

DICKENS' USE OF NAMES IN HARD TIMES

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That Charles Dickens had an ear for the English language is self-evident to even the most cursory reader of his novels. His describing of scene, drawing of character, and rendering of dialogue are almost unrivalled in English fiction. One manifestation of these linguistic skills is his talent for choosing names which capture the essence of his characters.

Often, the character's name doesn't "mean" anything in a literal sense; rather, it simply sounds right, creating resonances that emphasize a trait or set of traits. "Uncle Pumblechook," for example, sounds fat and sweaty and hypocritical. It is, of course, difficult to know whether the word "Pumblechook" suggests these qualities (although one of my students once remarked that the word "looked fat") or whether they are so perfectly embodied in the character that we continue to associate them with his name. It may be that Pumblechook's mannerisms--or those of Pickwick, Micawber, or Scrooge--are so vividly portrayed that they have forever been associated with his name rather than his name having some reference or inherent quality suggestive of those traits. In any case, names like "Pickwick," "Micawber," "Scrooge," and "Pumblechook" are unusual in sound and seem to raise certain associations appropriate to Dickens' purposes.

In other cases, Dickens creates names which on first glance seem to be the "type" names common to both stage and fictional comedy. Etheridge's "Sir Fopling Flutter" tells us all we need know about the would-be wit and artificial gallant who bears the name, and Mrs. Loveit's favorite sport is evident the first time her name is mentioned. Such names, by-products of allegory and Jonson's comedy of humours, are straightforward and simplistic, and they generally limit the character to one or two exaggerated traits. For example, Sir Lucius O'Trigger's quick temper and desire to duel are revealed by his name and are all there is to that comic figure in Sheridan's The Rivals.

Dickens' "type" names, on the other hand, are more original, more subtle, and more complex in what they suggest about the individuals who bear them. Grandfather Smallweed in Bleak House, for instance, is small physically, mentally, and morally, and he chokes out the beautiful and useful in his associates and family just as weeds choke a lawn or garden. Weeds are eyesores to be rooted out, and Dickens suggests throughout Bleak House that economic parasites like Smallweed should be plucked from the body politic. Moreover, the term "small" modifies "weed" to suggest that even in his pernicious economic exploitations, Grandfather Smallweed is far from the bigshot manipulator that he imagines himself as. For this despicable character, "Smallweed" is a perfect name, suggesting a complexity of negative traits that are made more and more vivid as

the old man's actions reinforce and make concrete the initial associations called forth by the name.

It is this kind of name--one with its roots in literal referents outside the character and therefore able to assume a metaphoric function--that Dickens uses most frequently in Hard Times. His reliance in this novel on such a method of naming characters is probably due to the brevity of the work and its strong thematic emphasis. He has a lot of ground to cover and little room in which to cover it, so he relies heavily on symbol and metaphor to condense and advance meaning. The names he gives his characters form part of the novel's metaphoric pattern and often are designed to advance the work's major theme: the dire consequences of an education based on Utilitarian principles.

Of course not all the names in Hard Times are used for thematic purposes. For example, Sleary, the circus-owner, is involved in the main action, but his name does not seem to have any thematic significance. It is, however, an Irish name that probably conjured up for Dickens' contemporary audience the stereotypical stage Irishman, red-nosed and boozing, and, sure enough, we see Sleary dispensing brandy to everyone with whom he comes in contact while consuming great quantities of it himself. Other Irish names probably would have had the same effect in Dickens' day, but perhaps "Sleary" suggested itself to the author because it sounds like a combination of "slur" (Sleary lisps and always is slightly

tipsy) and "bleary" (Sleary's eyes are blood-shot and watery from his drinking).

There are other names which, like "Sleary," are not directly tied into the novel's central theme but which nonetheless serve to delineate character; some of these are linked with specific motifs in the story. "Bounderby" and "Sparsit" are two such names. The former's name defines its owner as a "bounder": a vulgar cad who lacks the qualities of a gentleman. Bounderby's vulgarity is constantly emphasized through his ostentatious display of wealth and the false humility by which he heaps praise upon himself. Likewise, his indifference to the plight of his millhands and his exploitation of Mrs. Sparsit, the decayed aristocrat who serves as his housekeeper, identify him as a thorough bounder. Although he wasn't educated according to Utilitarian principles, Bounderby embraces those principles (as we see when he accompanies his friend, Thomas Gradgrind, Sr., on a tour of the Gradgrind school) and combines them with social Darwinism to justify his rapacious economic practices. Both Utilitarianism and social Darwinism are undermined by having the cad, Bounderby, espouse them.

