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The Circus in *Hard Times*
Lillian Young

In *Hard Times* the circus most obviously represents amusement. As Sleary says, “People must be amused, [...] they can’t be always a working, nor yet they can’t be always a learning” (Dickens 35). This business of amusement acts as a counter to, and a commentary on, Gradgrind’s prescription of Facts, Facts, Facts (Dickens 5). As Dickens points out, the one thing needful is not Facts but something else. Integral to that something else is amusement. Yet, although what Sleary says is true, the primary purpose of the circus in the novel is not amusement. It does not push forward the narrative by amusing any of the main characters, and its primary contribution to the themes of the novel is not in any philosophy of amusement beyond what Sleary has just put forward. The main purpose of the circus in the novel lies elsewhere.

Sleary’s circus is the first counter to the orderly, efficient world that both Bounderby and Gradgrind represent at this point in the novel. Dickens’s description of the circus is messy and chaotic, with people and objects engaged in all sorts of unusual activities that fail to cohere into any sort of intelligible pattern. Dickens never gives any of the circus acts a clear beginning middle and end, even though in reality they must have had them. This sort of behavior will not fit in the mathematical world that Gradgrind is selling. How do you mathematically calculate the value of a worker whose contribution to the work force is to “dance upon rolling caskets, stand upon bottles, catch knives and balls, twirl hand-basins, ride upon anything, jump over everything, and stick at nothing” (Dickens 31)? You cannot calculate the value of such a thing and you ought not to try. That does not mean that it is valueless.

This is the mistake that Gradgrind makes. He assumes that because the value of the circus cannot be calculated, the circus has no value. For Gradgrind and Bounderby the circus is

“wonder, idleness, and folly” (Dickens 14). That is, it produces nothing useful for them and so they assume that it does no work. This view Dickens specifically rejects. He consistently describes the circus as a craft and a trade. It is difficult and skilled work that people have to train at for a long time. The fact that circus performers learn through apprenticeships is key here. For Bounderby this is a ridiculous notion (Dickens 30), because in his mind there is no reason to apprentice yourself to something useless, to idleness.

For Dickens the value of the circus is in its relations. The circus people have “an untiring readiness to help and pity one another” (Dickens 31) that is missing from the worldview of Bounderby and Gradgrind. This is the crux of the matter for Dickens. They are good people whether or not they participate in the system of production. This is why they are “deserving, often of as much respect, and always of as much generous construction, as the every-day virtues of any class of people in the world” (Dickens 31). It is their compassion that Dickens consistently puts forward as their primary trait, and he makes use of it throughout the novel to move the plot forward. Sleary and the others exhibit more familial love (as distinct from the sort of love Stephen and Rachel have) for Sissy in the first 30 pages than anyone else does in the next 150. It is Sissy’s compassion and love for Louisa that makes her so effective in the second half of the novel. It is also Sleary’s compassion for Sissy that makes him willing to rescue Tom in the end. This is Dickens’s purpose for the community of circus people and the trait that he values most.

Still, Dickens is very much aware that the lifestyle and community that the circus represents is dying. It is an old type that will not survive the industrial revolution. The concept of apprenticeship is again important. The circus people are skilled craftsmen. They need the institution of apprenticeship to learn their skills. The major feature of the industrial revolution is

that skilled craftsmen were replaced by unskilled laborers. Dickens is as aware of this as anybody, and his answer is not to go back to the pre-industrial organization. All Stephen Blackpool wants to do is work at his power-loom in peace and marry Rachel, and Dickens validates that. The industrial type of work is not in and of itself the problem.

This can be seen in the fact that Dickens does not choose circus life for Sissy. Circus life is brutal. It requires balms and oils and broken bones and occasionally drives a man to abandon his daughter. When Sissy leaves the circus to live with Gradgrind, Sleary says to her, "You'll make your fortune, I hope, and none of our poor folkth will ever trouble you" (Dickens 34). This acknowledges that Sissy has a better chance in the life that Gradgrind can give her than she would have had in the circus.

Dickens's descriptions of circus people also indicate that their lifestyle is not the primary model of a good life. Dickens describes Sleary as "with one fixed eye and one loose eye, a voice (if it can be called so) like the efforts of a broken old pair of bellows, a flabby surface, and a muddled head that was never sober and never drunk" (31). Sleary, like the other people of the circus, is physically infirm. He has a voice that is fading away and barely functions as such. Sleary's lisp is a constant reminder of this and gives him the sense of someone who never quite gets through. Like the circus, Sleary's voice is more the memory of a thing than it is the vital, dynamic thing itself. Sleary's drinking, which Dickens emphasizes in Sleary's last scene (217-8) serves a similar purpose. Sleary is never quite all there. He is always on the edge of fading away.

This characteristic of the circus as fading is evident in its use in the plot. It emerges long enough to deposit Sissy and make an impression, and then the reader does not see it again until the end. There it comes forward to save Tom, and then disappears from the lives of the main characters in Dickens's final description. The reason for this is that the circus represents the old

form of labor and community. The circus then fades out again in Dickens's final description because there is no real place for it in Dickens's world, except perhaps as a reminder. Sleary both at the beginning and the end says, "Make the best of it; not the worst" (Dickens 35 and 218). He does not want to fit into Gradgrind's city or his life. The circus is past the edge. Dickens does support industrial society, so long as it does not lose its humanity. The circus, as a pre-industrial form of labor, is not the ideal and Dickens is aware that it is outdated. Yet he insists that the wise thing and the kind thing is not to be cross with it (Dickens 218) for falling behind, not to try to fold it into industrialized life, but to allow it to exist separately and to take from it the qualities that the industrialized city needs.

The gentle compassion that Dickens associates with the circus should be carried over into the industrial world. Sissy is one very real way in which values are transferred from one to the other. The old form is also necessary to rescue Tom, because the industrial world has very little room for mercy interfering with law and order. Gradgrind and Louisa could not have circumvented the law in that way. As modern people, they do not have the tools, but need to call on an older type of person and an older set of values for help. The circus's main value to the plot is not in bringing amusement but in bringing compassion in the form of Sissy and help in a time of need. As Sleary says, "there is a love in the world, not all self-interest after all, but something very different" (Dickens 218). Gradgrind recognizes this in the form of "Faith, Hope, and Charity" (Dickens 221). These, not facts, were always the things that were needful in order to counter the problems of the industrial city. The circus, in depositing its best qualities into the industrial world, has made the place human.