

University of St. Thomas, Minnesota

UST Research Online

English Master's Essays

English

Spring 2020

Louisa Gradgrind's Imaginative and Emotional Development: Spaces of Solitude in Charles Dickens's HARD TIMES

Meaghan Virginia Scott
University of St. Thomas

Follow this and additional works at: https://ir.stthomas.edu/cas_engl_mat



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Scott, Meaghan Virginia, "Louisa Gradgrind's Imaginative and Emotional Development: Spaces of Solitude in Charles Dickens's HARD TIMES" (2020). *English Master's Essays*. 21.
https://ir.stthomas.edu/cas_engl_mat/21

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by the English at UST Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Master's Essays by an authorized administrator of UST Research Online. For more information, please contact libroadmin@stthomas.edu.

Louisa Gradgrind's Imaginative and Emotional Development:
Spaces of Solitude in Charles Dickens's *Hard Times*

by

Meaghan Virginia Scott

A master's essay submitted to the faculty of the
Graduate Program in English in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts in English

University of St. Thomas

Saint Paul, Minnesota

May 2020

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Alexis Easley for her steadfast encouragement, support, and guidance through every step of this project. I will always appreciate her indispensable knowledge and dedication.

ABSTRACT

In this essay, I explore the connection between imagination and images of domestic space as theorized by Gaston Bachelard in order to examine the spaces Louisa Gradgrind inhabits in Charles Dickens's *Hard Times*. While Louisa's occupation of space sustains her imagination, it does not provide her with an emotional outlet. Sissy Jupe, a circus girl taken in by the Gradgrinds after her father's disappearance, inhabits the same spaces as Louisa. Being strongly connected to her emotions, Sissy embodies authentic empathy and love for others. Because her emotions are integrated with her imagination, she is capable of helping Louisa integrate her own emotional and imaginative life. By exploring Louisa's emotional and imaginative awakening within the spaces she inhabits, I will argue that Dickens provides us, as he also provided Victorian readers, with an example of how openness to empathy and empathetic reading can allow individuals to reintegrate their identity even after living a lifetime of disintegrated interiority.

In an 1850 editorial address in *Household Words*, Charles Dickens asserts, “No mere utilitarian spirit, no iron binding of the mind to grim realities, will give a harsh tone to our Household Words. In the bosoms of the young and old, of the well-to-do and of the poor, we would tenderly cherish that light of Fancy which is inherent in the human breast; which, according to its nurture, burns with an inspiring flame, or sinks into a sullen glare, but which (or woe betide that day!) can never be extinguished” (1). For Dickens, “fancy” was not an acquired skill but an inherent characteristic of every human being. Dickens aimed to ignite his readers’ imaginative capacity by inviting them to read within the corners of their homes whatever appeared in the corners of the magazine’s pages. Gaston Bachelard, in *The Poetics of Space*, likewise investigates how poetic images appear to us within the spaces we inhabit. He writes that “all really inhabited space bears the essence of the notion of home ... we shall see that the imagination functions in this direction whenever the human being has found the slightest shelter” (27). As readers experienced the textual spaces of *Household Words*, they had the opportunity to witness how empathy and love function within the reading spaces of home, an experience which could then extend into their broader social world.

Published in *Household Words* in twenty parts from April 1 through August 12, 1854, *Hard Times* aimed to spark readers’ imaginations within the physical spaces of their homes, which would then promote empathy and transform society.¹ As Catherine Waters argues, “Love of home life assumed unprecedented importance for the Victorians, and Dickens was hailed by his first reviewers as one of its earliest proponents” (350). By publishing *Hard Times* in a family magazine, Dickens provided his readers with a serial that would encourage them to seek domestic harmony.² While the purpose of this essay is not to provide a fully contextualized reading of *Hard Times* within *Household Words*, it is important to consider Dickens’s vision for

the periodical as a framework for understanding the novel. Hughes and Lund note that “within the serial experience, author, characters, and reader alike contributed their part toward creating a home,” a collaboration which Dickens, his characters, and Victorian readers shared within *Household Words* (18). Lauren Cameron argues that *Hard Times* explores the interplay between rooms and the mind; during the nineteenth century, she contends, the mind was understood as a room of sorts, and it was crucial to properly care for this space so as to achieve and maintain good physical and mental health.³ In her analysis, she focuses on the characters of Mrs. Gradgrind and Louisa, concluding that while Dickens accepts the validity of mental formation and physical health as being due to home surroundings, he specifically condemns the Gradgrind philosophy of utilitarian décor, which foretells both women’s fates. Bachelard employs a similar concept of the interplay between space and mind, arguing that inhabited architectural spaces act as shelter for the imagination. He states, “[W]e shall see the imagination build ‘walls’ of impalpable shadows, comfort itself with the illusion of protection—or, just the contrary, tremble behind thick walls, mistrust the staunchest ramparts” (27).

In this essay, I explore the connection between imagination and images of domestic space as theorized by Cameron and Bachelard in order to examine the spaces Louisa Gradgrind inhabits in *Hard Times* and to analyze her interior life within those spaces. While Louisa’s occupation of space sustains her imagination, it does not provide her with an emotional outlet.⁴ Sissy Jupe, a circus girl taken in by the Gradgrinds after her father’s disappearance, inhabits the same spaces as Louisa. Being strongly connected to her emotions, Sissy embodies authentic empathy and love for others. Because her emotions are integrated with her imagination, she is capable of helping Louisa integrate her own emotional and imaginative life.