Mrs. Sparsit's name identifies her physically, ethically, and financially. Physically, she is portrayed as birdlike: she has "a slender body, weakly supported on two long slim props"; her hands are called "talons"; and she has small, black eyes which dart everywhere and miss nothing. She is as "sparse" ethically as she

is physically. She is a parasite on Bounderby's wealth, but insults him behind his back. Her jealousy of Louisa's position as Bounderby's wife motivates her to attempt to reveal Louisa's flirtation with Harthouse, an effort which leads to her inadvertent exposure of Bounderby's bragging hypocrisy. Her finances are even sparser than her ethics. Left in dire economic straits on the death of her wastrel husband, she was forced to provide for herself by taking a position overseeing Bounderby's home.

Mrs. Sparsit's relationship with Bounderby, which she regards as demeaning but economically necessary, represents in small a larger conflict in Dickens' day, that between the old aristocracy and the new wealth of industrial England. As the nation shifted from an agrarian to an industrial society, the wealth and influence of the traditional land-owning class began to erode and a new class of wealthy industrialists began to emerge. These two classes were, of course, natural enemies, with the old aristocracy resenting the upstart nouveau riche and the latter detesting the often impecunious land-owners who continued to insist on their traditional prerogatives. Dickens treated this conflict in Bleak House through Lord Dedlock's resentment of the political aspirations of Mr. Rouncewell, a nouveau riche industrialist. In Hard Times, he treats it through Bounderby and Sparsit, whose names suggest certain aspects of the conflict. The "bounder" in "Bounderby," for instance, perhaps refers to the frequent vulgar-

ity of the newly emerging class of rich entrepreneurs who lacked traditional education and refinement and who yearned to lord it over the lords, and the "sparse" in "Sparsit" perhaps refers to the aristocracy's diminished wealth and power as well as to its alleged ethical impoverishment. True to his name, Bounderby exploits Mrs. Sparsit's genteel background to aggrandize himself; true to her name, Mrs. Sparsit demonstrates a lack of ethics in her attempts to retain her traditional prerogatives by exploiting Bounderby's wealth and position while resenting her subordination to one she considers socially inferior.

The new money/old money motif dramatized by Bounderby and Sparsit is linked to the main theme of Hard Times by Harthouse, whose name is a highly significant one. He, as does Sparsit, represents an aspect of aristocratic decadence particularly odious to Dickens. He epitomizes--just as does the gentleman's club, the Finches of the Grove, in Great Expectations--those who parasitically live off inherited wealth without contributing anything to society. At the same time, he is the vehicle for revealing the effects of Utilitarian education on Louisa.

Harthouse's name sounds--in certain British dialects akin in some respects to Boston speech--like "hothouse." A hothouse, of course, is a place where plants are raised with controlled temperature and humidity--in other words, where they are raised artificially, and everything about Harthouse is artificial. He is

that type of effete, upper-class snob that Dickens attacked throughout his career. Harthouse, like the Debilitated Cousin in Bleak House, is bored with his unchallenging, aristocratic existence and so he "goes in" for things--travel, politics, even love. His political aspirations, for example, are not genuine; he deceives Gradgrind by "going in" for politics as a mere diversion and not as a sincere proponent of the Gradgrindian philosophy. Likewise, his flirtation with Louisa is a game intended to relieve the boredom of life in Coketown and is not indicative of any deep feeling for her.

When he first arrives on the Coketown scene, Harthouse appears to be the stereotypical lover of the romantic novel, as the "hart" in his name suggests ("hart" sounds like "heart" and means "deer" which sounds like "dear"). He is young, handsome, refined, and fascinated by the lonely and lovely young wife of the crass Bounderby. But as his true character unfolds, gradually revealing his shallowness, the reader begins to see that his love-making is as insincere as the rest of his actions. The "hothouse" overtones of his name begin to intrude, suggesting that like the plants in a hothouse, the heart housed in his body has been artificially developed. And, like those plants, which cannot withstand the direct sun, Harthouse is utterly vanquished when he is confronted by Sissy Jupe, whose character in the novel is associated with sunlight--a point to which I shall return.

In addition to representing for Dickens the aristocracy's parasitic snobbery and general insincerity, Harthouse functions to demonstrate the stunting effect of Gradgrind's factual Utilitarian education on Louisa. Because she has been educated only to treat matters of the head and not the heart and therefore is deprived of the tools of emotional assessment and interaction, Louisa is unable to recognize Harthouse's insincerity and to assess her own feelings about him. In fact, she tells her father, Gradgrind, that she does not even know if she loves or has loved Harthouse. After this confession, she faints and her father sees "the triumph of his system, lying, an insensible heap, at his feet" (III.1). Louisa's inability to distinguish between the opposites--genuine lover and artificial exploiter--suggested by Harthouse's name dramatizes Dickens' adverse view of Utilitarian-based education.

