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Author(s): Anne Humpherys

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# Louisa Gradgrind's Secret: Marriage and Divorce in *Hard Times*

*Anne Humpherys*

"Is it possible, I wonder, that there was any analogy between the case of the Coketown population and the case of the little Gradgrinds?" Charles Dickens, *Hard Times*

In Nathaniel Hawthorne's gothic story "Rappacini's Daughter" (1844), a brilliant scientist "instruct[s his daughter] deeply in his science, [so] that, as young and beautiful as fame reports her, she is already qualified to fill a professor's chair" (1049) as her would-be lover Giovanni learns. But the father has done more: in a diabolical experiment he has had his daughter tend poisonous flowers through which she, Beatrice, becomes literally lethal: her kiss, her very breath kills. Though he has also arranged to give her a lover by infecting Giovanni with the poison, Beatrice, knowing that the antidote will be fatal to her, both sacrifices herself for her unworthy lover and rejects her father's gifts by killing herself.

The parallel between Hawthorne's gothic story and Dickens' most ungothic novel of hard facts is close. Louisa Gradgrind, like Beatrice, is the victim of a terrible fatherly experiment that the fathers justify in the same way: they intend to make their daughters more powerful. The experiments, however, are fatal both to the women and to others. Louisa's equally insufficient lover Harthouse is humiliated by his contact with her and disappears into Egypt, and though the sudden and untimely deaths of her husband and her brother are not her doing directly, they are at least metaphorically the result of their relationship with her. And in the most resonant connection, the innocent and idealized working-class hero, Stephen Blackpool, dies painfully as a result of

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two brief encounters with her. In a further parallel, Louisa's failure to remarry after Bounderby's death is a kind of death; like Beatrice's suicidal rejection of her father's gifts, Louisa, though she had accepted the husband her father gave her, lives out her life in the shadow of other people's happiness and fulfillment.

The father-daughter plot in these two works is archetypal—present in Western culture from the Old Testament Jephtha, Lot, and Dinah to *Iphigenia in Aulis* to *King Lear* to Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*.<sup>1</sup> There is a conflict in all these stories between social needs and private desires that usually surface—indeed usually generate narrative—at the point of the daughter's marriage. Daughters must move out of the family and make new alliances through marriage to keep the biological, political, and economic health of the community, but the dynamics, particularly the sexual dynamics, within the family itself resist the moving out of the daughter. Sometimes the desire to keep the daughter grows out of the father's romantic attachment to her as she supplants the woman he first loved, who has dwindled into a wife, a fictional pattern seen in *Oedipus at Colonus*, in *King Lear*, and in "Rappacini's Daughter" and *Hard Times* (Louisa is her father's "favorite child" [165] and "the pride of his heart" [163]).<sup>1</sup> The father of Western father-daughter narratives frequently tries to negotiate his desire to keep the daughter by selecting the man she marries (not uncommonly she is given to his relative or friend), thus giving an additional turn to Eve Sedgwick's thesis of homosocial desire.

But there is another reason the daughter needs to stay within the family in these narratives. She is also needed to serve, save, redeem, ultimately to sacrifice herself for the father, as does Iphigenia, Cordelia, Florence Dombey, or Louisa Gradgrind. To the degree that the Western narrative of the father-daughter concerns the redemption of the patriarch, the daughter's continued presence in the family is essential. So, as Fred Kaplan in his biography of Dickens states, Louisa's return to her father's house is the means of redeeming him even as the patriarchy in general in that novel is redeemed by sisterhood. (309)

This benign thesis<sup>3</sup> places the center of interest in *Hard Times*, as in most Western narrative, in the development of the father's story. But there is another story possible, that of the daughter. From her point of view, the sacrifice that might redeem the father can be fatal, as with Iphigenia or Cordelia. The daughter's story is not frequent in Western narrative, but "Rappacini's Daughter" suggests where we might find it, that is, in the gothic. For though Hawthorne's gothic story is centered on a representation of male abuse of knowledge and power, the daughter's story—the conflict between her desire for her father's love and her desire for self-fulfillment and autonomy—vies for center stage with the father's, particularly at closure, as it does in many gothic novels. In that most ungothic novel, *Hard Times*, Louisa's story is less

visible and more problematic, but it is present intermittently, injected into the narrative not through the gothic but through the 1860s version of the gothic, the sensation novel and its interrogation of the institution of marriage.

The sensation novel in *Hard Times* is similar to the under-narrated sensation novel at the heart of *Bleak House* (the illicit affair of Honoria and Captain Hawden<sup>4</sup>) and the undeveloped sensation novel at the bottom of *Great Expectations* (the story of Estella's mother Molly) in that, like these other marginalized women's stories in Dickens' novels, Louisa's story of the explosive potential of a woman's repressed desires generates the narrative and powers its development. Even though the novel's overt interest is in the father's story and his need for redemption, Louisa's repressed feelings about her father, her marriage, her husband, and her lover, and the actions she takes as a result of these repressions cause the reversals of fortune for both Bounderby and Gradgrind that make up both the plot and the overt themes of *Hard Times*. That is, through her self-assertive action Stephen is suspected of robbing the bank which ultimately leads to the unmasking and humiliation of Bounderby, and also through her return to her father's house, Gradgrind experiences doubt about his life's work and is turned into a "wiser man, and a better man" (203). It is important to note that these changes in the fortunes of Bounderby and Gradgrind are not the result of the essentially passive ministering affections of a "good daughter" such as Florence Dombey or Little Dorrit. This version of the father's story in *Hard Times* is represented by Sissy, not only by her nursing presence in the Gradgrind house but also by her unquestioned forgiveness of her own father's abandonment of her. On the other hand, Bounderby and Gradgrind's fortunes change because of Louisa's subversive self-assertion—in other words, because of her similarity to a sensation novel heroine.

