

The Victorians appear to have had a fondness for reading scenes of strong sentiment and passionate melodrama. With close reference to the work of at least two novelists, show what particular features of taste and belief this reveals.

A melodrama is a "sensational dramatic piece with crude appeals to emotions" in the terms of the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*¹. Given that the Victorian era has become synonymous with restraint, it is surprising to note the passionate sentimentality of its literature. In this essay, I examine the theatricality of Dickens' writing in *Hard Times* and the schematised passion of Hardy in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*; I ask why these novelists' appeals to our emotions may seem "crude" to modern tastes and why the inclination towards melodramatic martyrdom is a character trait common to both novels.

To our minds, the writing of Dickens must veer towards the over-sentimental in its overt appeal to our hearts. Whether it is in scenes of blissful reconciliation such as that between Louisa Gradgrind and Sissy Jupe in *Hard Times*, or in the pathos-laden death scenes of Stephen Blackpool and Mrs. Gradgrind, the proliferation of emotive phrases and gestures is expanded to a degree almost comical by modern standards. The emotion may be subtle, but the manipulation of the reader is not. Taking the instances above, in response to Louisa's "'let me lay this head of mine upon a loving heart'"², Sissy's impassioned ejaculation is overblown and melodramatic; "'O lay it here!" cried Sissy. "Lay it here, my dear"'³. This is a moment of tenderness, love and bittersweet repudiation. Yet Dickens chooses to swathe this

1 ¹ *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English*; seventh edition; Sykes, J. B.; (UK; Oxford University Press; 1986); p631.

2 ² Charles Dickens; *Hard Times*; second edition; (UK; Penguin Group; 1995); p229.

3 ³ *Ibid.*

complex mix of sentiment in sentimentality. The picture presented to us as readers is swamped by an abundance of ingratiatingly worthy emotion: "In the innocence of her brave affection, and the brimming up of her old devoted spirit, the once deserted girl shone like a beautiful light upon the darkness of the other"⁴. The same "brimming up" of description is presumably intended to elicit our gushing emotional sympathy. In the case of pathos, Dickens' broad descriptive strokes are more pronounced. "There was a universal cry of "Alive or dead?" and then a deep, profound hush. / When he said "Alive!" a great shout arose, and many eyes had tears in them"⁵. Stephen's struggle to speak upon his emergence from "The Old Hell Shaft" adds gravity to the swan-song he gives, yet its torturous duration can imbue us with an appreciation of his length of confinement. As Stephen cries ""But look up yonder, Rachael! Look aboove!"" and, "Following his eyes, she saw he was gazing at a star"⁶, it is perhaps the awkward theatricality of this style which can rile the modern reader.

This melodramatic narration extends even to the "staging" of scenes presented to us.

Blackpool's wife is first depicted as "barely able to preserve her sitting posture by steadying herself with one begrimed hand on the floor, while the other was so purposeless in trying to push away her tangled hair ..."⁷. Stephen has fallen "further off"⁸ from the figure having stumbled on her; and thus he now backs away into the darkness. This tableau evokes the moment of confrontation with a painterly eye for chiaroscuro and a dramatic eye for the distressed posture of Mrs Blackpool. This reliance on the physical signifiers of drama is visible too in the reconciliation between Louisa and Sissy, "She fell upon her knees, and

4 ⁴Ibid., p228.

5 ⁵Ibid. p270.

6 ⁶Ibid. p273.

7 ⁷Ibid. p72.

8 ⁸Ibid.

clinging to this stroller's child looked up at her almost with veneration"⁹. We may question whether this theatricality derives to some extent from the suppression of the excessive public display of emotion in Victorian culture. Has the language of the stage thus become the most convincing way to communicate passion to the readership of the time? Or could it be that the body language of the Victorian age has come to appear as stylised as its prosaic novel-writing language? I would suggest that in Victorian society, the outward display of emotion has become displaced onto the stage, wherein this suppressed energy is allowed a cathartic release. The audience can comfortably revel in the "brimming up"¹⁰ emotion of the theatrical realm because it exists outside social rules and Victorian restraint. Thus, *Hard Times* embodies the theatrical form in order that Dickens can allow his readers to escape from social convention. We are invited to be a part of that crowd from which "a great shout arose, and many eyes had tears in them"¹¹. As Dickens pulls at our heart strings, the theatrical artifice of his form enables us to engage in the ritualistic group act of tragedy, to take communion in purging our frustrated emotions. This is an escapist immersion so intense, that when it seems our participation has impinged our own thoughts upon the text, "Run, Sissy, run, in Heaven's name! Don't stop for breath. Run, run!"¹², Dickens hardly needs to justify this stylistic lapse with the explanation: "Quickening herself by carrying such entreaties in her thoughts, she ran"¹³.

