

## **‘No Way Out’: Issues of Marriage and Divorce in Dickens’s *Hard Times***

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Charles Dickens’s (1812-1870) *Hard Times* (1854) deftly weaves a gripping narrative dealing with industrial growth; huddled human lives devoid of warmth and love; a persistent tussle between fact and fancy; life and mechanisation; deteriorating familial relations between husbands and wives; son/daughter and father; friends-turned-relatives/strangers; and crushed childhood, in a society based on Jeremy Bentham’s (1748-1832) doctrine of Utilitarianism. Dickens shows the adverse effects of Utilitarianism on education as well as labour in *Hard Times* to critique this policy which focussed on “the greatest happiness for the greatest number” (Abrams 1839). The novelist, however, views it as extracting maximum output from labour at the cost of their health and similarly making ‘little vessels’, ‘little pitchers’ and ‘empty jars’ (*HT* 14) to be filled with facts only, thus completely neglecting and negating the spiritual and imaginative side of life that later results in the rudderless existence of the Gradgrind children Louisa and Tom and their subsequent disillusionment. This article, however, limits its discussion to the issue of marriage and divorce during the Victorian era and Dickens’s concern for the poor labourers for whom seeking a divorce could never have been possible given the intricate processes and huge expenses. The paper specifically addresses Stephen Blackpool’s case to reflect how divorce was actually the privilege of the rich and not a right of the poor. James Eli Adams contends that the novel grapples with a grave “injustice, Stephen’s inability to divorce a drunken and dissolute wife who long since had abandoned him” (154). Apart from it, the case of Josiah Bounderby and Louisa would also be considered to highlight how even the rich in some circumstances could not have procured divorce.

Set in Coketown, an industrial city, the novel revolves around Thomas Gradgrind, a businessman-turned-arithmetician in Parliament, his invalid wife and their five children, the eldest of whom, Louisa and Tom, find major attention in the novel. On the other hand, there is a self-proclaimed, self-made man, a banker and factory owner, Josiah Bounderby, and his widowed secretary, Mrs. Sparsit, who takes care of the business and the home as the former is still a bachelor. In the factory that Bounderby owns, Stephen Blackpool and his friend Rachael are work hands. Since Thomas Gradgrind does not allow his children to indulge in fancy, Louisa becomes apathetic and is pushed by her father to marry his friend Josiah Bounderby who is more than twice her age. Tom, on the other hand, dissipates his energies, indulges in cheating and financial fraud, and soon gets addicted to tobacco and alcohol. It is he who at the end implicates Stephen in a bank robbery and also reveals all the secrets of his sister to James Harthouse to indulge in his vices.

Stephen Blackpool in the chapter ‘No Way Out’ finds himself ensnared in a situation from which there is literally no way out for him. Looking older than his age in his early forties as “he had a hard life” which was full of “thorns” (73), Stephen’s placid state of mind is time and again

disrupted by the hide-and-seek game played by his adulteress wife. Though she is an insignificant character as she does not even have a name, her presence unsettles him completely as she drinks, takes out his articles, sleeps with other men and disappears and reappears, rendering him disqualified to even seek a divorce. He recoils and cringes on finding his wife on the bed meant for him after a day's harrowing work and spends the night on a wooden piece in a pensive and agitated state of mind. Even paying her off for the last five years does not yield him any good as she again returns. It is this concern in his mind which makes him seek Bounderby's advice regarding divorce. The latter opines: "You would 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 . . . from a thousand to fifteen hundred pounds" (83). This episode is particularly important to understand not only the predicament of Stephen but also to scrutinise the Victorian laws of divorce and remarriage.

The law was partisan and prejudiced against women as Sir William Blackstone reveals in his *Commentary on the Laws of England* (1765-1769) that "the husband and wife are one person in law: that is, the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during her marriage, or at least is incorporated or consolidated into that of her husband, under whose wing, protection and cover, she performs everything" (443). It is indicative of a woman's losing her selfhood, property, and immersing her identity in that of her husband, but Dickens does not espouse only the case of women but rather pleads for a love-bound-married life, and the absence of which should not be deterred by law from easily getting a divorce.

John D Baird analyses the Victorian laws regarding divorce and says how the process and the expenses involved could not be borne by the poor. He opines that while divorce could be attained on grounds of cruelty and adultery, to achieve one was not, all the while, easy: "Whereas women could and frequently did win divorce from adulterous husbands in the ecclesiastical courts, the House of Lords steadfastly refused to pass a divorce act in favour of a wife on the ground of her husband's adultery alone. A wife could get a complete release only when her husband's adultery was compounded with some aggravating circumstance, such as incest, or cruelty" (403).

