SOCIETY AND IDENTITY IN CHARLES DICKENS' *HARD TIMES*

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One major aspect featured in Charles Dickens' novels that has been of high interest throughout the years is society. It is present in almost everything that Dickens wrote, in the same way that the search for one's identity has been perceived as part of his works. This coexistence of society and identity in Dickens invites the notion that there must be a connection. In this paper I aim to perform an examination of the role of society in the development of one's identity in Dickens' writing – specifically, in his novel *Hard Times*.

Key words: Dickens, identity, society, childhood, hermeneutics

A vessel through which the characters both find and escape their identity in Dickens' works is society. In *Oliver Twist* we have the orphan who tries to outgrow that stigma; in *A Christmas Carol* we have Ebenezer Scrooge who is just a bitter old man to society and, in the end, attempts to be reintegrated in that very society; and in *Great Expectations* we have Pip who is trying to find a better fate through the ladder of social class. Society always plays an important role in Dickens' novels because it is a major source of, and attribute to, one's identity. It is important to establish this function of Dickens, because this way the perception about society and identity building becomes applicable not only to literature, but also to life, so that aesthetics and ethics intersect in a common subject area. Moreover, social status was of great importance in the Victorian era. In contrast to family, which is a very small and limited social unit, society is in many ways everything outside of the family and the next influence one comes in contact with.

Society can have two effects on the process of identity building – on the one hand, your status and rank in it can limit your possibilities in identity growth, and on the other hand, society can give you a platform to reinvent yourself, far away from the weight of the family. Still, in the Victorian era, the first effect seemed to prevail over the second, predominantly. In many of Dickens' works, one's status in society

appeared to only be a limitation (positive or negative) and it seemed to also create the incentive in one to impress others – even if that meant living outside their realistic reach. Dickens portrayed the upper class as having to always be perfect and appropriate; the middle class as struggling with either avoiding the introduction to the lower class or obtaining entrance to the upper class; and the lower class, which was very much ignored by the higher classes, just fighting for survival, certain of the impossibility of escaping their fortune. The regular presence of the before mentioned is also featured in John Bowen's examination of the influence of the writer Dickens, where Pip is used as a sample: "Pip in *Great Expectations*, for example, tries to recreate himself as a gentleman, only to learn how his apparent freedom and self-creation are inseparably entangled with the history of crime and class oppression embodied by the convict Magwitch" (Bowen 2006: 264). Because of this recurring appearance of society and identity, one has the possibility to argue that this problem is Dickensian, and maybe, by extension, Victorian. The platform on which this thesis will be tested is Dickens' tenth novel *Hard Times*. The choice of *Hard Times* can be justified through its multiple examples of characters in search of their identity through society. Moreover, the connection between social class and selfhood can also be seen in this quote by Harold Bloom who identifies: "…the book as a testament to Dickens's conversion away from a commercialized and industrialized England and back towards a supposed juster and more humane society" (Bloom 2006: 15). This supports the idea that society is a recognized feature in this novel.

The Limiting Faculty of Society

First, we are going to look at the limiting faculty of society. In this section of the paper we will talk about the characters that function as samples of how society can limit the growth of one's identity on the examples of Sissy Jupe and Stephen Blackpool.

Stephen Blackpool is "trapped" in a marriage because of his social status. There is a way to end the marriage, but because he has not, or ever will have, enough money to get the divorce he must continue with this life. There is a "better" partner for him in the face of Rachael, but this is not a viable choice because of external factors. Moreover, he is driven away by his peers and his boss, because he chooses to side with neither of them in a feud of the classes. And last but not least, his reputation is damaged even more when he is accused of a crime, not because of his character or his past, but because of his social status. Taking into account all these comments one can better understand why the reader will probably feel as

