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DEATH AND CLASS IN *HARD TIMES* AND *HOWARDS END*

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Charles Dickens and E. M. Forster are well known for problematizing social class in their works. In *Hard Times*, Dickens shows a Victorian England where industrialization has forced the working class into cramped, filthy, and mind-numbing factory work, while the wealthy remain comfortable in their large houses and multiple estates. Similarly, Forster's *Howards End* illustrates Edwardian London, where the gulf between rich and poor seems impossible to bridge, despite earnest attempts on either side.

Both novels choose to embody the lower class through a singular, principal character: Stephen Blackpool, a middle-aged loom worker for *Hard Times*, and Leonard Bast, a young clerk with an interest in the arts for *Howards End*. Though these two characters differ in their age, profession, geographical location, and the time they live in, they share the same fate — death, through accidental causes. Not only that, but both their demises are quickly brushed past to make room for the true protagonists' — the wealthy characters — ending, which brings them closure and are shown almost entirely unaffected by these sudden deaths.

The disregard with which these characters are treated is startling, particularly when noticing that these are two works which attempt to humanize those who are marginalized. One is thus forced to ask why novelists such as Dickens and Forster minimize their lower-class characters' relevance to such an extent, and whether or not a wealthier character would receive such a treatment.

This problem isn't exclusive to Dickens and Forster, however. Upon examination of English literature from the mid-Victorian to the pre-war era, aided by Eagleton's *The English Novel*, one finds that stories featuring laborers as relevant characters only start to appear in urban, post-industrialist novels starting from the mid-nineteenth century. However, although both Dickens and Forster treat them as more than just afterthoughts, their portrayal is still

colored by the fact that this was a view from the outside looking in. One finds that the attitude towards working-class characters is distant at best, and outright dismissive at worst. The attempt to illustrate the poor working conditions of the lower classes is ultimately subdued by the depersonalization these characters suffer; as Williams writes in his book *Culture and Society*, "the gain in comprehension … has been achieved by the rigours of generalization and abstraction" (100). As such, these novels which seek to explore and potentially solve the struggles faced by workers tend to fail, due to the author's inability to fully empathize with these characters.

It is the very themes of industrialization and general capitalistic ideology that cause these characters' woes and shape the worlds at large of these two novels. *Hard Times*, for one, is set in the cutoff years between the First and Second Industrial Revolutions, defined by a heavier reliance on machine-based production, increased usage of steam power, and a streamlining of mass manufacturing. Factory work came to define city life, requiring thousands of former farmworkers to grow accustomed to operating new machinery and adjusting to externally dictated work hours. The efficiency of these workers was crucial to the success of the factory work itself, to the point at which the ideal worker would be hailed as nothing but another cog in the machine.

The notion of workers as cogs in the machine lends to a recurring theme of dehumanization when it comes to the topic of industrialization and laborer's rights. Repetitive, mindless factory work "snatches away every bit of freedom on bodily and intellectual activity," leaving those operating the machinery fatigued in both body and mind, and vulnerable to workplace abuse (Fernando 8). Indeed, there was little to no regulation set in place to protect the workers' health and safety, which meant factory floors were hazardous at best and lethal at

worst. Still, the factory owners could maintain these unsafe working conditions with a clear conscience, thanks to a mindset of considering the working class as fundamentally *other* to themselves.

Othering as an act consists of placing an individual into a subaltern group, due to not fitting in with a certain social norm. In the cases here presented, one sees the othering of an entire social class being justified by their not being born into money and needing to work in order to survive. As such, the burgeoning industrial society widened the chasm between those who owned the means of production, and those who actually produced them ("Marx and Engels on Industrial Capitalism"). The upper classes, then, necessarily define the working-class in opposition to themselves, since they do not fall within their own definition of normalcy. As it will be seen throughout this essay, othering serves to implicitly condone discrimination, within the mindset that the subaltern group does not deserve as good treatment as the self. The form, however, varies from case to case — the workers could be treated as parts of the machinery, as previously stated; they could also be caricatures of humanity, either wishing to leech off their bosses or nobly putting up with their load; or, as well, they could be reduced to mere parts of themselves.