Louisa's repressed feelings and self-assertion not only cause havoc among the men in her life (not to mention her own life), but they cause a little havoc in the text as well. From the point of Louisa's marriage, there are a number of puzzling gaps in the story. One such gap, though a common one in Victorian fiction, is the configuration of the sexual nature of Louisa's marriage. There has been vigorous critical controversy over this subject.<sup>5</sup> Louisa's physical repugnance for Bounderby (as in the scene where she tells Tom she wouldn't mind if he cut out the place on her cheek where Bounderby kissed her) and the clear sexual desire that motivates him suggests there might be some sexual trouble between them from the start. But when we meet them months after the honeymoon, Louisa and her husband appear to live calmly together, which suggests to me that, however unsatisfactory, there has been conjugal sex.

Does it matter? We know that no Victorian novel could directly depict the sexual nature of human experience even in marriage. Why should we care

whether or not Louisa and Bounderby have had sex? It matters because the uncertainty about Louisa's sexual knowledge is one of a number of puzzling elements about her marriage. Her sexual experience or lack of it certainly would help us understand her feelings for Harthouse, which are rather mystified in the text. Why do her feelings for Harthouse result in her leaving her husband and returning to her father? Further, what does she have in mind in that return, and what does her father intend when he asks Bounderby to permit her to stay in her father's house "on a visit"? Finally, why does Louisa not remarry after Bounderby's death, that is, why does Bounderby die if by that Louisa is not freed to find happiness and fulfillment?

Of course, there are explanations for these events in the father's story. Louisa has to return and stay in her father's house to save him through her self-sacrifice. But in order for that story to dominate, questions about what Louisa might want must be suppressed. However, Louisa's story is not totally absent because it is part of another concern in the novel—that of marriage and divorce.

Though the introduction of the issue of divorce into *Hard Times* is as much the result of personal and political forces as narrative ones, once in the novel, it takes on a life of its own, as it were, and begins to disrupt the coherence of the narrative. Through the issue of divorce, parts of Louisa's story enter the narrative and vie for center stage with her father's story.

It is a critical truism that Dickens expressed his own boredom with his wife and marriage through Stephen Blackpool's desire for a divorce. Kaplan says that in the portrayal of Stephen's wife, Dickens gives vent to his feelings about his wife Catherine's "incompetence, clumsiness, withdrawal from responsibility" (309). But there was also considerable contemporary interest in the subject, for the first divorce reform bill was being debated in Parliament at the same time that Dickens was writing *Hard Times*.<sup>6</sup> (The actual bill was not passed until three years later.)

The need for some reform was widely felt. As Bounderby makes clear to Stephen, divorce in 1854 was difficult, complicated, and costly. The only "cause" for divorce was adultery, which for women suing had to be "aggravated" by incest or bigamy, though, in fact, legal separations were granted women for abandonment and cruelty. (There were only four full divorces granted women prior to 1857.) Three separate legal actions, including a bill in the House of Lords, were necessary. Legal separation "from bed and board" was possible, but women in that position had no legal rights, nor a right to their own earnings, nor to custody of their children, nor could either party remarry.

But even though part of the stated motivation for reform was to protect women and increase access to divorce, the debates over the Matrimonial Causes Bill, as it was officially called, had a large element of bad faith in

them.<sup>7</sup> For example, efforts to scuttle the Bill entirely were cynically based on arguments that it did nothing for the poor or to equalize the position of women. In the end, divorce law reform essentially continued the status of divorce as an instrument primarily for well-off men to assure that, as Lord Cranworth put it, women not be able to “palm spurious offspring upon their husbands” (3 Hansard, CXLV, 813).<sup>8</sup>

Nonetheless, given his personal situation and the current debates about divorce reform, there is nothing surprising in Dickens introducing the issue of divorce through Stephen. But once in the text, the issue of divorce, like the debates in Parliament, threatens to shift the discussion of a man's issue to women's issues. That is, in Parliament the desire to make it easier for men to get divorces opened the door to a vigorous campaign for changes in the Married Women's Property Law, while in *Hard Times* Stephen's desire to get out of a bad marriage invites us to look at all the marriages in the text and to see that, in fact, nearly all are abusive not to husbands but to wives.

Take Mrs. Sparsit, for example. The novel's plot would work as well, in fact better because more consistently, if she had been a social-climbing, money-grubbing husband hunter. Such bad behavior would justify Bounderby's humiliating treatment of her. But in fact, she was manipulated into a marriage with a boy fifteen years her junior by Lady Scadgers, probably because she thought he was a good match. In the event he is a very bad husband: he spent all his money and “when he died, at twenty-four . . . he did not leave his widow, from whom he had been separated after the honeymoon, in affluent circumstances” (37). If Mrs. Sparsit were not so much in Bounderby's camp and so hostile to Louisa, we might notice how badly she has been treated.