For Dickens, the successful integration of imagination and emotions produced by reading leads to healing empathy and a more cohesive sense of identity.⁵ As Deborah Thomas says, *Hard Times* illustrates “the close association in Dickens’s mind between imaginative play and emotional sympathy, as well as the power that he attributed to fancy (in both the imaginative and the emotional senses) to improve the human condition” (122–3). Early on in the narrative, Louisa becomes a clear example of what happens to love when imagination and emotions are denied value to the point of being nearly destroyed. Mr. Gradgrind, in teaching his children to operate according to facts rather than fancy, polarizes the intellect and imagination into a binary where one is valued at the other’s expense, which then severs his loving relationships with his children. Sissy and her father, on the other hand, understand the beneficial effects of reading (especially imaginative types of reading, such as fairy tales and *The Arabian Nights*). Just as Sissy and her father were able to immerse themselves in stories, Dickens invites readers to value imagination while encouraging them to learn empathy through imaginative reading.

For both Dickens and Bachelard, then, a more authentic way of living involves the integration (or reintegration, if necessary) of the imaginative, emotional, and intellectual facets of our being, uniting them operationally rather than forcing them into opposition. Even while attempting to suppress her imagination, which consistently “burns with an inspiring flame” throughout the novel, Louisa consistently practices what she believes to be love, even when those practices unintentionally become detrimental to herself and her loved ones (1). Regardless of any negative outcomes, Louisa’s nascent imagination and selfless love provide her with the future means of her reintegration, specifically when the romantic form of love fails, a failure that provides an opportunity for Sissy’s empathetic love to present itself. By exploring Louisa’s emotional and imaginative awakening within the spaces she inhabits, I will argue that Dickens

provides us, as he also provided Victorian readers, with an example of how openness to empathy and empathetic reading can allow individuals to reintegrate their identity even after living a lifetime of disintegrated interiority.

Corners & Shadows

Louisa's suppressed imagination and emotions are illustrated when we see her sitting alone in a dark corner by the fireplace. Bachelard asserts that every "corner in a house, every angle in a room, every inch of secluded space in which we like to hide, or withdraw into ourselves, is a symbol of solitude for the imagination," which in turn promotes a developing sense of selfhood as we mature (155). In the corner Louisa inhabits, her imagination sparks and sputters as she rebels against her father's doctrine of facts, even though she has been told throughout her life to "never wonder" (52). While her brother, Tom, vents his own frustrations with their parents and the atmosphere of their home, Stone Lodge, Louisa sits "in the darker corner," fluctuating between looking at Tom and staring at "the bright sparks" of the fire "as they dropped upon the hearth" (54). Despite Louisa's attempts at suppressing her thoughts, they remain actively "unmanageable" because "they *will* wonder" despite her father's orders to avoid wondering (57). As Nussbaum observes, "Seeing a perception, then, as pointing to something beyond itself, seeing in the things that are perceptible and at hand other things that are not before one's eyes—this is fancy, and this is why Mr. Gradgrind disapproves of it" (36). Indeed, this notion of "fancy" enables Louisa to listen to her brother's complaints while considering what she can do to alleviate them. Disregarding her own needs, in part because she has convinced herself she has none, Louisa has been trained from a young age to stamp out fancy, wonder, and all imaginative qualities so that she will constantly live in a world of facts. Yet by withdrawing into herself and

inhabiting a corner, Louisa achieves the solitude needed to reclaim at least partial use of her imagination.

In his exploration of the importance of corners to fostering imagination, Bachelard also notes that shadows operate as refuge. He writes, “An imaginary room rises up around our bodies, which think that they are well hidden when we take refuge in a corner. Already, the shadows are walls, a piece of furniture constitutes a barrier, hangings are a roof” (156). Shadows develop around Louisa while she occupies her corner, and these shadows become shelter for her while she wonders and converses with Tom. The narrator stops to give us a description of shadows in the room:

Their shadows were defined upon the wall, but those of the high presses in the room were all blended together on the wall and on the ceiling, as if the brother and sister were overhung by a dark cavern. Or, a fanciful imagination—if such treason could have been there—might have made it out to be the shadow of their subject, and of its lowering association with their future. (55–6)

Shadows become walls atmospherically charged with a sense of safety,⁶ yet they also loom over Louisa’s and Tom’s future, foreshadowing tragedy.

Continuing to stare into the fire from her dark corner, Louisa allows herself to imaginatively ponder their future, perhaps with the intention of discovering what she can do to prevent the disaster she intuitively senses rather than envisions. After Tom nonchalantly admits to using her as a future tool against Mr. Bounderby, Louisa accepts the role as her brother’s protector, thinking it may be her best option to care for him. Meanwhile, Tom decides to look at the fire his sister is mesmerized by, staring at it for a moment and then saying, “Except that it is a fire ... it looks to me as stupid and blank as everything else looks. What do you see in it? Not a

circus?" to which she replies, "I don't see anything in it, Tom, particularly. But since I have been looking at it, I have been wondering about you and me, grown up" (57). The fire reflects Louisa and Tom's disparate views of how life operates around them. While Tom only sees stupidity and blankness, Louisa has the capacity to wonder about their fates, instinctively perceiving the sorrow that will follow them into the future. Because she inhabits a corner while being surrounded by shadows, Louisa allows herself the degree of solitude necessary for the rebellious side of her imagination to grow just enough to find a way to protect her brother from the impending harm she imagines in his future, which will ultimately empower her own self-advocacy by the end of the novel. Tom, on the other hand, refuses to fully inhabit any domestic space, which diminishes his imaginative capacity. Because of his inability to imagine, he cannot empathize.