Frederick Clifford provides an example of a Victorian woman Mrs. Dawson who won her case in the Ecclesiastical Court as her husband would flog her but "the House of Lords rejected her Bill on six occasions" (qtd. in Baird 403). This cumbersome process made divorce a luxury, beyond the reach of the common people as well as the rich in some cases. The process demanded that the petitioner had to file a case of criminal conversation against the person who slept with his wife which would be followed by a hearing in the House of Lords. Thereafter the matter was examined by the House of Commons and then finally a Private Act of Parliament was to be enacted to enable the divorcee the luxury of a second marriage.

Under such laws, *Hard Times* was written. Stephen Blackpool can secure divorce as he has all the necessary grounds. His wife is poor and has committed adultery which can be discerned from the fact that she suffers from syphilis, a sexually transmitted disease, making her weaker each day and causing sores on her skin. The disease is a later development and as a consequence of her extra-marital conjugal relations as it occurs a long time after Stephen has stopped having sexual relation with her and moreover, he is not afflicted with the same disease. However, he does not have the privilege of being rich. Since he is poor he cannot pay 1500 pounds which is a huge amount for a labourer. Since he is in one-sided love with Rachael, another thirty-five year

old hand at the factory, he wants to marry her. But the law does not permit him to marry another without divorcing the first.

Stephen's situation is similar to a real court proceeding that took place at Warwick Assizes in 1855. A judge named Maule addresses a man convicted of bigamy as he had married another woman as his first wife had deserted him. The problem with him was that he had not sought a divorce:

"Your case is a very clear one, and I doubt not you would have obtained your divorce. [After filing a suit in the Ecclesiastical Court] you had only to obtain a Private Act of Parliament to dissolve your marriage. This you would get as a matter of course, on the payment of the proper fees and proof of the facts. You might have then lawfully married again. . . . I see you would tell me these proceedings would cost you £ 1000, and that your small-stock-in-trade is not worth £ 100. Perhaps that may be so. *The law has nothing to say.* (emphasis mine) (John Cordy Jeaffreson qtd. in Wagner 166).

It lucidly corroborates Stephen's case where law was the biggest obstacle to get a divorce.

Josiah Bounderby's marriage to Louisa also ends similarly. The former being haughty, being twice his spouse's age, fails to fathom her emotions. Since James Harthouse woos her, she does fall in love but cannot take a decision and thus descends at her father's door and rues that his philosophy has crushed the "better angel" in her into a "demon" (215). Gradgrind understands that Louisa's qualities, virtues have been "harshly neglected" (239) and implores Bounderby to let her stay at his home so that she could be restored to normalcy. Bounderby, however, warns of deserting her if she does not return by next afternoon and as she does not, he resumes "a bachelor's life" (240). Now in the case of Bounderby, he is rich and can secure divorce by even paying five thousand pounds but since he cannot accuse his wife of adultery and is not cruel in his treatment of her, he cannot.

The marriage and divorce issue needs to be probed more in so far as Dickens presents the characters of both Bounderby and Stephen Blackpool. The latter is invested by the novelist with an impeccable nature, unquestionable integrity, and unfailing virtue. While he leaves the factory to work at some other place due to his troubled family life, he becomes a target of the leader of the labourers Slackbridge's scorn. On the other hand, when he refuses to divulge any secrets about the workers' plans regarding strike or other means of protest, he is equally shunned by Bounderby. Moreover, the way he is implicated by young Tom in the bank robbery invites the sympathy of the readers.

Rachael, with unflinching faith in the virtue of Stephen, pleads for his innocence : "The masters against him on one hand, the men against him on the other, he only wantin [sic] to work hard in peace and do what he felt right. Can a man have no soul of his own, no mind of his own" (247)? It shows how there is this trait of sympathy and kindness or a bond between the underdogs of society: "Rachael's caring affection for Stephen is testimony of innate compassion among the lower classes" (Sicher 320).