When we see instances of strong sentiment directed towards the Gradgrinds, it is often the case that Dickens is showing the weakness of metaphor in communicating to a mind unattuned to "Fancy"; and the blindness of Mr Gradgrind's factual world-view to emotional

9 ⁹Ibid., p228.

10 ¹⁰Ibid.

11 ¹¹Ibid. p270.

12 ¹²Ibid. p268.

realities. Thus when Louisa passionately reflects upon the chimneys of the Coketown works, she talks of her own situation, "There seems to be nothing there, but languid and monotonous smoke. Yet when the night comes, Fire bursts out, father!" she answered, turning quickly"¹⁴. Yet her father is unable to "penetrate surfaces and read symbols"¹⁵. Given that the novel is in part a panegyric to the virtues of imagination, these scenes seem to be attempting to persuade us of the value of metaphor in expressing the complex, and by his choice of the obvious and overtly sentimental analogy, we may suggest that Dickens seeks to jolt even the most stultified Victorian imagination into collusion. When Louisa tells her mother, "I was encouraged by nothing, mother, but by looking at the red sparks dropping out of the fire, and whitening and dying. It made me think, after all, how short my life would be, and how little I could hope to do in it"¹⁶, Mrs. Gradgrind harshly responds, "Nonsense!"¹⁷. We are warned of the danger of being insensible of appeals to our imagination, and the warnings are all the more loud for the melodramatic scale in which they are writ. Thus when Mr Sleary talks to Mr Gradgrind in the penultimate chapter, it is not just Mr Gradgrind, but also the Victorian readers who have been enlivened to the intrinsic worth of metaphor, and are awake to its meaning; "thomehow or another ith at leath ath hard to give a name to, ath the wayth of the dogth ith"¹⁸. During a milieu in which two years later, Ruskin would feel compelled to write about the ugliness of the inappropriate metaphor in *Of the Pathetic Fallacy*, "the foam is not cruel, neither does it crawl"¹⁹; Dickens emphatically reinstated the

13 ¹³ Ibid.

14 ¹⁴ Ibid. p103

15 ¹⁵ Barbara Hardy, *Forms of Feeling in Victorian Fiction*; first edition; (UK; Peter Owen Limited; 1985); p46.

16 ¹⁶ *Hard Times*; (UK; Penguin Group; 1995); p59.

17 ¹⁷ Ibid.

18 ¹⁸ Ibid., p292.

19 ¹⁹ *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*; sixth edition; M.H. Abrams; (USA; W.W. Norton & Company; 1993); volume two; p1278.

worth of fluid representation. It is the boldness of his application that may seem cloying to modern tastes.

Hardy speaks of showing "the strongest passion known to humanity" in his preface to *Jude the Obscure*²⁰ and in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* we see a number of dramatic set pieces. Yet as Barbara Hardy observes, Hardy "tends to avoid decisive cries of passion"²¹ and instead "prefers to show the combination and accretion of many impassioned occasions"²². Thus, in the first clear confrontation between Henchard and Farfrae - over the humiliation of Abel Whittle - there is a moderation of tone:

"Come" said Donald quietly, "a man of your position should ken better, sir! It is tyrannical and no worthy of you."

"Tis not tyrannical!" murmured Henchard, like a sullen boy. "It is to make him remember!" He presently added, in a tone of one bitterly hurt: "Why did you speak to me before them like that, Farfrae? You might have stopped till we were alone."²³

This incident contributes to the "accretion of many impassioned occasions"²⁴ and because we are given the privilege of seeing chains of causalities, we are better able to situate dramatic events in their contexts. Since we have been given due warning of Henchard's temperament, when he starts to drink again after twenty-one years, it seems less incongruous that the former Mayor should have "seized the poker, and going to the door placed his back against it"²⁵ to force the musicians of the Three Mariners to sing. We are aware not only of Henchard's rash temperament but also of his increasing resentments, and this richness of circumstantial information situates the dramatic within the confines of our expectations. For this reason, in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, scenes of passionate melodrama occur less

20 ²⁰ From Hardy's Preface to the first edition of *Jude the Obscure*, but quoted here from; Barbara Hardy; *Forms of Feeling in Victorian Fiction*; first edition; (UK; Peter Owen Limited; 1985) p159.

21 ²¹ *Forms of Feeling in Victorian Fiction*; (UK; Peter Owen Limited; 1985); p161.

22 ²² Ibid.

23 ²³ Thomas Hardy; *The Mayor of Casterbridge*; second edition; (UK; Penguin Group; 1994); p114.

24 ²⁴ *Forms of Feeling in Victorian Fiction*; (UK; Peter Owen Limited; 1985); p161.