Leaving One's Corner

Closely aligned with the space of Sleary's fanciful circus, Sissy's imagination and emotions have had the freedom to flourish. Her love of reading, especially her memories of reading to her father, helps to stimulate Louisa's developing awareness of her feelings, further igniting the embers of her imagination. In *The Phenomenology of Love and Reading*, Cassandra Falke discusses how reading can provide us with the conditions in which to learn how to experience empathy, which is a crucial lesson in terms of learning how to love another.⁷ She writes, "Books can make forgetting ourselves and attending to another a regular part of our daily practice and thereby strengthen in us the habit of empathy" (163). Sissy embodies empathy and love stemming from reading to her father. While Louisa is tutoring Sissy in Stone Lodge (it is not specified which room, but a likely guess is the schoolroom where Louisa usually sits in her corner in front of the fireplace), she questions Sissy about the events leading to her father's

decision to leave her, and Sissy responds, “I used to read to him to cheer his courage, and he was very fond of that. They were wrong books – I am never to speak of them here – but we didn’t know there was any harm in them” (62). Imaginative literary works are viewed by Mr. Gradgrind and Mr. Bounderby as “wrong books” and must never be mentioned. The readers of *Hard Times* of course realize that these are not wrong books, and Louisa, too, begins to gain an appreciation for imaginative reading while listening to Sissy. But because she has been miseducated by her father since childhood, she has no way of articulating this awareness.

The narrator describes Louisa questioning “with her searching gaze on Sissy all this time,” struggling to comprehend the love of imaginative reading she has never experienced but nonetheless has grown to desire (62). Not only did Sissy’s father love these books, but they also “kept him, many times, from what did him real harm” a warning, perhaps, for Louisa, who is currently being harmed due to the lack of these books and is becoming more aware of it through getting to know Sissy (62). One of his favorites was *The Arabian Nights*, which empowered him “to forget all his troubles in wondering whether the Sultan would let the lady go on with the story, or would have her head cut off before it was finished” (62). Sissy’s use of the word “wondering” and her assertion that her father would “forget all his troubles” demonstrates the power of imaginative reading to provide a retreat from reality, one that can foster imagination and provide solace. John Drew argues that Dickens knew his readers were “suspended as it were in a parenthesis while reading, halted in a state of temporary leisure snatched out of the busy whirligig of living in the industrial age” in a similar retreat (“2011 Michael Wolff Lecture” 310). As readers of *Hard Times* learn about Sissy’s love of reading, which has trained her in empathy for and love of others, they realize that Louisa’s experience can likewise enlarge their own ability to acquire a similar emotional capacity.

When Louisa asks Sissy whether her father loved her mother, it becomes clear that she is experiencing empathy. She asks the question “with a strong, wild, wandering interest peculiar to her; an interest gone astray like a banished creature, and hiding in solitary places” (61). Her imagination is this creature, banished by her father from their home, which has found solitary places to inhabit so that it cannot be extinguished completely. Though Sissy affirms her parents’ love for each other, Louisa wonders how love could ever lead a father to abandon his child. What also puzzles Louisa is Sissy’s insistence that her father only left her for her good. Paulette Kidder notes that “Sissy is symbolically linked with those who preserve faith in what cannot be seen, despite criticism by those who claim to have rational explanations that would reduce their faith to a delusion” (423).⁸ Louisa’s education has not trained her to accept things on faith, so her observance of Sissy’s consistent faith in her father undermines everything she knows. As Sissy describes the events leading up to her father’s disappearance, she comes to a part of the story when her father loses his temper with his performing dog, beating him until Sissy begs him to stop, and on fully realizing what he’s done, lies down with the dog, crying (62–3). As Sissy recounts this memory, she begins to cry, and in this moment, Louisa “kissed her; took her hand, and sat down beside her” in a moment of empathy (63). Louisa has observed Sissy’s complete faith in her father’s love for her and heard Sissy’s account of her father’s worsening situation and how much their love of reading helped him (even temporarily) contend with his sorrow, all of which culminates in her ability to feel empathy. As Falke writes, “Through an empathetic engagement with that person, the lover (which we all are) enables both whole people involved to ‘vary’ and emerge more fully” (86). As Louisa engages with Sissy on an empathetic level, both experience a deeper understanding of the other in a loving way.

The arrival of Tom provides an opportunity to contrast Louisa's deepening self-awareness with his purely materialistic impulses, which alienate him from the spaces he inhabits. While Sissy and Louisa are still talking, Tom comes "lounging in, and stared at the two with a coolness not particularly savouring of interest in anything but himself, and not much of that at present," bringing to mind Falke's insights into the failure of empathy (63). Falke reminds us that "[l]iterature cannot overcome [skepticism and self-protection] in individuals who, because of social pressure or habitual callousness, block the flow of empathy between themselves and another person" (94-5). In contrast, Louisa is thinking empathetically of Sissy, who is waiting to hear from her father. When Sissy asks if a letter has arrived, Mr. Gradgrind responded, "No, Jupe, nothing of the sort," and "the trembling of Sissy's lip would be repeated in Louisa's face, and her eyes would follow Sissy with compassion to the door" (64-5).