though Stephen himself has less influence over his own identity than does society. This feeling is then cemented even further by the fact that Stephen finds some sort of redemption after his death not by his own actions, but rather by the initiative of part of the society that had put him in that situation to begin with. To a restricted extent, Martin Heidegger actually establishes this connection between identity and society in his examination of reality and the External World,[1] when he addresses one of Kant's theories: "Kant presupposes both the distinction between the 'in me' and the 'outside of me', and also the connection between these; factically he is correct in doing so…" (Heidegger 1996: 248). Heidegger then continues by partially disagreeing with Kant's theory, but he has already expressed his faith in that connection in the quotation. This suggests that Heidegger believed in the existence of interdependence between identity and society, since a connection between those two would propose an attributive link. How one's identity is deeply rooted in society, sometimes in ways we cannot reliably grasp, is also a feature touched upon by William J. Richardson in *Heidegger and Psychoanalysis*: "…these laws…are not abstractions but are inscribed in human culture itself and determine the subject[2] through signifying chains by one's ancestral past, family history, social milieu…" (Richardson 2003: 17). And, because of the examples given in this paper, one might argue that Dickens had been able to display this in his novels and in his characters.

Another excellent example that appears at the beginning of the book is Sissy Jupe who is introduced as girl number twenty. This introduction robs Sissy Jupe of any identity, it takes the human trait away from her and turns her into some kind of object. The fact that this happens at a school, which is one of the earliest contacts children have with society, makes this incident even more important. And after she is asked about her name, she is even denied her right to use it, when Mr. Gradgrind tells her that it should be Cecilia: "'Sissy is not a name,' said Mr. Gradgrind. 'Don't call yourself Sissy. Call yourself Cecilia'" (Dickens 2009: 3). When she finds herself in a difficult situation she is taken in by Mr. Gradgrind. However, when she fails to live up to his expectations, and in extension to society, she is taken out of school and is practically forced to become a servant to the family. The probability of illogicality in all of this is shown when Sissy becomes the voice of reason and reality towards the end of the novel, proving that she is being underestimated because of false standards and her social status.

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[1] Everything outside the I, outside our own self.
[2] "Subject" here being used in place of man.

The Authority of Society over the Child

At this point a comment on the status of the child in society and the results of it is in order – of course, in accordance with Dickens' works. J. Hillis Miller, while exploring many Victorian themes, takes an interest in the child-character in Dickens and the origins of it. Miller argues that Dickens used these characters in a therapeutic way, because of his own difficult childhood (cf. Miller 1990: 35). This can be proven by just some examples of child-characters in Dickens: Pip, whose childhood is developed lengthily in *Great Expectations*; Oliver Twist, probably the most prominent of Dickens' child-characters; and David Copperfield, with the autobiographical nature of the novel. Actually, *David Copperfield* is also singled out by Harold Bloom in his introduction to Charles Dickens as "the first therapeutic novel" (Bloom 2006: 6) and then he also acknowledges Dickens' habit of using his child-characters as a method of self-healing (cf. Bloom 2006: 6). And if *David Copperfield* is only the first of these therapeutic novels, *Hard Times* is no exception. For this reason we will have a look at Louisa and Tom Gradgrind, who present us with a powerful juxtaposition regarding society and its authority over the child.

In Louisa Gradgrind we have the perfect example of a child being forced into a role she is not fit for. Rather than being raised according to her identity, she is raised according to society's view of children. This tendency is visible also in the fact that she is given away to a man of a specific social status, and not to a man suitable for her growth as a person: Mr. Bounderby. Moreover, she is seen by James Harthouse as an object to conquer, not a person to be loved. Perhaps the best example to demonstrate the authority of society is her first "real" expression of identity, when she rejects Harthouse, Bounderby and her father's philosophy:

> 'Father, you have trained me from my cradle?'
> 'Yes, Louisa.'
> 'I curse the hour in which I was born to such a destiny... as it has been my task from infancy to strive against every natural prompting that has arisen in my heart.'
>
> (Dickens 2009: 205)

In this short excerpt from the novel the reader can observe the effect of this "training" and its repercussions on Louisa's identity. This is an excellent example of the lack of agency concerning one's own character that children influence family (and by extension society) had over the

child's identity in the Victorian era and how it is very much present in Dickens' novel.