More troubling, however, is Mrs. Gradgrind. Though she is generally represented dismissively throughout the novel (the list of characters refers to her as “feeble-minded”), it takes very little to see that she is in a terrible marriage. Her imbecility in fact appears to be a product of her marriage.<sup>9</sup> Gradgrind chose her because “she was most satisfactory as a question of figures” and “she had ‘no nonsense’ about her” (19). Though she may have been weak-minded to start with, she was presumably not at the time of her marriage an “absolute idiot” (19). When we meet her later in her life with five children, she is close to being one. How did that happen? She herself describes the process by which she has been turned into an idiot as “never hearing the last of it”, that is, when she ventures to say anything she is instantly and abruptly put down. So that “the simple circumstance of being left alone with her husband and Mr. Bounderby, was sufficient to stun this admirable lady . . . so, she once more died away, and nobody minded her” (19). The repeated use of the word “died” in connection with Mrs. Gradgrind's ceasing to talk throughout the novel indicates the brutality of her suppression. When she is literally dying she tells Louisa “‘You want to hear of me, my dear? That's

something new, I am sure, when anybody wants to hear of me' " and later " 'You must remember, my dear, that whenever I have said anything, on any subject, I have never heard the last of it; and consequently, that I have long left off saying anything' " (148–49).<sup>10</sup>

Mrs. Gradgrind is a particularly troubling character because her brutalization is articulated (if never actually represented), but her story, like Mrs. Sparsit's, is systematically undercut by laughter, and both are meted out punishment: Mrs. Sparsit has to go live with the woman who made her marriage, Mrs. Gradgrind dies without even a claim to her own pain. While for the most part we think Mrs. Sparsit more than deserves her blighted life, the discomfort in our responses to Mrs. Gradgrind is a sign of a disruption in the narrative that is the result, I would argue, of the interrogation of marriage introduced by the divorce plot.

But Mrs. Sparsit and Mrs. Gradgrind are minor figures. The most serious gaps in the narrative introduced by the issue of divorce concern Louisa. Most of Louisa's story is unnarrated, but one possible version is suggested, nonetheless, through the systematic analogy drawn between her and Stephen.<sup>11</sup> In the structure of the novel her story alternates and contrasts with Stephen's. Louisa's questions to Sissy about Sissy's parents and their marriage were answered not only by the young girl's description of their compatible and happy marriage but also both by contrast and repetition in the two following chapters in which Stephen tells Bounderby about his own miserable marriage and wish for a divorce and then fantasizes about an ideal marriage with Rachael. More metaphorically, Stephen's subsequent murderous thoughts about his wife are followed by Louisa's capitulation to Bounderby's "criminal" proposal. Another contrast represents the emotions that bring both Louisa and Stephen to the brink of disaster: Louisa's assertion of herself in intimate, dangerous, but under-represented conversations with Harthouse are followed by Stephen's equally dangerous self-assertions to Slackbridge and Bounderby. Louisa has two important scenes with her father; Stephen has two with his "father" Bounderby. Louisa's aborted "fall" from the bottom of Mrs. Sparsit's staircase into "a dark pit" is completed by Stephen's fall into the dark Old Hell Mine shaft. Finally, Louisa's leaving her husband and "dying" to the story is followed by Stephen's actual death.

Louisa and Stephen are further linked to Tom's betrayal of them both, while Tom's robbery of the bank acts out retribution on Bounderby for him, his sister, and Stephen (and also substitutes for Harthouse's intent to "rob" Bounderby of his wife). However, in a crucial scene in which the three are brought together by Louisa, Tom displaces his guilt and perhaps his sister's, too, onto Stephen. (Certainly both Stephen and Rachael initially think that Louisa is as guilty of using Stephen as Tom is.)

The most telling connection between Stephen and Louisa is in their equally dreadful if quite different marriages. Stephen and Louisa's responses to their

bad marriages are similar: both turn to sympathetic others though they both resist acting on the needs and desires released in them by these others.<sup>12</sup> The four illustrations for the novel reflect this linking of Louisa and Stephen in their responses to their marriages: two are of Harthouse, Louisa's would be lover; a third is of Stephen and Rachael with Stephen's wife, who is reaching out from the bed curtains for the poison. The fourth is of Stephen rescued from the Old Hell Mine Shaft, Rachel's hand in his while he delivers his unlikely speech on class relations.<sup>13</sup> The first three point to Louisa's and Stephen's failed marriages; only the fourth relates to the industrial theme, though as we shall see, that theme is integrated with the marriage question as well.

But this parallelism between Louisa and Stephen is broken at a crucial point; Stephen's desire to end his marriage is sympathetically treated, but not achieved. On the other hand, Louisa's marital situation, while it is never narrated directly and poses a number of unanswered questions, actually ends in a permanent separation.

The steps leading to this outcome show the imbrication of the divorce plot with the father/daughter plot. Tom tells Harthouse that Louisa married Bounderby to do her brother a service, but Louisa also accepted Bounderby's proposal to please her father, whose heart was set upon it, as her mother tells her (148). Gradgrind for his part has given Louisa to a man "as near being [his] bosom friend" (16) as possible, an exchange that is in the process of being repeated by Tom "giving" Louisa to his bosom friend Harthouse.<sup>14</sup> But though the second exchange negates the first, it ultimately leads to the fulfillment of both Louisa's need for a "divorce" and the archtypal fatherly desire expressed in Gradgrind giving Louisa to Bounderby in the first place—to keep the daughter for himself.