Although Louisa's encounters with Sissy have nourished her emotional consciousness, when she steps out of her corner into Tom's and her father's world, her imagination suffers more intensely because she reverts to her habit of repression. Striving to become exactly what will please her father and benefit Tom, Louisa hopes to be loved by her father and brother as Sissy's parents loved her, with her best interests at heart. In a later scene, Louisa meets her father in his "observatory," described as "a stern room, with a deadly-statistical clock in it, which measured every second with a beat like a rap upon a coffin-lid," a space in which he has "no need to cast an eye upon the teeming myriads of human beings around him, but could settle all their destinies on a slate, and wipe out all their tears with one dirty little bit of sponge" (95). Rather than the inspiring light and comforting warmth of a fireplace and a corner sheltered by shadows, Mr. Gradgrind's office proves to be a space more befitting a machine than a person. While occupying her father's observatory, Louisa buries herself alive, while he, like the clock, "[raps] upon the

coffin-lid,” hammering in the nails and thus sealing her fate. Yet later Sissy will also rap upon the coffin-lid, knowing Louisa is actually still alive, and it is Sissy’s rapping that will save Louisa’s imagination from death.

As Louisa looks out of her father’s window, at “the high chimneys and the long tracts of smoke looming in the heavy distance gloomily,” the sight neither encourages nor comforts her but rather signifies her loss and the bleak darkness she lives in, especially when outside her corner (96). The dismal scene Louisa observes as she gazes out the window is impossible for Mr. Gradgrind to see because he has long been intent on obliterating empathy from everyone, including himself. Readers watch as Mr. Gradgrind announces Mr. Bounderby’s marriage proposal, and it is in this moment that Louisa seems to suppress any form of emotional or verbal response. Indeed, Mr. Gradgrind repeats the proposal to her twice before she answers “without any visible emotion whatever: ‘I hear you, father, I am attending, I assure you,’” to which he happily responds, “you are even more dispassionate than I expected” (96). Leaving her corner provides Louisa with the opportunity to practice a first step in autonomy, yet rather than emerging into the world with a stronger sense of self, Louisa further denies herself options outside of a circumscribed interiority. However, as Jill Matus reminds us, “Louisa may indeed be experiencing emotions; it is just that she has learned to mask and hide them,” a fact that Mr. Gradgrind thoroughly fails to recognize (16–17).

For Dickens, then, Louisa’s initial lack of reaction to her father’s proposal suggests not a lack of identity but an active suppression of feeling. When her father prompts her for a response, she surprises him by asking a series of questions about love which shows her understanding of what emotions should be present, perhaps primarily based on her earlier conversations with Sissy. Mr. Gradgrind, who replies that it is not a question of love, states that Mr. Bounderby

“does not do you the injustice, and does not do himself the injustice, of pretending to anything fanciful, fantastic or (I am using synonymous terms) sentimental” (97). Readers will recognize that the only real injustice in this scene is that of Louisa’s father’s expectation that she will behave in perfectly rational ways and at the total expense of imagination and feeling.

As discussed earlier, Dickens encourages the readers of *Household Words* to strengthen rather than dampen their fancy, and in *Hard Times*, Louisa serves as a cautionary example of what happens when one attempts to extinguish imagination. Mr. Gradgrind, convinced he has stated the case to her with perfect clarity, waits for Louisa’s response. The omniscient narrator, potentially a stand-in for Dickens, then provides us insight into Mr. Gradgrind’s loss of humanity, noting that if he could have leaped “at a bound the artificial barriers he had for many years been erecting, between himself and all those subtle essences of humanity which will elude the utmost cunning of algebra,” he perhaps could “have seen one wavering moment in her, when she was impelled to throw herself upon his breast, and give him the pent-up confidences of her heart” (99). Readers know more about Louisa’s feelings than Mr. Gradgrind does and thus empathize with her in ways that Mr. Gradgrind cannot. Because he is incapable of empathizing with his daughter, he loses the chance to know what she really feels about this proposal. Louisa pauses again for a long time, staring outside at the chimney stacks, and then says, “There seems to be nothing there, but languid and monotonous smoke. Yet when the night comes, Fire bursts out, father!” (99). Fire is indicative of her imagination, but in this scene, it becomes a symbol of destruction. Her mention of fire is another witness to her premonitory abilities, since she foresees that the decision to marry Mr. Bounderby, and therefore, further repressing her imagination, could prove to be her complete undoing.

Louisa accepts Mr. Bounderby's marriage proposal while understanding at some level that her acceptance risks shutting down her imagination forever. After resigning herself and exclaiming "What does it matter," Mr. Gradgrind thinks to ask his daughter if she had ever "entertained in secret any other proposal" (100). She "almost scornfully" responds, "Father, ... what other proposal can have been made to *me*? Whom have I seen? Where have I been? What are my heart's experiences?" (100). Missing her sarcasm entirely, he congratulates himself on his success at driving out not only her imagination but her emotional life as well. Yet he cannot completely destroy what will prove to be the remnants of an emotional life reflected and constructed in the spaces of home. As she continues to speak, readers will pick up on flickers of her imagination, still refusing to be quenched. She says, "in her quiet manner,"

"What do *I* know, father ... of tastes and fancies; of aspirations and affections; of all that part of my nature in which such light things might have been nourished? What escape have I had from problems that could be demonstrated, and realities that could be grasped?" As she said it, she unconsciously closed her hand, as if upon a solid object, and slowly opened it as though she were releasing dust or ash. (100)

She closes her hand around the fancies she has just begun to value and crushes them into "dust or ash" (100). While inhabiting her corner at home, Louisa had grown up with the knowledge that something exists beyond the facts she has been taught; in this moment, she makes the decision to relinquish her attempts to nourish her imagination. As she scolds her father for asking such a question, she further claims that he has "been so careful of me, that I never had a child's heart. You have trained me so well, that I never dreamed a child's dream. You have dealt so wisely with me, father, from my cradle to this hour, that I never had a child's belief or a child's fear"

(101). While she verbalizes the deepest losses of her heart, the reader is aware that just by articulating them she acknowledges their necessity. Bachelard describes the emergence of self as being “manifest at the very moment when it comes forth from its corner. . . . The child has just discovered that she is *herself*, in an explosion toward the outside, which is a reaction, perhaps, to certain concentrations in a corner of her being” (157–8). Even though Louisa recognizes these losses, she continues to repress rather than become herself. Yet she will never see this repression as a triumph, while her father savors every word and holds each one of those losses as proof of what he considers in this moment to be his greatest success in life.