The total opposite to Louisa, but in the same manner a victim of society's authority, is her brother Tom. He is, once again, forced into a role not appropriate for him. He is given some freedom his sister never had, but this freedom results in a limitation of personality growth. This corruption is also mentioned in a straightforward way by Dickens himself, when he named a chapter with Tom in its center "The Whelp" despite him not being a child anymore in that part of the book. The difference between Louisa and Tom is also visible in their introduction: "But, Louisa looked at her father with more boldness than Thomas did. Indeed, Thomas did not look at him, but gave himself up to be taken home like a machine" (Dickens 2009: 11). From this excerpt one should take away how Dickens, probably affected by his own experience of this pattern, succeeds in showing the effects and importance of society in identity building at this early age. Sylvia McLeod singles out the importance of Dickens' childhood and his child-characters in her examination of Peter Ackroyd's biography of Dickens: "Having offered so much detailed evidence of the events of Dickens' early life, Ackroyd encourages the reader to ponder, with him, the possibility that intimations of Dickens' childhood resonate in his fiction" (McLeod 1997: 58). From this extract one should take away that Dickens' attempts at understanding himself better through his own works is discussed to such a degree that it is almost considered a fact. Paying closer attention to Dickens' child-characters, some of which have been named as examples here, it seems that this statement is more than just fair. It seems as if Dickens is trying to understand himself and his childhood better through those characters – a pattern also discussed in Carolyn Dever's study of Dickens and psychoanalysis, where she mentions that "early psychoanalytic critics linked Dickens's representations of childhood innocence and betrayal directly to the failure of his own childhood family" (Dever 2006: 218). This adds to the credibility of Dickens' works as examples of identity building processes, since Dickens seems to be focusing on that aspect concerning the character of the child. In addition, the place of society in the identity building procedure can also be traced to Dickens' personal life and his child-characters, because of Dickens' portrayal of society through himself. Sylvia McLeod points out in her analysis of the biography[3] that Dickens' experience of the Victorian society makes him and his personality a representation of the Victorian character (cf. McLeod 1997: 245-246).

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[3] *Dickens* by Peter Ackroyd. Aylesbury: Minerva, 1990.

The "Mask" of Identity Society Provides

One other aspect that needs to be discussed is the "false'' identity society is able to provide to its members. Society can act as an "escape" from identity, in the same way it acts as a limitation. As Martin Heidegger observes, "…Dasein[4] is essentially Being[5] with Others[6]" (Heidegger 1996: 281). To narrow it down, Heidegger argues that one exists because one interacts with other people and their surroundings, which forms one's identity. Without the Other there is no identity because every encounter, or lack of such, is an essential part of it. The presence of any person in one's existence contributes to the totality of one's whole identity. And considering this argument, one might promote the idea of "false" identity through society. For this we will look at the examples of Mr. Bounderby and James Harthouse.

In Mr. Bounderby we have a powerful man of humble beginnings who turns out to be a fraud. However, even before the "reveal" of his true origin Dickens gives hints of the duality of his identity by the use of specific adjectives and the reaction of other characters: "Eyeing Mr. Bounderby from head to foot again, [Mr. E. W. B. Childers] turned from him, as from a man finally disposed of, to Mr. Gradgrind" (Dickens 2009: 31). Mr. Bounderby's "mask" allows him to perform many deeds (e.g. convince Mr. Gradgrind to let him marry Louisa). This would not be possible without the influence of society. After the truth about him comes out the reader is left with two identities: the fictionalised self-made man, and the "real" dishonest Bounderby.

The other example is James Harthouse, a man from the upper class that takes an interest in Louisa. He is seen as a charming man of status, but when the curtains fall he exposes himself as the exact opposite. He is permitted to follow his immoral intentions because of his social status and not because of his actual worth. Moreover, during his "relationship" with Louisa the focus is on her, not him. This enhances the obvious clues that society's influence over identity is a force to be reckoned with. This feeling is amplified by the fact that there is no actual punishment for Harthouse in the novel. He is confronted only by Sissy:

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[4] *Dasein* is a German word which literally means "being there" and "existence", though Heidegger uses it to refer to the experience of "being" and as a synonym to the "human entity" – which is to describe man as a mortal being, a being in time, with an awareness of that.

[5] Being is used by Heidegger as a close synonym to *Dasein*.

[6] Other is used by Heidegger to describe everything outside of the I, one's own self.