In the specific context of industrialization, the collective nature of factory work stands in stark contrast to the rise of capitalism, which holds individualism as one of its core principles. Capitalistic ideology goes hand in hand with the idea of meritocracy, a system where any person is capable of climbing the social ranks should they put in the work. Additionally, this implies that one must be defined by "aggressive money-making and power-seeking" attitudes in order to become successful in life (Williams 124). The capitalist tenets of fierce independence and a thirst for power are succinctly summed up in the idea of "lifting

yourself by your own bootstraps," a phrase that nowadays means to achieve excellence with little to no outside help (Zaffaris).

Upon considering the social and historical context in which characters such as Stephen Blackpool and Leonard Bast are placed, one is led to believe that the lower class was, and is, seen as lesser than the bourgeoisie or the elite. This constitutes a positive feedback loop, where this belief both enables and is enabled by their dehumanization and othering. In consequence, authors are able to get away with less gravitas, or even less respect, for how they treat their working-class characters in fiction in contrast to how they would for an upper-class character.

Since the topic of social class is one of the main themes explored in both *Hard Times* and *Howards End*, each novelist has to make choices regarding how to portray the differences between upper- and lower-class characters. Dickens, for his part, chooses to illustrate this difference through language. The wealthy characters, on the one hand, speak standard English, in the same style as the narrator of the novel; the poorer characters, on the other, have their accents and verbal mannerisms on full display through how their dialogue is written. If the character has a lisp, as Mr. Sleary does, every "s" is replaced with a "th"; if the character skips certain sounds, the omission is illustrated by an apostrophe. As an example, here is an excerpt of dialogue from Stephen Blackpool: "I ha' read i' th' papers that great folk (fair faw 'em a'! I wishes 'em no hurt!) are not bonded together for better for worst so fast, but that they can be set free fro' their misfortnet marriages, an' marry ower agen." (Dickens 58-59). This stylistic choice has the effect of requiring a greater effort on the reader's part when parsing out these dialogues, as "the use of close dialect … creates barriers in understanding" to the reader accustomed to standard English (Ilhem 1). It requires more focus to be given to how the speech is uttered, rather than the meaning of the words themselves, momentarily breaking the

narrative immersion (Callaghan). Due to this difference, a very deliberate separation between the characters appears. For instance, the different phonetic representations can be thought of as being different languages, where a lower-class status renders standard diction impossible (Shannon). Having both the narrator and the wealthy characters speak conventional English constitutes a relief for the reader and establishes a camaraderie of sorts between them. It implicitly states that the language the working class uses is different than ours, subtly placing the reader on the upper-class's side without their noticing. It is also entirely possible that Dickens was well aware that his target audience was, in fact, the middle- and upper-classes, so it would only be natural to have the narrator be one of them. Nevertheless, this decision regarding the language used by the different characters undeniably contributes to the othering of the working-class characters.

Forster, on the other hand, does not stylize his characters' dialogue in this way. While it could be argued that Leonard Bast does indeed use some degree of code-switching depending on whether the character to whom he speaks is an equal or a social superior, the vast majority of his dialogue occurs with the latter group, so such an analysis wouldn't be representative of the novel as a whole. The differentiation, then, between Leonard and the wealthy characters of the novel comes in the way he is introduced:

> This story deals with gentlefolk, or with those who are obliged to pretend that they are gentlefolk. … The boy, Leonard Bast, stood at the extreme verge of gentility. He was not in the abyss, but he could see it, and at times people whom he knew had dropped in, and counted no more. He knew that he was poor, and would admit it; he would have died sooner than confess any inferiority to the rich. This may be splendid of him. But he was inferior to most rich people, there is not the least doubt of it. (Forster 49)

