

The Question of Realism in *Hard Times*

Ligia Grabauskas*

Abstract: According to Watt (2001), the novel is the literary form of the bourgeoisie, and one of its defining traits is the individualization characters. However, in Charles Dickens's novels, the reader encounters many caricatures, typical from the melodrama, a form previous to the novel. This paper intends to explain, through the analysis of a chapter from one of Dickens's novels, "Hard Times", why the author chooses flat characters, and how they contribute to create the feeling of reality.

Keywords: Charles Dickens, *Hard Times*, novel, realism, flat characters.

Introduction

Ian Watt describes in his famous text "Realism and the Novel Form" the characteristics of the novel, a rising literary form that began to appear in the late seventeenth century and had its apex in the eighteenth century. According to him, the novel is an attempt to be a faithful account of reality, portraying human experience with objectivity close to scientific analysis.

However, Raymond Williams argues in another important text of literary criticism, "Forms of English Fiction in 1848", that "At any particular point there are complex relations between what can be called dominant, residual and emergent institutions and practices".¹ This idea can be observed in literature: many of the most read novels in that time did not follow exactly the pattern described by Watt, the one of bourgeois realism. Charles Dickens's *Hard Times* is an example of a novel that did not break completely with old-fashioned romances, mingling features of previous modes with the new form.

Another aspect by which Dickens's prose stands out is the strict relation between the content and the form through which it is conveyed. He writes about the city, but also in a style that is adequate to portray urban life: fast rhythm, vivid and energetic descriptions, and abrupt shifts of tone and expressive characters that are known only by one or two defining traits, as if they were strangers passing in the street.

* Undergraduate student at Universidade de São Paulo (USP).

¹ WILLIAMS, Raymond. "Forms of English Fiction in 1848" In: *Writing in Society*. London and New York: Verso, 1983, p.150.

Through an analysis of the chapter XIV, “The Great Manufacturer”, extracted from the first part of the novel *Hard Times*, this paper intends to better explain these aspects of Dickens’s prose.

Analysis

“The Great Manufacturer” is an important part of the main metaphor used by Dickens in the novel: the division of it into three parts, named “Sowing”, “Reaping” and “Garnering”, provides the novel the idea of an on-going natural process. It brings the description of how time went by in Coketown. Capitalism is present in this fictional world almost as a second nature, for it is already so interwoven in society that it seems impossible to be overcome. Time goes by in consonance with the capitalist system: “Time went on in Coketown like its own machinery: so much material wrought up, so much fuel consumed, so many powers worn out, so much money made”². The repetition of quantifiers such as “so much” and “so many” shows that time is measured in terms of money and production, and creates a stifling atmosphere, from which there is no way out: the new order has already become a natural phenomenon.

However, the narrator makes an exception: Time is the only thing that still can compete with capitalism as an equal, the only thing that can operate a change in a world which is always the same. Thus the chapter is dedicated to show the passage of a short period of time in the life of four characters: Mr. Gradgrind, his elder children Louisa and Tom, and the girl who came from the circus, Sissy Jupe. From the first chapters, Louisa is presented as a more complex individual, but in the case of her brother, father and Sissy this development is not that which would be expected in a realist novel, which according to Watt gave great importance in the development of its characters.

Concerning Tom, the mention of any kind of development is made only in terms of biological growth (“Thomas is becoming almost a young man”³), or in terms of a change in the role the character plays in the society (“Time, sticking to him, passed him into Bounderby’s Bank”⁴). But his essence, his character remains the same throughout the whole novel. As for Sissy, the few traits we know about her are also presented in one go, and do not change; her development, or the lack of it, is the one expected from

² DICKENS, Charles. *Hard Times*. London: Penguin Popular Classics, 1994, p.80.

³ *Ibidem*, p.80.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p.80.

her at school (“I cannot disguise from you, Jupe, that the result of your probation there has disappointed me”⁵). Mr. Gradgrind in turn is the one who less suffers the effects of time, except for his becoming a member of Parliament of Coketown: “[...] while Mr. Gradgrind himself seemed stationary in his course, and underwent no alteration.”⁶

Tom, Sissy and Mr. Gradgrind, as well as most of the other characters of *Hard Times*, are caricatures: flat characters, stereotyped ones that are not developed by the author; from the beginning of the novel, their most prominent aspects are shown, and last until the end of the narrative. In this sense, Dickens’s mode of characterization is typical of the streets: there’s no time to watch the unfolding of one’s personality; the types are all passing in front of the reader’s eyes, and have to be easily recognized. Mr. Gradgrind is a remarkable example of the use of types, for his name denotes a particular aspect of him, setting the character in a context of expectations even before the reader has the chance to see him in action.

Nevertheless the caricature is far from the kind of character which belongs by definition to the bourgeois fiction: the round character, the one that is individualized, that has its personality explored by the author during the time. Instead, caricatures are typical of the melodrama, a traditional form dated back from the Middle Ages, which proves Raymond Williams’s defense of an interlock of previous and contemporary practices and forms. In spite of that they are very realistic and appropriate for Dickens’s purposes, because they are true to a new kind of experience, to the urban sensibility; through them, the author is able to capture the movement of the society of time. The industrialism in which they live sort of crushes people: the power has been taken over by material things, so people are reduced to mere objects. In a way, the distortion of reality executed by the novelist allows the reader to see more accurately, because the emphasis is beyond the surface, in the essence of things.

Time is again closely related to the industrialized society, but now through a metaphor that compares it to a factory. When the narrator talks about the changes that occurred in Tom and Sissy’s lives, he says: “In some stages of his manufacture of the human fabric, the processes of Time are very rapid”. This procedure delivers the idea of a universe overtaken by the capitalist system, which reduces everything and everyone into products, into things. The people are mere threads in the hands of the manufacturer, and the lives of the first depend on

⁵ *Ibidem*, p.81.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p.82.

the will of the latter. Reification is a figure greatly explored by Dickens to create the feeling of an omnipresent system that has contaminated every sector of the reality in which it is circumscribed. Later on, by the end of the chapter, when Louisa is wondering about what awaits for her in the next day concerning the conversation with her father, the novelist finishes the scene with an observation that reinforces the inexorability of Time, therefore of the system into which they are all immersed: “[...] what kind of woof Old Time, that greatest and longest-established Spinner of all, would weave from the threads he had already spun into a woman. But his factor is a secret place, his work is noiseless, and his Hands are mutes.”⁷

Conclusion

Charles Dickens has often been low rated among the critics due to his frequent use of flat characters, considered by many a weakness, a practice which denounces the incapacity of a writer to create more complex individuals. However, it is important to notice, when reading his novels, that stereotypes are exactly what people see in the streets since the world has begun to change, with the Industrial Revolution and the rise of the large cities: they are like passing strangers, who are just perceived externally by their most prominent characteristics.

That is why, after literary criticism started to give more value to Dickens's work, specialized literature in the subject frequently talks about being true to a social process: Dickens not only portrayed rather vividly the drama of the inhabitants of the new cities; he also managed, as no other novelist ever did, to do that in a form that captures the essence of an increasingly dehumanized society.

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⁷ *Ibidem*, p.85.