Because the two narrative forces have the same drive—to separate Louisa from her marriage—they work together and climax in a single scene—that between Gradgrind and Bounderby that achieves the separation and makes Louisa's return to her father permanent. In that scene, Gradgrind tells Bounderby that he wants Louisa to remain with him "on a visit," a request he justifies by suggesting that Louisa, like Lady Audley, is mentally unbalanced, thus offering the strongest reason he can for the unorthodox arrangement he desires.<sup>15</sup> But Louisa has never behaved in a selfish or improper way—not to Stephen to whom she gave money, not to Tom who from the very beginning recognized that he did not "miss anything in [her]" (43), not to her father or mother, nor to her husband, and in fact she has been the soul of kindness and propriety to all (in this she resembles Oliver Twist or Florence Dombey more than Esther Summerson or Tom Gradgrind).<sup>16</sup> During her courtship by Harthouse, the narrator as much as admits that she has an incorruptible good heart: "in her mind—implanted there before her eminently practical father

began to form it—a struggling disposition to believe in a wider and nobler humanity than she had ever heard of, *constantly* (my italics), strove with doubts and resentments” (125).

But in spite of all this, her father in his justification to Bounderby says she has qualities that are “harshly neglected, and—and a little perverted” (178).<sup>17</sup> Gradgrind has to assert Louisa’s mental imbalance because the separation between her and Bounderby is entirely contrary to legal definitions of separation and the attitudes that underlay the law, as articulated in this *London Times* comment on the aborted 1854 Matrimonial Causes Act: “Beyond all doubt, it is for the general public interest that marriage should be practically considered an immutable condition of life, to the end that it should not be hastily contracted, and that those placed in it should be stimulated by the pressure of necessity to accommodate themselves to one another” (15 July 1854).

Bounderby, thus, is quite correct to refuse the separation. In fact, in his response he actually uses a key word from the divorce debates. “I gather from all this” he says to Gradgrind, “that you are of the opinion that there’s what people call some incompatibility between Loo Bounderby and myself” (178–79), a sentiment frequently used derisively as in this *London Times* comment that “Society would be unhinged, and the next generation would be strangely educated if mere incompatibility of temper were a ground for divorce” (27 January 1857).<sup>18</sup>

Nonetheless the main effect of Bounderby’s ultimatum that Louisa be home by noon the next day is that Gradgrind is saved from having to explain what he means by her “perverted” qualities or to expand on his “visiting proposition” as Bounderby puts it. Louisa returns permanently to her father. It is if she never left her father’s house, a situation forshadowed by both Mrs. Sparsit and her husband Bounderby’s insistence on continuing to call her Miss Gradgrind and Tom Gradgrind’s daughter after she is married. She thereby fulfills the father’s plot of redemption, even as she acts out Stephen’s desire “to be ridded” (59) of his spouse—and perhaps Dickens’ desire for the same thing as well.

But it is a hollow victory for *her*; she suffers a kind of narrative death, essentially disappearing from the narrative, dissolving into her father’s story. What *her* feelings about her marriage and her husband and her return might be are unnarrated, though they have been vaguely suggested in the fire symbol and in her earlier conversation with her father about Bounderby’s proposal (a chapter tellingly entitled “Father and Daughter”). Even in the climactic scene when she confronts her father and appears to speak her heart and mind, she still cannot name her own desire.<sup>19</sup> In this Louisa is perhaps closer to Dickens’ inner turmoil about marriage and divorce than Stephen ever is.

Even so, in this climactic confrontation between father and daughter, the daughter’s story, released by the divorce plot, is the closest it ever comes in

the novel to breaking through the father's story and entering fully into the text. Though Louisa does not voice her feelings about Bounderby nor her thoughts about her marriage, she admits her strong feelings for Harthouse: "There seemed to be a near affinity between us. . . . If you ask me whether I have loved him, or do love him, I tell you plainly, father, that it may be so. I don't know!" (163) she says, but "I have not disgraced *you*" (my italics).

The confrontation between a forgiving father and a sinning daughter was a familiar trope in Victorian popular literature, particularly in melodrama. Dickens' use of it here, while it keeps the titillating possibility of the daughter's "fall," significantly revises the scene. Instead of the erring daughter begging for forgiveness from the father, the almost-erring daughter accuses the father of responsibility for her faults. By this revision, the daughter's story for a moment overpowers the father's story. The emergence of the daughter's story is further strengthened by the way in which the final tableau is aborted. Catherine Gallagher, who first pointed out the melodramatic reversals in this scene, says that the conventional melodramatic father/daughter scene ends in a tableau in which the father forgives the daughter with a full embrace between them, in other words a visualization of the dynamic of the father's plot in which the daughter returns to his arms. But as Gallagher also points out, in *Hard Times* this resolution is violently disrupted; rather than seeking a forgiving embrace, Louisa begins to fall to the floor; as her father "tightened his hold in time to prevent her sinking on the floor . . . she cried out in a terrible voice, 'I shall die if you hold me! Let me fall upon the ground!'" (163)<sup>20</sup> Like Beatrice Rappacini, Louisa rejects the conventional relationship and insists on controlling her own story.