This passage goes on to elaborate all the ways Leonard not only should be perceived as inferior to the wealthy characters, but how he fully embodies this inferiority. This belief is so deeply rooted in the text, the novel even states that his lower social status makes him inherently less loveable than his rich counterparts. The implicit conclusion the reader is expected to draw is that Leonard is a pitiable creature. While this is not such an obvious case of the narrator placing the reader above this character, as it is in *Hard Times*, this description emphasizes that we are meant to see him as small, both in spirit and faculties. Despite the tongue-in-cheek nature of the previous fragment, the inescapable truth, as presented by Forster, is that one cannot escape the circumstances of one's birth. We may admire Leonard's attempts to become more than what he is, but we are still asked to understand that this is ultimately futile — he is and will remain inferior to those born into privilege, no further discussion allowed.

The deliberate separation and othering of both Stephen Blackpool and Leonard Bast in their respective stories makes it easier for the wealthy characters to dehumanize them, and for the readers to find such interactions believable. This dehumanization can come in the form of metonymy, as is often the case in *Hard Times*: "Providence had seen fit to make them only hands, or, like the lower creatures of the seashore, only hands and stomachs" (Dickens 50). In other cases, it takes the form of a careless dismissal, as the businessman Henry Wilcox of Howards End would often show: "The poor are poor, and one's sorry for them, but there it is. As civilisation moves forward, the shoe is bound to pinch in places, and it's absurd to pretend that any one is responsible personally" (Forster 202). Most often, the wealthy characters would project their own ideologies and beliefs onto the characters — *Hard Times*' Bounderby would often say that the working class are lazy, expecting to be fed "turtle soup and venison, with a golden spoon" (Dickens 56). In other words, the lower-class characters are reduced to a mere shade of their humanity, echoing the treatment of their real-life counterparts.

Although Dickens is well-known for his caricatures, as not even the wealthy in *Hard Times* are exempt from this tendency, it is worth noticing that the three main lower-class characters in the novel — Stephen Blackpool, Rachael, and Sissy Jupe — all exemplify to a greater or lesser degree the stereotype of the 'noble poor'. They all perpetuate, in this sense, the idea that there is an inherent dignity in suffering, and that poverty builds character. Moreover, this caricature establishes a sort of inverse relationship between material and spiritual wealth; that is to say, "the greater the material poverty, the more spiritual the person" (Nelson). As such, the noble poor becomes a character somehow above the rest of humanity, turning "into signifiers for the transcendental subject; they become collective types — human abstracts" (Harrison 1). This contributes to the othering of these characters, as their suffering is reduced to a beautiful and moving narrative for those on the outside to enjoy (Freund). Furthermore, holding on to this notion is incredibly convenient for the wealthy, because it absolves them of any responsibility in alleviating the strain that poor working and living conditions can cause to the lower class.

The archetype of the noble poor lies at the heart of both novels, and of many other works examining the conditions of the working class. It can be traced back to the beatitudes found in the gospel of Luke, blessing the poor and hungry as those who will inherit the kingdom of God. Catholic Christianity in particular builds on this idea, believing that attachment to material wealth is a sign of a poverty of spirit, which grants a sort of sainthood to the poor ("Homily of His Holiness"). As such, the highest virtue for them is to claim, as Stephen Blackpool puts it, that it's "fro' first to last, a muddle!" and to passively accept their lot (Forster 216).

Nevertheless, despite the othering these characters receive, and potentially due to this very wealth of spirit, both Stephen and Leonard are portrayed as being incredibly insightful about the world around them. Particularly, there are two fundamental truths they are privy to, and to which the wealthy cannot access: firstly, they understand the inescapability of poverty, being poor themselves, and secondly, they are deeply aware of the importance of human connection.