Returning to the Spaces of Home

Early in her marriage to Mr. Bounderby, Louisa preserves her ability to empathize as seen in her encounter with Stephen Blackpool in his room, a space significantly located outside the constraints of her husband’s oppressive home. Yet as she continues to endure her marriage and suffers from Tom’s exploitation, she grows colder and even more hard of heart, not only to Sissy but also to her younger sister Jane. Yet Sissy and Jane (as well as Mrs. Gradgrind) are crucially important in helping Louisa recognize her deepening loss of selfhood, and it is this vital recognition that serves, in part, to reignite her emotions. Louisa visits Stone Lodge when she discovers her mother is on her deathbed. Propped up on her couch, Mrs. Gradgrind responds to Louisa’s inquiry of whether she is suffering, saying, “I think there’s a pain somewhere in the room . . . but I couldn’t positively say that I have got it” (193). Mrs. Gradgrind, who has never had much strength or inclination for anything due to her husband’s controlling impulses, feels rather than knows Louisa’s pain, thereby experiencing a small level of empathy for perhaps the first time in her life; whether she is aware of it or not, Louisa may feel a connection to her mother in this scene that she never has before. Mrs. Gradgrind further comments, “You very

seldom see your sister ... She grows like you. I wish you would look at her. Sissy, bring her here," indicating her awareness that Louisa has avoided home, perhaps intentionally (193). When Louisa sees Sissy and Jane together, she sees in Jane's face "a better and brighter face than hers had ever been: had seen in it, not without a rising feeling of resentment, even in that place and at that time, something of the gentleness of the other face in the room" (193). Sissy, whose parents were deeply in love with each other and who has been raised to love with her heart in union with her imagination has proven to be a positive influence on Jane, and both Louisa and Mrs. Gradgrind see it. After ordering Sissy and Jane to leave her alone with Louisa, Mrs. Gradgrind notes,

But there is something – not an Ology at all – that your father has missed, or forgotten, Louisa. I don't know what it is. I have often sat with Sissy near me, and thought about it. I shall never get its name now. But your father may. It makes me restless. I want to write to him, to find out for God's sake, what it is. (194)

Mrs. Gradgrind's final words to her daughter plant yet another seed that will later blossom into Louisa's acknowledgement of what she has lost and her acceptance of Sissy's healing care. Hughes and Lund write, "Victorians valued slow, steady development in installments over time, seeds planted in spring leading to harvest in distant autumn" (275). Perhaps for Dickens's readers, Louisa's emotional development would have resonated with them in much the same way, seeds being planted in each installment of the novel, waiting for the right moment to grow.

Earlier in the novel, Louisa meets one of Mr. Bounderby's associates, James Harthouse, who, instead of having empathy for Louisa's situation, becomes fascinated with her out of boredom. He attempts to convince her of his love, partly because he "had seen how cast away she was," referring mostly to Tom's abandonment but also her husband (205). Ironically, this

declaration takes place in a garden, which would normally be associated with feelings of freedom and joy, yet in this case Louisa experiences fresh awareness of how imprisoned she has become. For Louisa, whose father had stamped out the possibility of a loving relationship, this encounter with Harthouse proves to reignite her hopes for emotional fulfillment, and the walls surrounding her heart and mind collapse. She is indeed falling down Mrs. Sparsit's imagined staircase "to shame and ruin" (195). Dickens's descriptions suggest that for the Victorians, falling down a staircase could only mean the destruction of one's reputation. Yet Bachelard emphasizes that "[w]e always *go down* the one that leads to the cellar, and it is this going down that we remember, that characterizes its oneirism" and regenerative possibilities (46). In her dream-like state, Louisa descends metaphorically into the cellar of her psyche, a space in which dreams can become nightmares. Bachelard claims that it is in cellars that one's oneiric experiences have the most potential to become nightmarish, for "[i]n the cellar, darkness prevails both day and night, and even when we are carrying a lighted candle, we see shadows dancing on the dark walls," shadows that may seem more perpetual than ephemeral (40). Louisa unconsciously falls into her heart's dark cellar, one that Bachelard contends "is first and foremost the *dark entity* of the house ... that partakes of subterranean forces," and what is worse, without a candle (39). Yet it is within this shadowy existence that she finds the courage to confront her father. As Bachelard also says, "the impassioned inhabitant digs and re-digs, making its very depth active" (39–40). Louisa may have fallen into her cellar unwittingly, but rather than give in to despair, she runs directly to the source of her difficulties to save herself.