Finally though, I differ from Gallagher's reading of this scene. She sees in the failure of the confrontation to end in the loving embrace a sign that Gradgrind saves Louisa by letting her go. That certainly would be the way the daughter's story should develop. But unfortunately it does not really happen that way in the novel. It is true that Gradgrind does not embrace Louisa; instead he passes her off to Sissy, who puts her to bed, and after a subdued exchange in which the daughter forgives her father, the two women act out the melodramatic trope precisely. Louisa "fell upon her knees" and cries "Forgive me, pity me, help me! Have compassion on my great need, and let me lay this head of mine upon a loving heart." Sissy acts for the father by reintegrating Louisa into the paternal sphere through *her* embrace: "O lay it here! . . . Lay it here, my dear" (168). Sissy then somewhat astonishingly continues to act for the father by sending Louisa's lover away. (Gradgrind is willing to play the father's role to the husband he has chosen for her, but not to the lover she has picked for herself, showing perhaps once again the power of Eve Sedgwick's model of homosocial desire.) One reason the

scene between Sissy and Harthouse has struck most readers as unbelievable—even ridiculous—is because this melodramatic confrontation is conventionally acted out by either the father or the brother. As the good daughter, Sissy's assumption of the father's role here cannot really work.

Daniel Deneau has argued that Louisa must have had no real feelings for Harthouse because he is never referred to again after Sissy sends him away. But Sissy's "second object" in her conversation with Harthouse suggests something different, for there seems little reason to make him leave immediately and forever if Louisa, who has given Sissy "her confidence", is not still in some danger from her own heart and Harthouse's presence (172–73). The fact is, we have no idea *what* is on Louisa's mind; from the point she returns to her father's house, her story remains untold.<sup>21</sup> Not only is Louisa not "saved,"<sup>22</sup> her story essentially disappears from the text.

With the return of Louisa to her father and the disappearance of Stephen, the father's story emerges as the only story and the issue of marriage and divorce is also erased from the text. This narrative move is achieved more or less seamlessly because of the imbrication of Stephen and Louisa—he representing the industrial theme, she the education theme and the divorce theme moving between them. In fact, issues of class and gender frequently were substituted for issues of marriage and divorce in the divorce reform debates. The reason for making divorce more difficult for the poor and for wives, members of Parliament argued, was that "the poor and women [are] particularly susceptible to moral lapses," as Mary Lyndon Shanley says. "Parliament's fear of the disruptive potential of female sexuality was as great as its distrust of the unrestrained passions of the poor" (365–66).<sup>23</sup> However, the debates on divorce reform achieved precisely what Parliament feared; they inevitably opened the way for women's issues and working-class issues to enter the arena of public concern.

The sensation novel worked in a similar way, though the development is reversed. These novels examine women's desires and the inadequacy of middle-class marriages to fulfill them, but in the conclusion they reinscribe the "heroine" into conventional roles. Lady Audley, who dared to make her own destiny, is declared even by herself to be "mad" and thrust out to die in a lunatic asylum; the self-reliant and adventurous Magdalen Vanstone in Collins's *No Name* falls into a death-like illness to be reborn as the passive wife of a sea captain.

The ending of *Hard Times* resembles in a general way these sensation novel's endings. Both Louisa and Stephen end badly, arguably Stephen worse than Louisa though her brother Tom's rejection of her compounds her lonely future. Louisa, even though she has not fully acted on her desires—she has not run away with Harthouse—lives unpartnered, a guest at the banquet of Sissy's domestic happiness, doing her father's work, atoning for his sins.<sup>24</sup> Stephen dies painfully by falling down a mine-shaft.

The gratuitousness of Stephen's death and the underexplained events that lead up to it suggest how difficult it is in the end to integrate the gender and class issues involved in the divorce plot into the conventional father's story which dominates the last pages of *Hard Times*. In his final words, Stephen seems to lay the blame for his death on the misunderstandings between capital and labor—fathers and children—but actually his death has come about because of his terrible marriage and frustrated relationship with Rachael. The focal point for both this relationship and his death is his promise to Rachael. As many critics have pointed out, this promise is inexplicable,<sup>25</sup> but even more puzzling is why Rachael does not release him from it when she sees what the result of his adhering to it is. And why does Stephen, whose refusal to join his fellow workers is based on this promise to Rachael to avoid trouble with the masters, then insist on justifying his colleagues to Bounderby, thereby essentially provoking his master into dismissing him, thus achieving precisely what Rachael made him promise to avoid? And most importantly, why are these actions followed by such a painful and gratuitous death?<sup>26</sup>

Stephen's death has been justified as Dickens' recognition that there is no way out of the class war. Nicholas Coles says "Stephen is killed off by the combined forces of both classes . . . and there is no manner of hope in either of them" (168).<sup>27</sup> However, if we think of Stephen's story as it connects to Louisa's through the marriage and divorce plot, we may see an additional reason for his death. Though overtly Stephen is the only one whose miserable marriage seems to call for divorce, the linking of Louisa and Stephen has opened a crack through which we see that for women much less dramatic situations than Stephen's make marriage a repressive institution. Though intermittently in evidence, this insight has been downplayed through laughter at Mrs. Sparsit and Mrs. Gradgrind and through narrative silence about Louisa. But in order to completely erase this story so the father's story can dominate the closure, the divorce issue must be killed in Stephen, who has been its overt spokesman.