The inescapability of poverty is something no good capitalist can bring themself to admit, being entirely contradictory to the idea of lifting oneself up by one's bootstraps. *Hard Times* addresses this directly, saying:

> Any capitalist there, who had made sixty thousand pounds out of sixpence, always professed to wonder why the sixty thousand nearest Hands didn't each make sixty thousand pounds out of sixpence, and more or less reproached them every one for not accomplishing the little feat. What I did you can do. Why don't you go and do it? (Dickens 93)

Here, the idea being conveyed is that, to the wealthy, there is no excuse for poverty. If one is poor, then it is simply a matter of not having the discipline to put in the work — it becomes a moral failing. The privileges that allowed the wealthy to reach this comfortable position are ignored in this rhetoric, or deliberately suppressed, as in Bounderby's case. Through these caricatures, Dickens portrays the Marxist concept of "simplified class antagonisms", one of the many angles through which this inadvertent class conflict can be approached (qtd. in Stearns and Burns 6). In other words, there is a sharp divide between characters such as Bounderby and the "Hands" he speaks of; that is to say, between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Since in the above quote one can see there is no interest from the former group to understand the latter's struggles, hostility arises instead of cooperation.

By contrast, the wealthy characters in *Howards End* are either keenly aware of the comforts that money grants them, or don't think about it at all. Margaret Schlegel, for example, knows that wealth grants her a great deal of comfort and security, saying that, "There's never any great risk as long as you have money" (Forster 64). Although she realizes that people like Leonard need money to thrive, it is little more than a topic of lunch conversation, rather than a principle she is willing to seriously act on. Her sister Helen, on the other hand, does not understand how money, or a lack thereof, tints the day-to-day lives of people. She takes others' umbrellas, or leaves hotel bills unpaid, without thinking of how financially devastating that can be for a working-class person. For her, money is and always has been such a given, that its absence is unfathomable, and that fact shapes her entire philosophy.

As for the importance of human connection, *Howards End* pays a great deal of attention to it — the words "only connect" are the epigraph to the novel and Margaret's own mantra. However, she has completely abandoned this idea by the end of the novel, choosing to sever her connections with anyone who is not within her immediate circle of acquaintances. It is Leonard, in his guilt over his affair with Helen, who carries Margaret's philosophy to fruition, and embodies the importance of interpersonal connection. Only he behaves with earnest openness to those he feels he has wronged, actively seeking Helen out and attempting to mend the relationships with the rest of her family.

Dickens, for his part, textually argues in favor of interpersonal connection through narration and the actions of characters like Sissy and Rachael, all the while virulently rejecting the benefits that would come from group cooperation in the form of a union. Despite this organization encompassing much of what he praises and hopes for human relationships, and attacking the very injustices he criticizes in the novel, the notion of a union in *Hard Times* is at

best a joke, and at worst synonymous with a dangerous mob. Dickens lays bare "the destructive effects of industrial capitalism" but shies away from openly declaring "class warfare" (Keach). The disadvantages placed on the working class by the system in which they live are surely unfortunate, according to him, and must be made known to the public — but the possibility of them being united under a common cause to fight against it is treated as a fool's errand.

The dismissal of unions in *Hard Times* has its roots in the individualistic subtext of the novel, and the uneasy tension this brings. On the one hand, Dickens glorifies the struggle of the lone character, of Stephen Blackpool in this case, to make a living in a world that appears to be designed against him. But while he does seek to live a better life, he never fully wishes to radically alter the conditions in which he and his peers live. Because, even though the novel has an individualistic undercurrent throughout, there is also a condemnation of acting in one's own best interest, as this is "bound to be selfish and sectarian." (Eagleton 112). To fight for oneself is treated as inherently greedy and misguided — as reflected by the union leaders — and would completely tear down the ideal of the noble poor that has been so carefully set up in Stephen Blackpool's characterization. Rather, the novel seems to imply that it is more commendable to accept one's lot and keep one's distance from these sorts of movements, perhaps leaving room for an upper-class savior to come in and rescue the working class instead.

