Dickens, Marx, And Freud Essay, Research Paper

The novel Hard Times written by Charles Dickens, is a reflection of the evolving ideas prevalent during his time. Dickens? characters especially are personifications of changing ideas in psychology and political thought. Each one of his characters symbolizes a different belief and its association to society. Both Stephen Blackpool and Thomas Gradgrind, Jr. particularly characterize ideas of notable philosophers around the time of Dickens. Blackpool portrays the abused worker, suffering under capitalism as expressed by Karl Marx. Thomas Gradgrind, Jr., is Freud?s notion of our desire to rebel against an extreme, which often leads to intoxicating substances, and our conscience and the subsequent feelings of guilt and remorse we experience because of it.

Stephen Blackpool represents the oppressed working class of the 19th century in Dickens? novel Hard Times. He is portrayed as an honest, hard-working power-loom weaver employed by the factory owner and proclaimed ?self-made man? Josiah Bounderby. Through the course of the plot Blackpool is found to have suffered many trials in life including a marriage to a drunk and the unfortunate love of a woman he cannot marry. He is even shunned and despised by his own class because of his refusal to join a union with his fellow factory employees due to his belief that the trade union agitator is a false prophet. Eventually he defends the workers against harsh words spoken by Bounderby about them and ends up losing his job for that. In Book Three of Hard Times Blackpool is accused of a crime he did not commit but is unable to prove his innocence except in asking Gradgrind to clear his name. These are among his last words, and he dies soon after. Through it all though, Blackpool is a moral, sensitive man holding no contempt against those who have wronged him.

These struggles Blackpool confronts in Dickens? novel exemplify the ideas of Marx. Blackpool is Marx?s personification of the corruption of the worker by capitalism. Blackpool is the first victim of the labor cause. As Marx writes in Alienated Labor, ?The misery of the worker is inversely proportional to the power and volume of his production? (WIT Text, pg. 444). He leads from his beginning a depressing life. ?Stephen looked older, but he had had a hard life. It is said that very life has its roses and thorns; there seemed however, to have been a misadventure of mistake in Stephen?s case, where by somebody else had become possessed of his roses, and he had become possessed of the same somebody else?s thorns in addition to his own.? (Hard Times, pg. 60). Stephen has not known any beauty in his life. His work is all he has, but that is not his passion. He describes his place of employment, the mill, as ?…always going, and…they never work us any nearer to any distant object-except always death.? (Hard Times, pg. 140). It was something he had begun out of necessity and eventually it had moved itself into his entire being. After work every day he feels a sensation ??the sensation of its [his labor] having worked and stopped in his own head? (Hard Times, pg. 61). This idea is the entire basis Marx fashions: the fusion of the worker and his work as one until the worker is diminished. Again in Alienated Labor Marx enunciates his point by pointing out ?[The objectification] of labor appears as the diminution of the worker? (WIT Text, pg. 445) and ?The more objects the worker produces, the fewer he can own and the more he falls under the domination of his product, of capital? (WIT Text, pg. 445). Stephen Blackpool is the victim of labor in that it completely prohibits him from experiencing what is attractive in life. His labor thwarts his roses and gives him thorns instead.

In Hard Times the laws of England are fashioned for the rich, not the poor, another way Marx believes capitalism exploits the poor worker. Stephen Blackpool visits Bounderby for help. He has spent a large portion of his life married to his estranged wife but has found another woman he has grown to love. Wanting to free himself from the bounds holding him to his first wife he asks Bounderby for advice. Blackpool, however, is quickly informed that getting a divorce involves a large amount of money. Due to his meager salary Blackpool must live his life married to a drunk and simply acquaintances with a virtuous woman. The divorce laws in England at that time only benefited the wealthy. The bourgeoisie, the predominate lawmaking class at that time, made the law in their own interest. They could afford such fines if necessary and thus saw no reason to lower the cost since it did not benefit them at all. In this case, no help was extended to the poor. In Alienated Labor, Marx addresses this corruption; he writes, ?Political economy proceeds from labor as the very soul of production and yet gives labor nothing, private property everything? (WIT Text, pg. 453). In the personification of this idea labor, equals the worker, Blackpool, and private property equals the wealthy, Bounderby. Private property forms competition which compels those who have to ignore or take advantage of those who have nothing; ?The only wheels which political economy puts in motion are greed and the war among the greedy, competition.? (WIT text, pg. 444). Everything is compelled by greed so the worker is stamped out. Helping Blackpool does not benefit Bounderby so the worker, Blackpool, is tossed aside. Marx writes ?The non worker does everything against the worker …? (WIT Text, pg. 455). Helping the worker is not in the greedy self interest of the non worker, according to Marx. The non worker?s motives include only his selfish desires thus the worker is abused by both the non-worker and the laws made by the non-worker. In his exasperation Blackpool cries ?…show me the law to help me!? (Hard Times pg. 70). There is no divorce law to help him. He is simply a worker, a tool, a ?hand?.