25 ²⁵ *The Mayor of Casterbridge*; (UK; Penguin Group; 1994); p269.

frequently than scenes of passionate drama; and that the strong sentiment expressed in the novel is so thoroughly contextualised suggests a more refined taste in Hardy's Victorian readership. Hardy, with his references to "*Weltlust*"²⁶ and "Calphurnia"²⁷, is talking to an educated readership and his manner of depicting the dramatic is pointedly distinct from the theatricality of Dickens, who writes a popular serial in *Household Words*. In this light, it is questionable whether we can talk about "The Victorians" as having a generalised "fondness" for the melodramatic without distinguishing between different readerships.

However, those passages in Hardy wherein strong sentiment is expressed, become jarringly exaggerated when taken out of context. Hardy so schematically raises the pitch of emotional crescendos, that absurdity tends to lie deeper below the surface of his dramatic confrontations than in Dickens' work. Thus when Henchard and Farfrae are fighting, Henchard gasps "'this is the end of what you began this morning. Your life is in my hands'"²⁸. Farfrae bids him take it for "'Ye've wished to long enough!'"²⁹, to which Henchard bathotically replies: "'O Farfrae! - That's not true!'"³⁰. In contrast to Dickens in *Hard Times*, Hardy tends not to show people dying as we look on, the action is instead reported and thus some of the emotional impact is lessened. However, again, there are instances where we nonetheless perceive Hardy's desire to emote strong passions, such as in Mrs. Cuxsom's narration of Mrs. Henchard's death. "'When I'm gone, and my last breath's blowed, look in the top drawer ... and you'll find my coffin clothes there ... And there's four ounce pennies, the heaviest I could find, a-tied up in bits of linen, for weights - two for my right eye and two for my left ...'" /

26 ²⁶Ibid.; p310.

27 ²⁷Ibid.; p307

28 ²⁸Ibid.; p315.

29 ²⁹Ibid.

30 ³⁰Ibid.

"Ah, poor heart!"³¹. Hardy seems to be struggling between the desire to write unsentimentally, with restraint, and the pressure of popular demand for bluntly heart-rending reading material. Thus even as he distances us from the melodrama of a "death scene", Hardy turns and looks back in sentiment. Henchard's death is another example of this rewriting which seems to produce two versions of the text, ""What, Whittle" he said, "and can ye really be such a poor fond fool as to care for such a wretch as I!"³². On the one hand, Henchard's death has been dealt with using subtlety and tact, it has been moved outside the parameters of the narrator and takes place off-stage. On the other, we are presented with a report of Henchard's last memorable words, words reminiscent in tone to those of King Lear talking in the storm to his Fool³³. This then, is the language of tragedy, and its melodramatic potential is lessened only by its inclusion within the parentheses of reported speech. Having written *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Hardy wrote in his diary that "his art"³⁴ was "to intensify the expression of things, as is done by Crivelli, Bellini, etc., so that the heart and inner meaning is made vividly visible"³⁵. This desire to "intensify the expression" seems to denote a search for the passions of beauty and emotion in the things he sees. It is in this manner that Hardy has abstracted Casterbridge to allow it to represent a rural idyll, he has sentimentalised this picture of a town into what he himself called a "dream-place"³⁶. Hardy wrote that he "could not absolutely contradict"³⁷ the man who said that "'Casterbridge" is a sort of essence of the town as it used to be, "a place more Dorchester than Dorchester

31 ³¹Ibid.; p137.

32 ³²Ibid.; p383.

33 ³³*The Norton Shakespeare*; first edition; Stephen Greenblatt; (USA; W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.; 1997); Act IV, sc. v. p2433-2445.

34 ³⁴Quoted here from J. B. Bullen; *The Expressive Eye*; first edition; (UK; Clarendon Press; 1986); p142.

35 ³⁵Ibid.

36 ³⁶Ibid.

37 ³⁷Ibid.

itself"³⁸. There is passionate expression in the very scenes themselves which Hardy paints for us: "To birds of the more soaring kind Casterbridge must have appeared on this fine evening as a mosaic-work of subdued reds, browns, greys and crystals, held together by a rectangular frame of deep green"³⁹. Although the same abstraction can be seen in the "fairy palaces"⁴⁰ of *Hard Times*, Dickens' intent seems a more self-conscious authorial desire to demonstrate the free-play of "Fancy" in his mind rather than a sentimentalisation of the oppressive ugliness of Coketown. Whereas Dickens balances his idealised vision of Coketown as seen from the train, with the close-up grime of "interminable serpents of smoke"⁴¹, Hardy's scenes present only his passionate love for the Wessex ideal even at close hand: "the mossy gardens at the back, glowing with nasturtiums, fuchsias, scarlet geraniums, "bloody warriors", snapdragons, and dahlias, this floral blaze being backed by crusted grey stone-work remaining from a yet remoter Casterbridge"⁴².