Stephen Blackpool and Leonard Bast are also united in their desire for things ultimately unreachable to them. Stephen wishes to live a life with Rachael as her lawful wife but does not have the means to divorce his current drunkard, volatile wife. This wish is symbolized in his final moments, when he looks at the stars — they are beautiful and heavenly, but ultimately untouchable. Likewise, Leonard wishes to understand the beauty and art in life, while being

fully aware that he will never reach the level of those who have spent their entire lives studying those topics. Forster even uses the same imagery as Dickens, saying that Leonard's pursuits are "as a prisoner look[ing] up and see[ing] stars beckoning" (Forster 351).

Despite their high aspirations, both characters' death scenes are shown as senseless and pathetic. Stephen and Leonard both seek to clear their guilt in some way, Stephen to absolve himself, and Leonard to confess. Yet they both die violently and accidentally, meaning that there was nothing truly deliberate about their ends, nor is there anyone really to blame.

However, there are significant differences in *how* the narrative treats their death scenes. An entire chapter is devoted to finding a mangled Stephen Blackpool at the bottom of the Old Hell Shaft, bringing him back to the surface, and granting him one last chance to tie loose ends and wax poetic before expiring. Coketown in almost its entirety is present to mourn him, as a man unjustly accused of the younger Gradgrind's crime. His material poverty is a sign of his spiritual wealth, and as such Stephen's arc must necessarily end in martyry; to do otherwise would be greedy of him and would taint the nobility of his death.

Leonard Bast, on the other hand, dies ironically, covered in the books he longed to understand. The sentences describing the scene itself are short and devoid of emotion. No one mourns his passing — not the characters present, not even the narrator themself. He is not granted the dignity of death rites until much later, because no one even realized the body laying before them was a corpse.

But perhaps the most jarring fact about these two death scenes is how quickly the narrative moves on. In both cases, the focus is shifted back to the true protagonists, the wealthy characters, and their satisfying closure. Neither Stephen nor Leonard are really discussed towards the end of their novels, nor are their deaths acknowledged to have directly impacted the main cast.

In *Hard Times*, the final chapter is devoted to explicitly enunciating how every character in the novel received what they deserved, be it a punishment, a reward, or something a little more nuanced. But Stephen is conspicuously absent from this chapter, precisely because he paid the ultimate price for a crime he did not commit. The novel cannot offer us a satisfying conclusion to his story. He receives no more attention from the narrator — he is just a tragedy to be glossed over.

While one could argue that Stephen did not have strong ties to the main cast and met a more wretched end in part due to this, the same cannot be said for Leonard Bast. He played a key role in the lives of both the Schlegels and the Wilcoxes; however, his death is seen as more of a nuisance than anything else. Despite all the talk of connection between human souls, no one is really saddened by his passing.

Upon comparison with Ruth Wilcox's death earlier in the novel, this treatment becomes even more shocking. She passes relatively early in the story, meaning her personality is not explored in as much depth as the other characters in the novel are; even so, her death shakes the emotionally repressed Wilcoxes to their cores, and reaches out further into the community, affecting people who barely knew her. Years of repressed emotion wash over her widowed husband as he grieves:

> [Henry] remembered his wife's even goodness during thirty years.... So many women are capricious, breaking into odd flaws of passion or frivolity. Not so his wife. Year after year, summer and winter, as bride and mother, she had been the same, he had always trusted her. Her tenderness! Her innocence! The wonderful innocence that was hers by the gift of God (Forster 96)

Ruth's passing is treated as that of a saint, and the fact that she hid her illness — something that was in her control — further exalts her sainthood. Her death looms over the rest of the novel, impacting the thoughts and decisions of the major characters throughout.