Marx believes that ?his [the worker?s] own active function, his life activity, alienated labor, also alienates the species from him.? (WIT Text, pg. 448). Throughout the entire story of Hard Times Blackpool is left alone to fend for himself. Charles Dickens uses this alienation Stephen experiences as an illustration of Marx?s point. Before the story even begins he has been abandoned by his wife. He is then rejected by his fellow workers for refusing to join the trade union. Finally even his work alienates him when his is fired from his position at the factory and forced to relocate to another town to find work.

In a capitalist society the worker is used for the good of the rich but still remains oblivious to the fact he is used (WIT Text, pg. 447). Work reduces the worker to the opposite of what he produces. ?The more powerful the work, the more powerless becomes the worker; the more intelligence the work has, the more witless is the worker and the more he becomes a slave of nature.? (WIT Text, pg. 446). This idea is a key point in Marx?s essay Alienated Labor and Blackpool personifies this idea. In the end he is reduced to a criminal for a crime he did not commit in a society that has always detested him. As what he produces becomes more and more powerful, he and his race are pushed farther and farther down. But yet the workers have no notion of the crimes committed against them. Stephen Blackpool is not bitter against his aggressors even after everything that had happened to him. Even shortly before his death he proclaims the goodness of Bounderby: ?If Mr. Bounderby had ever known me right-if he had ever known me at all-he wouldn?t have took offense with me. He wouldn?t have suspected me.? (WIT Text, pg. 254). The propaganda of the non-worker had convinced him of its superiority and reduced Blackpool to a simple believer. ?The more the worker exerts himself, the more powerful becomes the alien objective world which he fashions against himself, the poorer he and his inner world become, the less there is that belongs to him.? (WIT Text, pg. 445). Stephen Blackpool is robbed of everything: his love, his work, his reputation and eventually his life; all of it was taken for the capitalist economy. Blackpool is everything Marx saw as having been corrupted by labor and capitalism.

Although the character Blackpool is the oppressed worker according to Marx, Thomas Gradgrind, Jr. represents the ideas of Freud. Tom is Freud?s personification of the desires within ourselves to rebel against an extreme we are taught to live, often leading to the abuse of alcohol, and the subsequent guilt and remorse we feel from our super ego.

Tom is the son of Thomas Gradgrind, Sr., a factual man only interested with pure facts. Therefore, Tom is brought up in a utilitarian environment: taught never to wonder, doubt facts or entertain any kind of fancy. In the novel Hard Times he is part of the middle class and only has love for one person, his sister, Louisa. His sister?s husband employs him in the bank but Tom interests himself more with rebellion since he is finally away from the factual upbringing of his youth. Thus Tom enters into gambling and drink. Unfortunately for him, his bets never earn him any money and he finds himself often asking his sister for help. Her devotion toward her brother compels her to give him what he asks until he has simply taken too much. In need of money, he stages a bank robbery and places the blame on the honest Blackpool. Eventually found out, he is forced into exile where he repents and asks his sister for forgiveness.

Sigmund Freud?s Civilization and Its Discontents addresses this need for rebellion and the eventual remorse Tom Gradgrind feels after the destruction he caused. The school of fact Tom was associated with at an early age restricted most of the natural instincts common to children and adolescents. Once he has the opportunity to enter the real world, he rebels due to his dissatisfaction with his education: ?..when I go to live with old Bounderby I?ll have my revenge…I mean I?ll enjoy myself a little and go about and hear something. I?ll recompense myself for the way in which I have been brought up.? (Hard Times, pg. 49). Freud explains this need for rebellion: ?What we call happiness in the strictest sense comes from the (preferably sudden) satisfaction of needs which have been dammed up to a high degree.? (Civilization and Its Discontents, pg. 25). He has never been given the opportunity to express himself in more than fact, so for him, happiness means the fulfillment of those opportunities; he sees happiness in everything that did not involve his bringing up; Freud understands this: ?We are so made that we can derive intense enjoyment from a contrast.? (Civilization and Its Discontents, pg. 25). Harthouse, an admirer of Louisa in the novel Hard Times, recognizes this need Tom experiences and expresses it to Louisa. ?…he [Tom] has not been fortunate in his training. Bred at a disadvantage towards the society in which he has a part to play, he rushes these extremes for himself from opposite extremes that have long been forced upon him.? (Hard Times, pg. 161). Freud adds to this idea by writing, ?Any choice that is pushed to an extreme will be penalized by exposing the individual to the dangers which arise if a technique of living that has been chosen as exclusive should prove inadequate.? (Civilization and Its Discontents, pg. 35). Tom?s education is inadequate and its inadequacy causes him to completely diverge from his school of thought. He does it suddenly and forcefully with every intention of straying as far as possible from it. His education of fact was inadequate for the real world and unfortunately he did not have the skills to cope with reality. ?The man who sees his pursuit of happiness come to nothing in later years,? writes Freud, ?still finds consultation in the yield of pleasure of chronic intoxication; or he can embark on the desperate attempt at rebellion.? (Civilization and Its Discontents, pg. 36). For Tom, his pursuit of happiness was forced upon him by his father. He, however understands the disease in his method of education and thus embraces both these ways Freud mentions. While under the employment of Bounderby he moves toward gambling and drink. Once in conversation with Louisa, she mentions she has not seen him in awhile. He replies, ?Why I have been otherwise engaged Loo, in the evenings.? (Hard Times, pg. 88), implying he spends a good deal of his time with alcohol and gambling. Harthouse also notices this and tells Louisa he believes Tom to be falling into trouble (Hard Times, pg. 160). Freud recognizes the influence and attraction of alcohol; he states, ?There are foreign substances which, when present in the blood or tissues, directly cause us pleasurable sensation; and they also so alter the conditions governing our sensibility that we become incapable of receiving unpleasurable impulses.? (Civilization and Its Discontents, pg. 27). Alcohol was Tom?s way out of the misery of reality.