This is Louisa Gradgrind's secret: she killed Stephen Blackpool, though unlike Lady Audley she did not personally push him down the well. Louisa's action of seeking Stephen out in his home, accompanied by her brother as an escort, has led to the suspicion of Stephen's robbing the bank, his hurried return, and ultimately his death. Further, Louisa also narratively necessitates Stephen's death. Though she is the embodiment of the sensation heroine's story of repression and lack of fulfillment in marriage, Stephen has carried the weight of her story. So even as she cannot remarry, though the healthy Bounderby dies five years after the separation, Stephen cannot live to marry Rachael. The sick Mrs. Blackpool survives, the healthy Stephen dies, thereby removing the last vestige of the divorce plot. The novel ends where it began—with the now-chastened father and sacrificed daughter together again, and for all time.

Dickens' letters emphasized what a strain the writing of *Hard Times* was for him, and when he finished he remarked "Why I found myself so 'used up' after *Hard Times* I scarcely know" (Norton *HT*, 275). Usually this is understood in terms of his struggle with the weekly number format. But I think that there are other tensions at work as well: the introduction of divorce into the novel (for whatever reasons Dickens did so) is a disintegrating force. Perhaps the struggle to contain and ultimately eliminate that force also contributed to Dickens' creative exhaustion. (Of course, Dickens had personal reasons for not wanting to concentrate on divorce from the woman's point of view.)

Kaplan remarks that the subject of divorce was still on the novelist's mind even after he finished *Hard Times* when he made an entry in his notebook about a proposed story of "a misplaced and mismarried man." While the "mismarried" is perfectly understandable to us in terms of Dickens' own situation, the "misplaced" is a more curious expression. It suggests a helplessness in the unfolding of one's life, a definition of life as one of accidental placement and lost possibilities rather than fatal choices or actions, a sense that life's miseries as well as its happinesses are the result of where one is placed and not of what one is. And even as the word "misplaced" perhaps gives poignant insight into Dickens' state of mind, it can also serve as a kind of coda to the glimpses of another "misplaced" person—Louisa. Thinking of himself perhaps but speaking for Louisa even as she has spoken for him,<sup>30</sup> Dickens says, as he develops the idea for his story of the "misplaced and mismarried man", that he—or she—is "Always, as it were, playing hide and seek with the world and never finding what Fortune seems to have hidden when he was born" (Kaplan 310).

## NOTES

1. See Lynda E. Boose, "The Father's House and the Daughter in It: The Structures of Western Culture's Daughter-Father Relationship" in the seminal collection of essays on this subject edited by Lynda E. Boose and Betty S. Flowers, *Daughters and Fathers* (19–74).
2. Kristin Flieger Samuelian points out that Bounderby's insistence on being a self-made man is a rejection of the maternal. Though she does not link this to the father-daughter plot, clearly the "absence" of the mother in the Gradgrind family enables the father to substitute the daughter emotionally for his wife, even as Mr. Bennet does in *Pride and Prejudice* and with similarly negative results.
3. Rosemarie Bodenheimer has a similarly benign view of the father-daughter plot in *Hard Times*. "Out of the reconciliations with her father and Sissy, Louisa's end too is mitigated by a retrieval of childhood . . . Both Gradgrind and his daughter are tested for their loyalties to past connection, and both pass the test, Louisa

when she returns to the father who hurt her and Gradgrind when he defies Bitzer and the law of the land" (205). Such readings, completely supportable within the father's plot, accept that the daughter's place is with the father and minimize the cost of this "successful" conclusion.

4. According to Phillip Collins, one stage version of *Bleak House* was entitled *Lady Dedlock's Secret* (173).
5. Robert Lougy says it is unconsummated (246), as does John D. Baird. Juliet McMaster, on the other hand, says "I find no evidence for Robert Lougy's astonishing claim that the Bounderby marriage is unconsummated, nor does he provide any" (423).

But, to paraphrase Mrs. Gradgrind "though there is some sex somewhere in the room, I can't absolutely say Bounderby has got it." Edgar Johnson says Louisa "prostituted" herself when she married Bounderby; Monroe Engel calls attention to the "extraordinary sexual image" by which Mrs. Sparsit imagines Louisa's capitulation to Harthouse (362). Daniel Deneau's analyzes the sexual way in which Louisa's feelings for Tom are articulated, in particular in the scene after the robbery when she comes into Tom's bedroom "in a loose robe," barefoot, and with her hair down. (366-67). Robert Fabrizio has a long section analyzing Louisa's sexual feelings for Tom (75-78). Catherine Gallagher talks of the "sexual exploitation" of Louisa and argues that "fancy and incest" are inextricable in the text (164).

6. When the bill was first entered in 1854, there was little public interest, but there were several subsequent articles in *Household Words* on the subject written by Eliza Lynn and W. H. Wills. These articles are generally rather conservative; they recognize abuse of women particularly in terms of property but also argue women should not get upset over their husbands' infidelities. Dickens himself wrote a later article on the subject, entitled "The Murdered Person" (*HW* 14 [11 Oct. 1856]), which emphasized two targets: the high cost of divorce actions and the legal disabilities which placed a wife's resources in her husband's power even after the marriage had failed and the parties separated.
7. Poovey remarks that the debates "raised the possibility that married women's anomalous position would be questioned and even changed. That this did not happen suggests how reluctant lawmakers were to examine their assumptions about women, the relationship between the sexes, and the gender bias of British law." She also believes the debates over the law were important because by "acknowledging the fact of marital unhappiness, they inevitably exposed the limitations of the domestic ideal." (52) Poovey further remarks that "The very fact that legislators explicitly addressed the issue of class inequity [how the expense kept the working class from having access to divorce] and not the sexual double standard suggests that, while the social and economic unrest of the 1840s had forced legislators to conceptualize class relations as a problem that needed attention, the social relation between the sexes was not yet open to the same kind of scrutiny" (58).
8. Gail Savage argues, based on statistical analysis of the reports from the Divorce Court, that in fact many women and lower-class people were able to get divorces under the new law.