Common to both Dickens and Hardy is a penchant for depicting scenes in which the reader can be moved by the incapacity of one of the characters to influence what is happening to them. Such situations provoke self-pity in the character and an angry helplessness in the reader, who reads on all the more fervently with the desire to sate a sense of injustice. This can be felt in Stephen Blackpool's confrontation with Bounderby; "'Now" said Bounderby, "speak up!" / After the four days he had passed, this address fell rudely and discordantly on Stephen's ear. Besides being a rough handling of his wounded mind, it seemed to assume that he really was the self-interested deserter he had been called"⁴³. From this point, the

38 Ibid.

39 *The Mayor of Casterbridge*; (UK; Penguin Group; 1994); p30

40 *Hard Times*; (UK; Penguin Group; 1995); p73

41 Ibid.; p28.

42 *The Mayor of Casterbridge*; (UK; Penguin Group; 1994); p68.

43 *Hard Times*; (UK; Penguin Group; 1995); p149.

conversation spirals into misunderstanding and ends in his angry dismissal. Stephen is powerless to communicate his situation to Bounderby and we are inclined to feel his desperation; "Stephen shook his head, mutely protesting that indeed he had other business to do for his life"⁴⁴. In *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, when Louisa demands of Henchard "But how can I when I know you have deceived me so - so bitterly deceived me!"⁴⁵, we are told that Henchard "did not sufficiently value himself to lessen his sufferings by strenuous appeal or elaborate argument"⁴⁶. Thus it is that "Waiving his privilege of self-defence"⁴⁷, Henchard does not undertake the "strenuous appeal" to justify himself, he is a party to his own incapacitation. Later, in his will, Henchard's stubbornly self-denying edicts "& that no flours be planted on my grave"⁴⁸ are described by Barbara Hardy as "the solemn formalising of bitterness, self-pity and pride"⁴⁹ in an "act of control both dignified and indulgent"⁵⁰. This response is one of easy martyrdom. Faced with seemingly insurmountable obstacles to understanding or sympathy, the characters in both these works choose to resign themselves rather than to struggle. Although we are encouraged to see dignity in this resignation, there is an undercurrent of indulgent self-pity which must make us question the honour of the act. In a culture still saturated with strong faith in Christianity, this preponderance of self-sacrifice seems to reflect the elevated position ascribed to the virtue of martyrdom in the Victorian mind. The portrayal of scenes of frustrating incapacity is perhaps also a symptom of the psychological landscape of the Victorian age. In a time of rapidly expanding scales of industry, urbanisation, machinery and production, a time of disenfranchisement, poverty and

44 Ibid.; p155.

45 *The Mayor of Casterbridge*; (UK; Penguin Group; 1994); p376.

46 Ibid.; p377.

47 Ibid.

48 Ibid.; p384.

49 *Forms of Feeling in Victorian Fiction*; (UK; Peter Owen Limited; 1985); p169.

deep class divisions, the sentiment of powerless insignificance, a sense of the hopelessness of trying to change one's circumstances, is understandable. Unfortunately, in modern readings this reaction can seem as childish and melodramatic as Louisa's petulant anguish:

[Bounderby] went his way, but she stood on the same spot, rubbing the cheek he had kissed, with her handkerchief, until it was burning red. She was still doing this, five minutes afterwards.

"What are you about Loo?" her brother sulkily remonstrated. "you'll rub a hole in your face."

"You may cut the piece out with your penknife if you like, Tom. I wouldn't cry!"⁵¹

To conclude, the passionate sentimentality of these two novels suggests that, as in our age, the Victorians read - at least in part, because they wanted to be moved. Whereas the theatricality of Dickens' staging and dialogue can seem melodramatic to the modern reader; it suggests his desire to allow his readers a cathartic vent to their repressed emotions, within the safe realm of the unreal. The exuberant display of emotions which ensues must surely be the result of *destape*⁵² - a taste for the extreme, cultivated in reaction to the prevailing restraint of the age. Hardy judges the tastes of his readership to be less inclined towards explosive emotion, and thus fiercely contextualises his flair for the dramatic; yet his love for Wessex provides the sentimental scenes he describes in his work, as the idyllic resting places for a nostalgic and industry-weary Victorian reader. The dwarfing scale and rigid conventions of the Victorian age could have led to the sense of helplessness which lies at the centre of both works; but it seems that Christian martyrdom is the yet pervasive and melodramatic sanctuary chosen by the main characters of these Victorian works.

50 ⁵⁰ Ibid.

51 ⁵¹ *Hard Times*; (UK; Penguin Group; 1995); p27-28

52 ⁵² Literally, "taking the lid off": Term used to describe the cultural period of rampant liberalism following the end of the repressive Franco regime in Spain, 1975; Ed Moffat; Spanish History, Culture and Institutions; lecture given 22.4.99; Lancaster University.

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