'You may be sure, sir, you will never see her again as long as you live.'
Mr. Harthouse drew a long breath; and, if ever man found himself in the position of not knowing what to say, made the discovery beyond all question that he was so circumstanced. The child-like ingenuousness with which his visitor spoke, her modest fearlessness, her truthfulness which put all artifice aside, her entire forgetfulness of herself in her earnest quiet holding to the object with which she had come; all this, together with her reliance on his easily given promise – which in itself shamed him – presented something in which he was so inexperienced, and against which he knew any of his usual weapons would fall so powerless; that not a word could he rally to his relief

(Dickens 2009: 219)

This is arguably the only moment in the novel when Harthouse faces some sort of repercussion for his actions and the fact that it comes from Sissy, and not some other member of society, shows how much freedom he is given because of his "mask".

Opposing Views

As a final remark, I would like to mention that J. Hillis Miller argues in his chapter about *Oliver Twist*, "[Dickens] has neither added to reality nor distorted it in any way, but has made himself a perfect mirror reflecting reality as it is" (Miller 1990: 32). Since Miller is talking about Victorian literature and Dickens in general, it is only fair to assume that Dickens is this "perfect mirror reflecting reality" in all his works – which would include *Hard Times*. Nevertheless, there is also some critique of Dickens and his portrayal of Victorian society. Various authors have expressed their concern that Dickens was actually not such a "perfect mirror" but rather a broken mirror of his own views altering society's reality in his writing. One of those authors is Angus Wilson, who, in his essay on Dickens' heroes and heroines, expresses his opinion of Dickens' portrayal of Victorian society as ambiguous because of the contradictions in his characters and the inconsistencies in his earlier and later novels (cf. Wilson 2006: 85-86). This is an argument made several times by critics of Dickens and it opposes our previous statement that Dickens' society is an accurate depiction, but I believe this to be just a difference in the point of view. There may be inconsistencies between his earlier and later novels, but this should be viewed as an evolution of the writer Dickens. Dickens displayed progress with every novel of his, which is visible by his last two completed novels: *Great Expectations* is regarded by many as his magnum opus, while *Our Mutual Friend* is considered as one of his more complex novels.

Also, concerning contradictions in characters, Dickens may be seen to exhibit the overall nature of humanity. People can be unpredictable and Dickens' characters mirror exactly that feature of humanity. This function of Dickens is also pointed out by Robert L. Patten in his analysis of the influence of Dickens' publications in parts: "… Dickens's artistry has been reclaimed on many fronts, from the unmatched skill with which he structures sentences and prose rhythms to the profoundly observant and trenchant analyses of people and society he provides" (Patten 2006: 21). Rather than labeling Dickens' portrayal of society as ambiguous, one should understand it as a depiction of the Victorian society through the eyes of one of its prime cultural heroes. This role of Dickens is also commented upon by Catherine Waters in her essay on Dickens as a reformer of culture when she explains that "his fiction and journalism thus incorporate the times in which they were written in ways that go beyond the reflection of topical issues to reform culture, showing how the narratives we read produce the norms and values of our society, and shape the people we may become" (Waters 2006: 172). Dickens included Victorian society in his writing the way he perceived it and, Dickens being one of the most influential writers of the Victorian era, it would be fair to regard him as the "perfect mirror" mentioned above.

All in all, we have established that the problem of identity building and society is present in Dickens and is applicable to his works in general. *Hard Times* and its characters provide arguments for society's influence over one's individual and private identity, proving society's role as a limitation to the identity building procedure. Likewise, the importance of the character of the child as part of, and contribution to, society is even more interesting because of Dickens' own childhood. Dickens' therapeutic child-characters exemplify society's influence over identity building: Dickens may be observed to have been trying to understand this influence through his writing. Society apparently influenced his own identity the same way it could be seen to affect the identity of his characters. This also enforces Dickens' credibility in his portrayal of society and its influence. Therefore, as mentioned before, the problem becomes Dickensian and, through the cultural importance of the author Dickens, a problem of Victorian society. Thus, society has to be distinguished as a key element of Dickens' narrative of identity building in general and the possibility for expansion into Victorian Literature cannot, and should not, be ignored.

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