But Stephen and Leonard simply die. There is no positive outcome for them, no agency over their deaths, no satisfying closure to their narrative arcs. Moreover, neither character is really allowed to die for themselves. Their deaths, as has already been noted several times, do not serve the purpose of finalizing their stories; rather, they die so that the upper-class characters can learn something about themselves. They give the wealthy a poetic ideal to weep over, without having to truly lose anything themselves. They cannot fully live for themselves, having to toil long hours at a grueling job — but they are not allowed to die for themselves, either.

Stephen Blackpool delivers the final blow to Thomas Gradgrind's already shaken belief in his fact-based ideology, using his dying breaths to expose the result that this philosophy has had on the younger Gradgrind. Their society had created "so much distance between the classes that the chasms are not capable of being crossed without a spiritual guide" who can sacrifice himself for the other's enlightenment (Stearns and Burns 5). As for Leonard Bast, he becomes no more than a symbol with which Margaret can contemplate death and her own true nature, and he himself stirs no emotion in her:

> In this jangle of causes and effects, what had become of their true selves? Here Leonard lay dead in the garden, from natural causes; yet life was a deep, deep river, death a blue sky, life was a house, death a wisp of hay, a flower, a tower, life and death were anything and everything, except this ordered insanity, where the king takes the queen, and the ace the king. (Forster 351)

Margaret very easily passes from mentioning Leonard's death to philosophizing about life in general, only a few hours after his death is discovered. Despite the strong bond they may have formed in life, him even being the father of her future nephew, Margaret has quickly severed any emotional attachment she may have had with Leonard. Even Helen remains passionless regarding his death, at best feeling guilty over her absence of guilt. To this, Margaret bids her to let go:

> "I can't have you worrying about Leonard. Don't drag in the personal when it will not come. Forget him."
>
> "Yes, yes, but what has Leonard got out of life?"
>
> "Perhaps an adventure."
>
> "Is that enough?"
>
> "Not for us. But for him." (Forster 360)

Here, Margaret has completely taken over Leonard's narrative. She speaks for him, comfortably stating that he is satisfied with lesser things than they would be. He has outlived his use, and as such, Helen need not feel any remorse about discarding his memory.

At the end of the day, both Stephen Blackpool and Leonard Bast are characters who are undeniably important — crucial, even, to the progression of the plot and the arcs of other characters. They seem to understand the world around them with more clarity than those born with privilege, and thus have valuable insight regarding society and their place in it. But they pass into irrelevance with far too much ease as the novels move into their denouements, their deaths hardly constituting a minor shock in the main cast's satisfying endings. At best, they offer the wealthy characters an excuse to think about themselves; in other words, their deaths ultimately serve the upper class.

Perhaps it is not so much an issue of the wealthy seeing the poor as inherently lesser than them, though that is certainly an attitude that many of the characters in both novels have. Rather, it is the fact that the working class is seen as fundamentally different and 'other'. By seeing them as something foreign or alien, it renders the elite almost incapable of fully empathizing with them — there is doubt cast on their humanity, due to the very few similarities each of their lives bear with each other. Upon considering this, alongside the fact that wealth is inextricably linked with importance, one may easily understand how these authors can get away with showing less sympathy for a poor character's death.

All this begs the question of how much impact such an attitude in fiction may have on reality: was this lackluster treatment of poor characters in fiction inspired by the real-life treatment of the working class, or do novels such as *Hard Times* and *Howards End* serve to implicitly support a degree of dehumanization of the poor? A further study may investigate whether such a causal line may even be drawn, or if it would be more accurately thought of as a positive feedback loop, and how such a maladaptive pattern may be broken.

Regardless, Dickens and Forster both argue that human connection and imagination is what saves us from ourselves and allows each of our own humanities to flourish. Through their works, however, they show that this is fundamentally impossible in the framework of modern society, which would have us widen the already vast chasm between wealthy and poor. No broad net of interpersonal connections can truly be cast until the Stephens and Leonards of the world are treated with dignity and respect, both in life and in death.

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