Louisa like Rachael believes fully in Stephen's honesty and feels pity for him when he is fired by her husband: "By the prejudice of his own class, and by the prejudices of the other, he is sacrificed alike? Are the two so deeply separated in this town, that there is no place whatever for an honest workman between them" (162)? Louisa feels Stephen Blackpool as sandwiched between two unfeeling/ insensitive worlds. Further, even when Louisa feels moved at her husband's ill-treatment of Stephen and offers him some money, he does not accept the whole amount but takes

only two pounds and that too with a commitment to repay that: "I'll tak two pound. I'll borrow 't for t' pay 't back" (163).

All this shows that Stephen Blackpool was a man of principles and Dickens deliberately depicts him in such a positive light so that the readers sympathise with a worker and condemn the pro-rich laws of divorce when marriage was turning out to be a hell for him. John Baird, therefore, views this novel as a protest "against the inhumanity of social attitudes which find expression in the law. . . such an attitude can enforce only misery and human waste; it cannot mend a broken marriage, but only turn it into a prison" (412).

The other case under consideration is that of Bounderby and Louisa. Though much is said earlier, it is important to contrast the character of the banker with that that of Stephen. His very first appearance and conversation with Mrs. Gradgrind portrays him as haughty due to his success and 'the self mad man' ranting. He rues how his mother left him with his grandmother who would treat him most cruelly and would even sell his tattered shoes to drink. She would drink four teens in breakfast. He reveals with a proud air: "I had not a shoe to my foot. As to a stocking, I didn't know such a thing by name. I passed the day in a ditch, and the night in a pigsty. That's the way I spent my tenth birthday. Not that a ditch was new to me, for I was born in a ditch" (27). This ditch-born boy, boasts the banker, is now 'the Josiah Bounderby of Coketown.'

Later, when he insults his friend-cum-father-in-law, he again puts on airs of being the most important man:

"Your daughter don't properly know her husband's merits, and is not impressed with such a sense as would become her, by George! Of the honour of his alliance . . . there are ladies-born ladies-belonging to families- Families!—who next to worship the ground I walk on" (239).

Blind in his vanity, he undermines his friendship in the first place and secondly, fails to view the 'incompatibility' between him and his wife in terms of mammoth age difference and the lack of commensuration in dispositions.

Dickens does not leave the question here but exposes his vanity. Bounderby's whole story of success and childhood is exposed when his real mother is brought before his eyes and shatters his hollow claims. His mother, Mrs. Pegler's revelations prove Bounderby to be a sham and it is learnt that his mother was not dead and he was equally loved by both the parents. She further exposes that her husband died when Bounderby was eight years old and his grandmother died when he was not even born. What is more painful for the mother in all this is that he had forced her not to tell anybody about his childhood and had even forbidden her to meet him though he would provide her thirty pounds per annum. Such insensitivity towards his mother is unbecoming and cannot be spared. He deprives his mother of her motherly affection for all these years by simply giving her money. Relation, that too of a mother and son, is sacrificed at the altar of mammon worship. Stripped of human values, Bounderby fails to acknowledge the power of human love and human relations, be it with his mother, his wife Louisa, or his friend Thomas Gradgrind.

Stephen and Bounderby, the labourer and the mill owner, respectively represent diverse strands. The readers feel sympathy for the former and disgust for the latter. Stephen is virtuous, honest, and a man of principles and integrity; while Bounderby is full of vanity and deceit. Given the situation of both, Bounderby can pay the amount of divorce as he is rich and can enact a Private Act of Parliament; Stephen cannot as he is poor. However, Bounderby cannot get divorce as his wife has not committed adultery. Therefore, he can live separately as the Ecclesiastical

Court would grant him permission but cannot remarry as the House of Lords would not permit it. Louisa also cannot find an escape from this “miserable marriage” (Kidder 418). Stephen cannot even move to the Ecclesiastical Court as he cannot even pay the requisite amount as he has all the necessary grounds as his wife has committed adultery and is therefore, genuinely to be pitied for. It is quite evident here, after analysing the characters of both, Stephen and Bounderby, that Dickens pleads more the case of Stephen as he is a real victim despite being honest. As Efraim Sicher writes:

“Stephen performs the role of neo-Christian saint of forbearance and kindness, a martyr to the masters’ hardheartedness and criminal negligence, who maintains an all-too perfect moral integrity in the muddle of hypocritical laws made for the wealthy and privileged members of society” (320).

However, Dickens largely appeals for happy married lives as there is no use living with a person when life turns out to be a real hell devouring all happiness. It is for this reason that he dealt with the marriage laws in his *Household Words* and advocated lenient laws so that not only women but also men could find an escape from an otherwise caged existence.

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