

Fixed class structure and the illusion of movement in Dickens' *Hard Times*

There are many figurative and literal ladders within Charles Dickens' *Hard Times*.

However, the most obvious of them, the ladder to climb the social hierarchy, is only obvious in its desired direction—up. Yet, this ladder presented to the “Hands” of the working class by both Slackbridge and Bounderby proves to be an illusion, and class within the novel proves to be more fixed than fluid. As a consequence, descriptions of movement and proximity are complicated in this text, symbolizing the falsity of movement between the classes through the medium of the text. Stephen Blackpool is the only worker who sees through these illusions, and consequently faces ostracization and hardship due to this realization of an intentionally fixed system of stratified upper and lower class. This essay will consist of a close reading of chapters four and five, focusing on the characters Bounderby, Slackbridge and Stephen and what they reveal about the reality of the “social ladder” as an illusion.

Focusing in on Slackbridge, there is an immediate irony in his name: he is not a real bridge to wealth, status or unity. Rather, the bridge he presents to the workers by means of unionization is indeed, slack. From the beginning of chapter four, “Men and Brothers,” he very intentionally manipulates the workers, and Dickens wastes no time informing the reader of his true intentions: “He was not so honest...he substituted cunning for their simplicity, and passion for their safe solid sense” (131). Despite Slackbridge's impassioned speeches about the valor of the working man, as evidenced by his self-described “cunning,” he believes none of it and wants to use his enraptured audience to gain power and influence. Further, Slackbridge is not one of the working class, as evidenced by the stark differences in vernacular within dialogue sections of the novel, representing the deep divide between the working class people and their “leader.”

Slackbridge's speech from the opening to chapter four exemplifies his posh, antiquated speaking style: "Oh my friends, the down-trodden operatives of Coketown! Oh my friends and fellow-countrymen, the slaves of an iron-handed and a grinding despotism!" (131). Besides the laughability in the disingenuous phrases of "my friends and fellow-countrymen" coming from a man of self described "cunning" (reminiscent of the ironic title "Men and Brothers" describing a chapter on Slackbridge), there is a comedic irony in how far removed Slackbridge is from the reality of the working class— even in his attempts at calculated manipulation, his passionate speech, seem more fit for a Parliament hall or a pretentious fête than a union rally. Here Dickens engages with a comedic irony targeting the upper class through the character of Slackbridge, in that he is so deeply disconnected from his audience he even fails to pander to them correctly. Through Slackbridge, Dickens establishes the deep divide between classes in 19th century England, and introduces the illusion of the union as a bridge to a higher social class within the context of this novel.

Turning to the "Hands" of the working class themselves, Dickens uses cleverly placed directional descriptives to compare the working class to those of the upper class in order to demonstrate the underlying dynamics of social hierarchy. When the chairman of the newly formed union speaks on the same issues as Slackbridge, we see how deep the divide between the people and Slackbridge really is, as the real vernacular of the working people is starkly different: "'Stephen Blackpool,' said the chairman, rising, 'think on 't agen. Think on 't once again, lad, afore thou'rt shunned by aw owd friends'" (135). Not only does Dickens use the chairman to illustrate said difference in vernacular between Slackbridge and the Hands, but also uses the directional descriptives, in this instance the word "rising," to demonstrate the idea of the union as means to rise in social class (albeit a false idea in the context of this novel). The idea of the

chairman rising while addressing Stephen illuminates the underlying dynamics of perceived movement within the social hierarchy. The man's role as the chairman elevates him from the status of just another "Hand" working in the factory, and places him above Stephen and the other Hands. Not only is he literally rising from his seat to address Stephen, but he rises in the social hierarchy to have a title and position of authority. Dickens cleverly uses these directional descriptives to demonstrate the characters' ever changing proximity to one another on the perceived social ladder throughout the novel. Another example is when Stephen leaves the rally, ostracized and downtrodden, only to be summoned by Bounderby: "Then go straight up there, will you" (137) as spoken by Bitzer. This is followed by Dickens' narrative description, "Stephen, whose way had been in the contrary direction, turned about, and betook himself as in duty bound, to the red brick castle of the giant Bounderby" (137). Needless to say Bounderby's description as a giant refers to him as the top of the social hierarchy at the factory, but that isn't the only movement going on within these lines pertaining to the idea of status. Stephen has fallen from grace here, and is going in the "contrary direction" of Bounderby's fixed position at the top of the social ladder— however, he faces an opportunity to get into Bounderby's good graces by spying on his rival Slackbridge and the union, therefore, the idea of going "up" and the potential for movement within the social hierarchy is present here when Bitzer bids Stephen to "go straight up there" (137). This extensive use of directional descriptives illustrates the way that Dickens sees social class, and the potential to improve it, underscoring nearly every moment of the mens' lives.

Chapter five, "Men and Masters," begins with Stephen's entrance into the "red brick castle" of Bounderby. Similar to the opening of chapter four, manipulation is immediately at play. The circumstances and manipulator may be different (shifted from Slackbridge to

Bounderby) but the mechanism is the same: the upper class is exploiting the working class for personal gain (the working class here symbolized by Stephen). Again, Dickens utilizes directional descriptives to illustrate the reality of the social hierarchy: “‘Well, Stephen’ said Bounderby, in his windy manner, ‘what’s this I hear? What have these pests of the earth been doing to *you*? Come in, and speak up’” (138). Primarily, the usage of the phrase “pests of the earth” to describe Stephen’s fellow factory workers is indicative of Bounderby’s intention to manipulate Stephen; he separates Stephen (“you” in italics, for emphasis) from the rest of the workers (the “pests”) because he wants information from him, and presents this conversation as an opportunity to distinguish himself and “lift” himself from his class status. This idea of “lifting” Stephen up in status is shown through the use of the phrase “speak up” throughout this chapter. The phrase is repeated thrice within the first page of the chapter, even before Stephen has the chance to speak, and it is always directed at Stephen himself. Bounderby repeats it each over and over, establishing order and superiority to try and lull Stephen into submission. As previously mentioned, Bounderby is seen as a “giant” of the upper class, so Stephen has to speak up, literally, to speak to him from his lower position. In the end, Stephen sees through Bounderby’s manipulation and decides to do what he believes is right, defending the other Hands despite their decision to ostracize him.

Stephen’s unwillingness to submit to either Slackbridge or Bounderby not only establishes his good character, but more importantly, reflects his knowledge of reality: all long, there was very little opportunity for movement within the social hierarchy he occupies. He recognizes that the illusion of movement up the ladder (separately presented to him by Slackbridge and Bounderby) are in reality only means of gaining more power for men at the top. Just like Slackbridge, there is a more hidden irony in Stephen’s last name, Blackpool— Stephen is

the only one who sees the “black unpassable world betwixt ” (143), the gaping, black mass that no bridge or ladder can cross— the deep divide between the classes intentionally created by the wealthy, which they desperately hope will never, truly, be crossed.