Stairway to Sin: An Uncharacteristic Breach in Dickens' Didactic Style

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Jenna Zulauf, originally from Ubly, is completing her fourth year at SVSU as a double major in Sociology and Psychology. Although she admits she is not entirely a fan of literature or writing, she saw the opportunity in this essay to look closely at the writer's intentions using the analytical skills she has gained in her majors. Jenna credits her ability to communicate through writing to her three years of mentoring at the Writing Center.

It is often argued that Dickens' didactic writing style leaves little room for interpretation on the part of the reader. Critics also point out how Dickens' focus on superficial, surface-level details in his novels ignores the complexity of people and events in the real world. In the novel Hard Times, the majority of the description certainly does follow this didactic form, portraying characters as flat, single-sided personalities and illustrating events through severely biased perceptions. However, Hard Times is not without moments of description in which the more complex multi-faceted aspects of the characters' lives are revealed. One such example is Dickens straying from the didactic style throughout the narration of Louisa's sin of adultery. His careful choice to include and describe the metaphor of a staircase relates specifically and directly to the theme of the fallen woman and successfully demonstrates the complex underlying processes of Louisa's personal fall from morality.

Dickens could have chosen to simply present a superficial description of Louisa and her adulterous desire. However, as she begins to spend more time with James Harthouse than with her husband, Dickens creates a watchful character named Mrs. Sparsit who envisions Louisa's sin as a gradual descent down an imaginary staircase. The voyeuristic woman "erected in her mind a mighty Staircase, with a dark pit of shame and ruin at the bottom" (153). Although this choice may seem quite obvious and appropriate even at a first reading, Dickens' careful choice to describe Louisa's acts of sin at all, and furthermore in this exact way, is neither a coincidence nor an arbitrary selection. The staircase and Louisa's walk down it work to create specific meanings relating back to the image of the fallen woman. In addition, elements of the staircase demonstrate complexity in this evolution toward sin that other types of imagery would have failed to fully convey.

Louisa's movement toward adultery is gradual in nature, and Mrs. Sparsit envisioned Lousia's journey toward sin "from day to day and hour to hour" (153). To relay this message of a gradual process to his audience, Dickens would only have needed to avoid images implying sudden all-or-nothing changes in position, such as sheer cliffs or, in the case of another Hard Times character, deep pits. For example, he could just as easily have shown the change to be gradual by describing Louisa as walking on a path toward sin. One can stand at the beginning, end, or anywhere between these two points on a path, in contrast to a pit where one is either at the top or bottom. Although a path clearly communicates the notion of a progression, this choice does not imply the physical descent that a staircase does. The use of a

path in this instance would forfeit the suggestion of the sinner's physical movement downward, a likely reference to a fall from morality and to the eternal hell that awaits the sinner below. Pictured by Mrs. Sparsit, the end of the staircase is indeed "a dark pit of shame and ruin" (153).

It would have been possible to illustrate the gradual nature of a physical descent by employing the image of Louisa at the top of a hill. Obviously this example would have met Dickens' needs of showing both a progression and movement downward from a starting place. Compared to a hill's continuing uninterrupted slope, a staircase has many defined ledges. Because it is divided into equal parts, the staircase provides a more precise measure of severity than the hill can offer. Although her journey toward sin is indeed gradual, it is not in fact completed at a steady rate. In the beginning, Louisa merely stands atop the staircase. Later she walks several stairs at a time, and finally takes a quick run to the last sinning step. Her descent is projected in Mrs. Sparsit's mind as "Sometimes slowly, sometimes quickly, sometimes several steps at one bout, sometimes stopping, never turning back" (153). A hill would only be able to describe her movement toward sin in a qualitative way, rather than the more quantifiable measures of speed and magnitude the staircase provides.

Understanding how the image of the staircase itself fully conveys the intended elements of gradual descent in variable amounts toward sin, it is important to revisit the connections between these images and the theme of the fallen woman. First of all, describing Louisa as a fallen woman may make it seem as though she is physically falling or tripping down the staircase. It is quite an interesting thought that although she is a definite representative of this type, she is in no way tumbling hopelessly down the steps. In fact, she is in absolute command of her body, if not her emotions, in a controlled walk toward sin. One night, Harthouse and Louisa "strolled away, among the lanes beginning to be indistinct in the twilight – she leaning on his arm – and she little thought how she was going down, down, down, Mrs. Sparsit's staircase" (155).

It is also important to note that Louisa's walk toward the bottom step is voluntary. Although she is being influenced and lured by a man without her best interests in mind, no one forces her toward sin. She is walking down the stairs without intimidation or threat. The farther away from her husband she roams, the closer to Harthouse and to sin she comes. She could have, had she so chosen, made a retreat with little resistance back up toward the summit of the staircase where she began. However, it would have ruined Mrs. Sparsit's fun of snooping had Louisa so much as "once turned back" (153). It appears that the fallen woman sins under her own power and also has the chance to save herself before reaching the point of no return. This fall is Louisa's alone as she walks solitarily down the stairs. She does not force Harthouse away, "neither turned her face to him, nor raised it," even when she felt very uncomfortable with his confessions and approach (159-160). Although she has every reason to retreat back up the stairs and shun Harthouse, she continues to wait around rather than walk back up toward morality.

Louisa's fall into adultery presents an atypical deviation from the didactic style Dickens uses for the majority of Hard Times. Seeming at first to be an insignificant detail, the staircase actually portrays ideas that other likely options would fail to establish and address. The staircase successfully shows Louisa's voluntary, controlled, and gradual descent, which could have been reversed had she so chosen. Rather than using superficial description, Dickens' complete description of the complex process and the careful decision to use the image of a staircase elaborate beyond the otherwise flat character and typical presentation of the fallen woman.

Work Cited

Dickens, Charles. Hard Times. 3rd ed. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001.