roles played in that period. Some, like Ruskin, defended the conservative values of womanhood; whereas others as John Stuart Mill did not agree with women's roles under patriarchal values. And we may remember too, Mary Wollstonecraft as a major woman thinker contradicting this patriarchal society before the time of Dickens.

With the difference of classes, *Hard Times* shows different female protagonists. Sissy and Rachael represent the Victorian model. Sissy embodies Dickens’s truth. She is the only one that escapes from the Gradgrind-Bounderby system. Dickens presents in *Hard Times* a distinct sense of optimism: “if truth and a simplicity of spirit are to be maintained in the face of relentless indoctrination by political systems, economic systems, or whatever, it is on characters like Sissy Jupe that Dickens puts his trust” (Selby, 1989: 20). She is the affectionate, helpful and gentle character who becomes an indispensable presence in the house. Sissy, whose emotional life is guided by “fancy” and not merely by “fact”, in spite of suffering too, is the one that helps the others and the only one to find complete happiness in her later life. Moreover, she is the one rewarded at the end of the novel: “The sisterly bond between Louisa and Sissy grows ever stronger over the years, with Louisa doting on Sissy’s children” (Selby, 1993: 11).

Rachael, on her side, is the one who represents the social injustices working class people suffer. She portrays the image of the most poor and misunderstood working class women. And although she represents happiness and purity, she cannot avoid suffering.

On the other hand, Louisa, the misfit middle class Victorian girl of the 19th century, develops from not being able to show her true self to realize she has feelings, although hidden, but feelings. She does not know how to express them; she is their prisoner. At first, she has “a life of feminine submission, of ‘contemplative purity’, a life of silence” (Gilbert, 1984: 36) but her life changes to a life of female rebellion. Louisa fears her own future but she has to face it whatever the cost. At the end, she succeeds in finding her way, her individuality facing the reality in which she is immersed but with Sissy’s help.

It is true enough: many of us move through our lives rather blindly, operating under the assumption that the status quo, being fundamentally ‘in the nature of things’, must be maintained and upheld, perhaps at all costs. But it is no less true that we, human beings, have also been endowed with the rather remarkable capacity to name the status quo, to see what is given as such, to have some awareness of the situation in which we find ourselves.[...] In addition to being subjects in the sense of being subjected-to the determinative power of culture, we are subjects who have the power – in principle, if not always in practice – to recreate both culture itself and our place within it (Freeman, 1993: 186).

This quotation may apply to *Hard Times* and Louisa because finally, the angel-woman wakes up and reveals she can manipulate, she can create her own path.

We might think that Louisa’s future is open since Dickens portrays her alone. As readers, we could interpret that Dickens gives her a second chance, and a chance she

could use to live a new life far away from the restrictions imposed over her under a patriarchal world. She could become a woman who opposes to the domestic life, to marriage, to the law since her father reacts and realizes he is mistaken. She is a full expression of human possibilities. She could represent what Charlottë Brontë embodied: a new modern woman who is characterized by being intelligent, independent, and able to make her own decisions. But she cannot fully represent it because she seems much more caught in classical Victorianism than that.

It is in the figure of Louisa and Sissy where Dickens puts the main emphasis in this novel. Louisa is portrayed as a failed “Angel in the House”, but Sissy acts as another “Angel in the House” since Dickens conveys her as a growing potency working in the Utilitarian Gradgrind’s house and being the one that embodies Dickens truth. As stated above, Dickens’ view of women was ambiguous because although he defended social values, he liked the roles women occupied in that period. According to that, it does not appear to be necessary questioning women human rights or their position in society. So, there are limitations in the portraits of women Dickens gives due to the way in which he conceived of gender roles. The solutions he offers are individual solutions; ‘a change of heart’ which makes the protagonists see and understand their defects, as happens with the three female characters analyzed in this novel.

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