The effects of this system of education are neatly summarized by Gradgrind's name and that of M'Choakumchild, the schoolmaster who heads the Gradgrind School. When Sissy Jupe is asked to identify the first principle of political economy and responds with, "To do unto others as I would that they should do unto me," Gradgrind observes that this "absurd answer" shows "the necessity of infinite grinding at the mill of knowledge, as per system, schedule, blue book, report, and tabular statements A to Z . . ." (I.9). In other words, his system entails the gradual grinding down of his pupils until there is nothing left in their minds but "facts,

facts, facts." The result of this, as we see in Louisa's relationship with Harthouse, is to destroy the ability to experience--let alone, understand--the emotions. Worst of all--to Dickens--is that when the system is applied early enough, it destroys childhood. To the pupils in his school, Gradgrind seems "a kind of cannon loaded to the muzzle with facts and prepared to blow them clean out of the regions of childhood at one discharge" (I.2). Appropriately enough, the name of the teacher whose charge it is to fill the little vessels with facts is M'Choakumchild, a blatantly obvious "type" name, but one which clearly defines Dickens' view of the effects of Utilitarian education on children.

Dickens dramatizes this theme through two of Gradgrind's pupils, Bitzer and Sissy Jupe, whose names enhance their thematic functions in the novel. As a student whose entire education has been under the tutelage of M'Choakumchild, Bitzer--as his name indicates--has accumulated only bits and pieces of superficial knowledge and has been deprived of anything that might develop his imagination. When Sissy, who knows the beauty and majesty of horses because she has been raised in the circus by her horse-trainer father, cannot define "horse," Bitzer provides a Gradgrindian definition:

Quadraped. Graminivorous. Forty teeth, namely twenty-four grinders, four eye-teeth, and twelve incisive. Sheds coat in the spring; in marshy countries,

sheds hoofs, too. Hoofs hard, but requiring to be shod with iron. Age known by marks in mouth.

There is no feeling for the essence of a horse, for its nobility or power, in all these detached, cold facts, the fragmented nature of which is emphasized by the choppy style of presentation.

Bitzer has been so filled with facts and made so literal by M'Choakumchild's instruction that he cannot even recognize figurative language as such. For example, when he is about to turn young Tom Gradgrind over to the law and is asked by Tom's father, "have you a heart?" he replies, "The circulation, Sir . . . couldn't be carried on without one. No man, Sir, acquainted with the facts established by Harvey relating to the circulation of the blood, can doubt that I have a heart" (III.8). This is literalness carried to the extreme, but typical of the Gradgrindian grinding at the mill of factual knowledge.

Sissy Jupe, on the other hand, is not one of those products. M'Choakumchild is unable to choke out her imagination, extinguish her spirit, or quench her emotions because she is the product of that universal symbol of childhood, the circus. She was reared and educated among Sleary's circus folk, her father a horse-trainer and clown and her mother a dancer. In the head versus heart motif that runs throughout the novel, she represents the latter more than any other character. Her name, a nickname for Cecilia, also is a form of "sister," which has connotations of warmth and

love, and Sissy does become a sister to the younger Gradgrind children and keeps them from succumbing to their father's destructive program of education.

In order to quickly establish his position on Utilitarian education in this shortest of his novels, Dickens contrasts Sissy and Bitzer in the novel's second chapter. The two are seated in the classroom where a ray of sunlight

irradiated Sissy. . . . Sissy, being at the corner of a row on the sunny side, came in for the beginning of a sunbeam, of which Bitzer, being at the corner of a row on the other side, a few rows in advance, caught the end. But whereas the girl was so dark-eyed and dark-haired that she seemed to receive a deeper and more lustrous colour from the sun, when it shone upon her, the boy was so light-eyed and light-haired that the self-same rays appeared to draw out of him what little colour he ever possessed. . . . His skin was so unwholesomely deficient in the natural tinge, that he looked as though, if he were cut, he would bleed white. (I.2).

In this scene, the sunlight makes Bitzer appear as if he were dead--and emotionally, he is; M'Choakumchild and Gradgrind have seen to that. On the other hand, the sunlight makes Sissy appear radiant, lustrous, alive--and emotionally she is alive because she has not

fallen victim to the Gradgrind system. Thus, it is not surprising that when this creature of the sun confronts Harthouse, he wilts as would a hothouse plant subjected to the direct sunlight. When Sissy informs him that his flirtation with Louisa is over and that it is time for him to "go in" for something else, he slinks off, totally vanquished.

Dickens, then, judiciously uses characters' names to develop motifs and advance the theme of his novel. For example, Bounderby and Sparsit's character deficiencies are revealed by their names in such a way as to dramatize the conflict in Dickens' England between the new and the old wealth. Furthermore, by having a bounder wholeheartedly accept the principles of Social Darwinism and Utilitarianism, Dickens undermines those very principles. Harthouse's insincerity is suggested by the two, quite different, possibilities of "heart" and "hothouse" in his name; the latter of these possibilities strengthens his role in revealing the serious consequences of a Utilitarian education. Gradgrind, M'Choakumchild, Sissy and Bitzer all have names which in several ways aid Dickens in his attack on the educational principles espoused by Utilitarians and adopted by the Birkbeck Schools in his day.

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