Returning to her father's observatory in the middle of a thunderstorm, Louisa demands that he save her from the horrific fate he has prepared her for, admitting Harthouse's declaration and his knowledge of the truth about her miserable marriage. Mr. Gradgrind turns white with

horror as he supportively holds his daughter, listening as “the feelings long suppressed broke loose” (211). No longer strong enough to hold back her emotions or to deny her hopes for love, Louisa finally admits what her father’s education has done to her; rather than blaming him, though, she clearly communicates to him the consequences of his teaching and begs him to save her “by some other means” because nothing else he has taught her will (211). Catherine Gallagher claims that while Mr. Gradgrind recognizes his daughter for the first time, he also understands his inability to help her in the future. She notes that Louisa “has had too much attention from him, and it has been the wrong kind of attention” (181). As Louisa begs him to save her, Mr. Gradgrind finally admits to himself, and later to her, that he is incapable of giving her the attention that she needs.

By returning home, Louisa also returns to the spaces of solitude she has inhabited throughout her life. Initially, Louisa left her corner in order to find herself, yet because of her marriage to Mr. Bounderby, she repressed her imagination further, almost to the point that it could have sunk into what Dickens called in his introduction to *Household Words* “a sullen glare” (1). And while Louisa began to open up emotionally to Harthouse, he led her to a false rather than empathetic or potentially healing love, leaving her vulnerable, alone, and searching for safety. Bachelard writes that “all the spaces of our past moments of solitude, the spaces in which we have suffered from solitude, enjoyed, desired and compromised solitude, remain indelible within us, and precisely because the human being wants them to remain so” (31). Louisa instinctively returns to Stone Lodge because it is where her dreams and imagination once found a solitary home. She has not found solace outside of her childhood corner, so in the moment the “fire bursts” within her she returns to the only spaces of solitude she has ever known.

After her father's inability to save her, Louisa is ready to give up on herself, but Sissy's influence proves to be crucial in her healing process. The morning after her crisis, Louisa awakes "from a torpor" while "[i]t seemed, at first, as if all that had happened since the days when these objects were familiar to her were the shadows of a dream; but gradually, as the objects became more real to her sight, the events became more real to her mind" (215). Shadows are necessary as refuge for imagination. She is coming from "less present" into "more present" to her surroundings as the protective shadows of the dark cellar recede. Because "the cellar dream irrefutably increases reality," Louisa sees her life more clearly while inhabiting her cellar (Bachelard 41). Everything she has been through since leaving home has become a shadow to protect her while recovering from the initial shock of her emotional catharsis.

When Sissy stands next to her, Louisa's first reaction to her presence is one of "dull anger" because she is "seen in her distress" (218). The narrator explains, "All closely imprisoned forces rend and destroy. The air that would be healthful to the earth, the water that would enrich it, the heat that would ripen it, tear it when caged up. So in her bosom even now; the strongest qualities she possessed, long turned upon themselves, became a heap of obduracy, that rose against a friend" (219). Louisa has kept her emotional life so restrained that she is literally being rent from the inside out. After so many years of denying her emotions, a direct consequence of squelching her imagination, Louisa's heart turns against Sissy, who has continued to love her despite the cold shoulder she has received since Louisa's engagement to Mr. Bounderby. Sissy loyally offers this love to Louisa, but she does not ever force it upon her, which is a key indicator of authentic love: it is always offered whether accepted or not.

As they sit in Louisa's old bedroom, which is not mentioned in the novel until this scene, Louisa reverts to her more repressive self, identifying how heartless she has become while

remaining convinced that she can never be loved. Considering herself unhealable, she tells Sissy, “I am so proud and so hardened, so confused and troubled, so resentful and unjust to every one and to myself, that everything is stormy, dark, and wicked to me. Does not that repel you?” (220). Sissy immediately exclaims that it does not. Louisa then says, “I am so unhappy, and all that should have made me otherwise is so laid waste, that if I had been bereft of sense to this hour, and instead of being as learned as you think me, had to begin to acquire the simplest truths, I could not want a guide to peace, contentment, honour, all the good of which I am quite devoid, more abjectly than I do. Does not that repel you?” (220). Again, even though Louisa repeatedly tests Sissy’s empathetic capacity, the answer is an emphatic no. But for Bachelard, the “cellar recovers its stairways,” and it is no different in Louisa’s case (45). Sissy lights a metaphorical candle for Louisa in her dark cellar: “In the innocence of her brave affection, and the brimming up of her old devoted spirit, the once deserted girl shone like a beautiful light upon the darkness of the other” (220). Louisa finally accepts Sissy’s love and care, partially because Sissy had earlier sparked Louisa’s empathetic responsiveness, and it is only then that she begins to heal from her life of interior neglect and deprivation. As Falke observes, “What each beloved gives the other in this moment, even in a simple smile, is more than the intention of either could contain. Although empathy may be followed by reflection, it does not depend on it. It is not a step-by-step process, but occurs all at once” (86). Readers vicariously experience Louisa’s chronological journey and simultaneously witness Sissy and Louisa’s empathetic love for each other which occurs only in the present moment. Indeed, Dickens represents Louisa’s fall down a staircase into a cellar as a hopeful rather than a ruinous process.