As is the trend in society, one falls until it is impossible to fall any longer. After robbing the bank he worked for and placing the blame on Blackpool, Tom?s super-ego, or conscience steps forward. Freud believes ?The tension between the harsh super-ego and the ego that is subjected to it, is called by us the sense of guilt.? (Civilization and Its Discontents, pg. 48). After his rebellion, he experiences guilt for the destruction he caused. Tom commits his crime but is not even able to confess it to the one he loves most, Louisa. Thus his guilt is left to his super-ego which tortures him. He also feels guilty because he knows it would hurt Louisa and possible cause her to lose the love she had for him if she found out. Freud also identifies this as a basis for guilt, ?…[we are] never so helplessly unhappy as when we have lost our loved object or its love.? (Civilization and Its Discontents, pg. 33). After the crime is committed and he lies to his sister, ?…the wretched boy [Tom]…threw himself upon his pillow again?tearing his hair, morosely crying, grudgingly loving her [Louisa], hatefully but impenitently spurring himself, and no less hatefully and unprofitably spurring all the good in the world.? (Hard Times, pg. 179)

Tom is eventually found out and he feels the remorse Freud defines as ?…a general term for the ego?s reaction in a case of sense of guilt…itself a punishment and can include the need for punishment.? (Civilization and Its Discontents, pg. 101). Tom finally realizes his mistakes which come from a selfish view of society and how he could exploit it to make himself happy. Freud recognizes this danger. ?An unrestricted satisfaction of every need,? Freud writes, ?presents itself as the most enticing method of conducting one?s life, but it means putting enjoyment before caution and soon brings its own punishment.? (Civilization and Its Discontents, pg. 26). However, much less to the credit of young Tom, he falls into the pattern of civilization. He is only able to realize his mistakes once he has lost everything. His conscience only displays itself once his end is eminent. As Freud writes, ?As long as things go well for a man, his conscience is lenient and lets the ego do all sorts of things; but when misfortune befalls him, he searches his soul, acknowledges his sinfulness, heightens the demands of his conscience, imposes abstinences on himself and punishes himself with penances.? (Civilization and Its Discontents, pg. 87). Freud relates this phenomenon to the ancient Hebrews and other peoples. It is a trait in all of us, just as no one wants to lose the love of the one they care for most. In his dissolved state, Tom does plead to Louisa for her forgiveness. On the last page where Dickens? recounts the fates of all the characters, he portrays Tom as ?A lonely brother, many thousands of miles away, writing, on paper blotted with tears, that her [Louisa?s] words had too soon come true, and that all the treasures in the world would be cheaply bartered for a sight of her dear face?? (Hard Times, pg. 277). She receives a letter later saying, ?he died in hospital, of fever, such a day, and died in penitence and love of you, his last word being your name.?

Dickens uses Hard Times to express his discontent with society. Freud and Marx are not satisfied either with the present conditions facing them and their culture. Dickens embraces similar ideas of Marx and Freud and personifies them through his two characters, Blackpool and Tom Gradgrind. Blackpool?s personality, struggles and relationships with others represent Marx?s concept of the oppressed worker while Tom?s symbolize our need to rebel and our battles with guilt. Each individual is a product of his time. Freud, Marx and Dickens are products of their times as well in that they have a distrust of the current traditions; this pessimism is depicted in their lives? works. And in the end, we realize, art and literature express the chaos of their era.

Civilisation and its Discontent: Freud

Hard Times: Dickens