9. Jean Ferguson Carr discusses Mrs. Gradgrind and recognizes her suppression by the father's discourse. Though Carr points to a reference that equates Gradgrind to Bluebeard, she does not link the treatment of Mrs. Gradgrind to the marriage theme.
  10. McMaster notes that "we are to understand that [Mrs. Gradgrind] has been so crushed and ground by Gradgrind facts that she is scarcely alive" (415), but she does not treat her as an abused wife.
  11. Gallagher notes the parallel of Louisa and Stephen, seeing it as ultimately, after the opening chapters, "only" metaphoric. Her point about the connection concerns the ultimate failure in the novel of the parallel of the family and society (150–52). See also Stanley Friedman.
  12. Baird analyzes how Dickens suggests that sexual promiscuity is part of Mrs. Blackpool's degeneration, which would give Stephen grounds for divorce. Louisa does not commit adultery, nor does Bounderby, so neither of them would have grounds for divorce under the law, either before or after the Matrimonial Causes Act (408).
  13. The focus of the illustrations on the marriage theme is at odds with the different titles Dickens had in mind—"According to Cocker"; "Prove It"; "Hard Heads and Soft Hearts"; "A Mere Question of Figures." (Craig, 11). This split between title and illustration suggests a similar split in the narrative between the marriage, Louisa, Stephen story and the industrial-mathematical Louisa, Stephen story, though as I suggest later on, the two are linked toward the end of the novel. Craig in fact suggests a connection when he gives as one meaning of the phrase "hard times" "the more pervasive state in which people felt that the essential and permanent conditions of their lives hemmed them in inflexibly."
- The three divisions of the novel—Sowing, Reaping, Garnering—as fertility metaphors also suggest a marriage focus rather than an industrial one.
14. Robert Barnard interprets the scene where, speaking of Louisa to Harthouse, Tom rips the petals from a rose as a symbolic sacrifice of Louisa. (378–9)
  15. In the popular play Fox Cooper made of *Hard Times* almost immediately after the final number was published in *Household Words*, Gradgrind makes no proposition to Bounderby at all; Bounderby simply gives his ultimatum. Nor does Gradgrind suggest Louisa is "perverse"; in fact he insists she is an "angel" and Bounderby a "scoundrel." I think Cooper is doing more than simplifying here. He is also trying to correct a place in the narrative that he senses rings false, either because incomplete, underdeveloped, or a locus, as we would say, of contesting discourses. I think many revisions that popular dramatists make when turning novels into plays indicate similar aporias in the texts.
  16. An observation of Raymond Williams seems particularly apt here: "*Hard Times* is composed from two incompatible ideological positions, which are unevenly held both by Dickens and by many of his intended readers. Put broadly, these positions are: first, that environment influences and in some sense determines character; second, that some virtues and vices are original and both triumph over and in some cases can change any environment" (169) and further "that though 'circumstances' may affect, even radically affect, the *history* of a character, his or her true formation lies elsewhere, and the capacity for change, whether in an

- individual or in the general 'circumstances', is similarly rooted in primary personal qualities, often of course related to some wider, usually religious, source" (170).
17. Deneau argues that the "perversity" is the incestuous feelings Louisa has toward Tom.
  18. Bounderby also says "I am Josiah Bounderby, and I had my bringing-up; she's the daughter of Tom Gradgrind, and she had her bringing-up; and the two horses wouldn't pull together" (181), a metaphor than Lynn Shanley notes also marked the divorce reform debates. These echoes of the debates in Bounderby's speeches in this scene demonstrate that Dickens was following the parliamentary arguments as reported in the press.
  19. Carr argues that "Louisa and her mother, and even Dickens, cannot find words for what is missing from their lives, words having been usurped as the tools of the Gradgrind system" (170).
  20. In his dramatization, Fox Cooper insists on restoring the melodramatic trope to this scene, thus both recognizing the power of the melodramatic mode and also, again, sensing there is some confusion here about whose story this is. Louisa's words "I shall die if you hold me" are followed by her sinking to the ground, but in the play this is immediately followed by her father "raising her up and supporting her off" saying "My child! my child! . . . I would give worlds to annul this cursed fatal marriage."
  21. David Lodge remarks that "we hardly ever get inside the girls' heads at all—they are primarily objects in the perceptual fields of other characters" (385).
  22. In discussing an earlier version of this paper at the Dickens Universe, several people made compelling arguments that what happens in this and the closing paragraphs of the novel is that Louisa and Sissy form a sisterhood that substitutes for—and is superior to?—the conventional patriarchal model of human and family relationships. That is, while I see Sissy acting for patriarchy, they see her as the source of a woman's counter-community. What prevents my acceptance of this argument is the almost unbearable sadness of the conclusion, where all the positive possibilities for Louisa are deliberately raised by the author ("Herself again a wife—a mother—lovingly watchful of her children. . . . did Louisa see this?") only to be cruelly denied ("Such a thing was never to be." [219]) Louisa does not deserve this; in her feelings for Tom, for Sissy, for Stephen—for everyone—there is no evidence that she is emotionally unable to find happiness as a wife and mother. The inexplicable harshness of this conclusion indicates to me that there is some force in Louisa that must be suppressed, even punished. What could it be except her self-assertive actions as a sensation heroine made possible by the introduction of divorce into the plot?
  23. Caroline Norton, who was one of the major forces behind the changes in the law regarding married women's property, also linked the two: our "legists and legislatures . . . never *will* satisfy, with measures that give one law for one sex and the rich, another law for the other sex and the poor." (Quoted in Shanley 359). Bishop Wilberforce, on the other side of the debate, also made the connection in opposing the re-introduction of the Divorce Bill in 1856. First he remarked (as though he had Louisa in mind) "How constantly it [has] happened that the evil