Endings & Beginnings

Louisa learns to live for love; she cares for her own needs first which then allows her to experience empathy. The novel ends with Louisa once more wondering in her corner, yet now she is gentler and humbler than when she was married to Mr. Bounderby, fully in tune with her imagination and emotions because of what she has learned from Sissy. As an empathetic reader of books, Sissy is also a lover of people; Louisa has learned from Sissy to accept “fancy” and feelings united, which is why children especially love her. The narrator describes her current state of mind and heart as she watches “the fire as in days of yore,” asking, “How much of the future might arise before *her* vision?”:

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, the sturdiest physical manhood will be morally stark death, and the plainest national prosperity figures can show, will be the Writing on the Wall,—she holding this course as part of no fantastic vow, or bond, or brotherhood, or sisterhood, or pledge, or covenant, or fancy dress, or fancy fair; but simply as a duty to be done. (286–8)

Many scholars who have studied Louisa Gradgrind’s character arc conclude that the ending of her narrative represents a pessimistic rather than a hopeful view of her future. Deborah Thomas, for example, argues that “Dickens leaves us with the impression that both Louisa and her father will attempt to spread this new way of thinking to others. ... Yet, overall, the ending of *Hard Times* seems more pessimistic than promising” (132). Lauren Cameron likewise argues that “the mental damage has been done,” claiming that Louisa’s “mind’s interiority has been formed by

her homes' interiors, by the environments that surround her. Louisa is left loverless and childless in the end, and is given an outlet for nurturing only as an aunt-like figure to Sissy's children" (75). But is such an ending hopeless? It is five years after the events that had led up to her life crisis.⁹ Louisa has reintegrated her emotions with her imagination; she has learned to love and to be loved. She also encourages children to exercise their imaginations while practicing empathy, thus countering her father's educational theories. As a humbler version of herself, Louisa has become a reader of "childish lore" and can therefore teach children to be empathetic readers themselves without inflating it into a matter of pride (as her father and Mr. Bounderby did with her education). Falke reminds us that rather than "dividing empathy into logical or emotional acts that begin from an assumption of distance between subjects, phenomenologists have instead worked to describe empathy as a 'unique and irreducible form of intentionality' that is called forth by the moment" (86). Dickens's portrayal of imaginative reading suggests his alignment with earlier nineteenth-century authors who argued that "reading ... actuates our humanity more fully, enabling readers to treat others with greater kindness and understanding. It works prior to reasoned reflection, at the level of habit" ("On the Morality" 188). For both Falke and Dickens, reading can teach us to develop habits of empathy so it will become an instinctive rather than forced response when encountering another person.

By answering his own speculative question about Louisa's future, the narrator ends the novel with a call for us as readers to follow Louisa's example of integrating her mind and body while fully inhabiting the intimate spaces of home: "Dear reader! It rests with you and me, whether, in our two fields of action, similar things shall be or not. Let them be!" (288). Here Dickens asks readers of *Household Words* to imagine what actions to take in our lives that will include our minds and hearts united with each other. We live in a state of impermanence until

death, life's only certainty, when the "ashes of our fires turn grey and cold," and Dickens would have us use that time for the benefit of all rather than only ourselves (288). In the novel's ending, Dickens is also helping us imagine the ideal household, one that is fully realized through empathetic reading and action at home. In a discussion of the relation between house and universe, Bachelard writes, "Sometimes the house of the future is better built, lighter and larger than all the houses of the past, so that the image of *the dream house* is opposed to that of the childhood home" (81). Louisa's childhood home, one built by her father that forced her into a state of emotional repression, is now a figment of the past. Louisa's home by the end of the novel is the interior one she has tried to nourish throughout the novel, one of healing and hope for the future that she returns to when everything falls apart. Bachelard reminds us that "[m]aybe it is a good thing for us to keep a few dreams of a house that we shall live in later, always later, so much later, in fact, that we shall not have time to achieve it. For a house that was final, one that stood in symmetrical relation to the house we were born in, would lead to thoughts—serious, sad thoughts—and not to dreams. It is better to live in a state of impermanence than in one of finality" (81–2). Impermanence can be liberating for one's imagination because while living in such a state, one can still dream, attempt to see into the future, and anticipate what the future holds without allowing that future to cloud the present. For Louisa, who reclaims her corner of solitude and dreaming in front of the fire, her strong and healthy relationships with children and imaginative reading represent the ideal house of the future, one that she, as well as Dickens's readers, can look forward to even if it is never fully realized. Louisa's interior journey throughout *Hard Times* kept itself rooted in love of others, and this love is what provided her with the means for reintegration, a state that may seem more open-ended than resolved, but one

that allows her to love and be loved, which for both Dickens and Bachelard is the most important phenomenological experience in life.

For Bachelard, “[c]onsciousness of being at peace in one’s corner produces a sense of immobility” (156). As we accept this immobility, then, the resulting refuge provides not only the necessary space for our imaginations to animate but a sense of safety while allowing ourselves to do so. In a letter to John Forster, describing his initial plans for *Household Words*, Dickens writes, “I want to suppose a certain SHADOW, which may go into any place, by sunlight, moonlight, starlight, firelight, candlelight, and be in all homes, and all nooks and corners, and be supposed to be cognisant of everything, and go everywhere, without the least difficulty” (*Letters of Charles Dickens* 621). Hoping to act as a benevolent observer for his audience, Dickens visualized a periodical that would give comfort and wisdom. Just as the shadows in a room become a refuge for Louisa Gradgrind, the words in Dickens’s periodical become shadows that provide Dickens’s readers with walls of safety allowing them to empathize with the characters in *Hard Times*.