which [has] resulted in a direful tragedy [has] had its commencement in the lightest cause—some difference of temper, some little alienation of affection, exposing the wife to the arts and approaches of another. But if the woman were guarded by the sure conviction that no more happiness in married life was possible, the temptation might altogether fail.” He then moved immediately to the lower classes, “who” he says give “no indication of any wish for relaxation of the law; it [is] perfectly well known that a legal divorce [is] an impossibility, and to that circumstance might be traced the sacredness of the marriage tie among the lower orders of the English people which [is] so remarkable.” (Quoted in Poovey 58–59).

24. Based on the penultimate paragraph of the novel, Samuelian sees Louisa ministering to the working class for the rest of her life, thus fulfilling Stephen’s final words. This makes a neat conclusion to my thesis of Stephen’s substituting for Louisa at the end by making Louisa in turn substitute for him. There has been some critical confusion over whether this passage applies to Sissy or to Louisa. The passage reads “But, happy Sissy’s happy children loving her; all children loving her; she, grown learned in childish lore; thinking no innocent and pretty fancy ever to be despised; trying hard to know her humbler fellow-creatures, and to beautify their lives of machinery and reality with those imaginative graces and delights, without which the heart of infancy will wither up. . . .” (219). Philip Collins (191–2) and John Holloway (169) read these lines as referring to Sissy not Louisa. Though I think on close reading it is clear the passage refers to Louisa not Sissy, the confusion by such eminent Dickens authorities points to the uncertainty at the end of the novel about the nature of Louisa’s final position.
25. Barnard says it is an “inexplicable promise which she didn’t want him to make and apparently doesn’t insist that he keep” (376). But see n. 70 in Coles’s essay where he points out the survival of a fragment deleted by Dickens in which Stephen gives an “angry speech over the maiming of Rachael’s little sister in a factory accident, followed by Rachael’s rebuttal of his anger and Stephen’s promise to avoid it in future.” He continues “Dickens’s reasons for deleting so vital and moving a passage are a matter for speculation.” Craig in his introduction to the Penguin edition of the novel says the vagueness of the promise “makes us begin to think that Dickens is not even implying an adverse judgement of trade-unionism, but sliding out of dealing with it at all” (29). On the other hand, Joseph Butwin argues that “the inclusion of documentation of specific abuses in the novel would give too great a validity to the working-class activism of the union, thereby undercutting the role Dickens intended for its middle-class readers” (179). In this light it is interesting to note that Slackbridge’s denunciation of Stephen short-circuits “the awkward (for a middle-class advocate for the poor) political issues involved in union organization” (Coles, 165) in the same way that Bounderby’s ultimatum that Louisa be home by noon the next day short-circuits explanations of her separation from him as well as her father’s judgment of her “perverted” qualities.
26. The final scene in the Fox Cooper drama again differs radically from that in the novel, and in its differences perhaps recognizes that the novel’s assignment of rewards and punishments at closure is problematic. The play attempts to correct

this according to both theatrical and cultural norms. Thus, Tom confesses to the burglary but is saved by Louisa giving him the money to replace the theft. Gradgrind then says "it was no robbery, after all. The money was removed by Tom from one place to another, and is on the premises at this very minute." Nor does Stephen die. Equally important is Bounderby's response: "Blackpool, you have suffered a martyrdom through error and misconception. If you recover of your wounds, I'll make you some amends. First, I'll give Rachel to you for a wife. Secondly I'll give her the £150 as a marriage portion, and that's not all I'll do for the pair of you." So not only Gradgrind but Bounderby too is reformed, and Louisa can thus do the right thing: "Mr. Bounderby, I will now cheerfully accompany you back to the home you have provided for me, and must insist upon it that you allow your good mother to supply the place of Mrs. Sparsit." Bounderby "suspends work at the factory for seven days", pays "full wages during all the time" and gives "my wife Louisa" £200 to "distribute amongst you" to provide "you with a few necessities and comforts these 'Hard Times.'" "

27. Humphry House says that Stephen "might have become the material of genuine tragedy, if Dickens had been prepared to accept his death from the beginning as inevitable and unanswerable . . . [but] Dickens did not want to admit that Stephen's bargaining power—whether against Bounderby, his marriage, of life itself—was negligible, but wrote as if there might be an unexpected solution at every turn" (206).
28. In her confrontation with her father, Louisa says her "old strife" was "made fiercer by all those causes of disparity which arise out of our [hers and Bounderby's] two individual natures" (162) perhaps reflecting Dickens's own sense of the power of "incompatibility" in marriage.

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