Bachelard describes words as “little houses, each with its cellar and garret. Common-sense lives on the ground floor. ... To go upstairs in the word house is to withdraw, step by step; while to go down to the cellar is to dream, it is losing oneself in the distant corridors of an obscure etymology, looking for treasures that cannot be found in words” (166). As readers encounter the words of *Hard Times*, Dickens invites them to search for the “treasures” beyond the words. In his introduction to *Household Words*, Dickens wants to give his audience reprieve from the harsh realities of life in the industrial age through household reading, “to teach the hardest workers at this whirling wheel of toil, that their lot is not necessarily a moody, brutal fact, excluded from the sympathies and graces of imagination; to bring the greater and the lesser

in degree, together, upon that wide field, and mutually dispose them to a better acquaintance and a kinder understanding” (1). *Household Words* serves as the “shadow” that enables readers to empathize with Louisa while experiencing the arc of her emotional journey; as Louisa’s story unfolds, readers’ potential selves are then able to emerge from the periodical’s “corners,” making Louisa a model of hope for a flourishing interior life.

Notes

¹ In the preface to volume 7 of *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, the editors point out that *Hard Times*’s “opening chapters, contrasting ‘Fact’ with ‘Fancy’, echo the ‘Preliminary Address’ which had introduced *Household Words* in 1850; the story as a whole exposes the dangers of a gulf between social classes and the need, especially in education and industry, for imaginative sympathy” (ix).

² See Phegley’s work on “Family Magazines,” including Dickens’s periodicals *Household Words* and *All the Year Round*. She argues, “It was, perhaps, the genre of the family magazine that most changed the periodical publishing industry and that most readily met the needs of the entire sweep of the Victorian reading public: from the servant and the factory worker to the clerk and the shop girl, from the middle-class housewife and the business entrepreneur to the woman author and the clergyman” (292).

³ Armstrong also analyzes spatial theories of Victorian novels beginning with Kant and including Bachelard.

⁴ Burdett’s chapter on “Emotions” explores the history of the word “emotion” as well as the Victorians’ emotional values.

⁵ Much of the recent research done on Victorian literature includes the subject of affect. In her introduction to *The Feeling of Reading*, Ablow argues, “Together, these essays demonstrate that

in the mid- to late nineteenth century, reading was commonly regarded as at least as valuable as an affective experience as it was as a way to convey information or increase understanding” (2). Parkins, in “Dickens and Affect,” explores “aspects of Dickens’s complex repertoire of feelings at the level of lived experience, or what we might call Dickens’s phenomenology of affect” (471).

⁶ As John Drew notes in *Dickens the Journalist*, “Elsewhere in his writing Dickens’s complex inter-association of light and shade indicates that he does not automatically equate shadow with approaching doom” (107).

⁷ Falke’s book builds on and extends Felski’s work, *Uses of Literature*. See also Falke’s article, “On the Morality of Immoral Fiction: Reading Newgate Novels, 1830–1848,” which discusses the nineteenth-century debate on reading practices involving immoral characters. Keen’s book, *Empathy and the Novel*, endeavors “to bring psychology, philosophy, and narrative theory to bear upon the matter of how, if at all, human beings can learn empathy from novels” (35).

⁸ Kidder’s article also extends Nussbaum’s book, showing that “the dissatisfaction with the limits of utilitarian accounts of human reason has roots in a spiritual longing” and that she has “shown that for Dickens, the resistance to utilitarianism is articulated largely in Christian terms” (424).

⁹ Hughes and Lund remind us that “the more important point for the Victorian audience here, however, was that neither home, the one restored or the one created, had come easily or quickly in this literary experience. Victorians may have idolized the hearth, but their best portrayals emphasized how tenuous it was and how much time was involved in attaining it” (43).

Works Cited

Ablow, Rachel. “Introduction.” *The Feeling of Reading: Affective Experience & Victorian Literature*, edited by Rachel Ablow, University of Michigan Press, 2010, pp. 1-10.

- Armstrong, Isobel. "Theories of Space and the Nineteenth-Century Novel." *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, vol. 17, 2013, pp. 1-21.
- Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space*. Penguin Classics, 2014.
- Burdett, Carolyn. "Emotions." *The Oxford Handbook of Victorian Literary Culture*, edited by Juliet John, Oxford University Press, 2016, pp. 580-97.
- Cameron, Lauren. "Interiors and Interiorities: Architectural Understandings of the Mind in *Hard Times*." *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, vol. 35, no. 1, 2013, pp. 65-79.
- Dickens, Charles. *Hard Times*. Penguin Classics, 2003.
- . "A Preliminary Word." *Household Words*. 30 Mar. 1850, pp. 1-2.
- . *The Letters of Charles Dickens: Volume Five: 1847-1849*. Edited by Graham Storey and K. J. Fielding, Clarendon Press, 1981.
- . *The Letters of Charles Dickens: Volume Seven: 1847-1849*. Edited by Madeline House, Graham Storey, and K. J. Fielding, Clarendon Press, 1993.
- Drew, John. *Dickens the Journalist*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.
- . "2011 Michael Wolff Lecture: An Uncommercial Proposition?: At Work on *Household Words* and *All the Year Round*." *Victorian Periodicals Review*, vol. 46, no. 3, 2013, pp. 291-316.
- Falke, Cassandra. "On the Morality of Immoral Fiction: Reading Newgate Novels, 1830–1848." *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, vol. 38, no. 3, 2016, pp. 183-93.
- . *The Phenomenology of Love and Reading*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016.
- Felski, Rita. *Uses of Literature*. John Wiley & Sons, 2008.
- Gallagher, Catherine. "Family and Society in *Hard Times*." *David Copperfield and Hard Times: Charles Dickens*, edited by John Peck, Macmillan Press, 1995, pp. 171-96.

- Hughes, Linda K. and Michael Lund. *The Victorian Serial*. The University Press of Virginia, 1991.
- Keen, Suzanne. *Empathy and the Novel*. Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Kidder, Paulette. "Martha Nussbaum on Dickens's *Hard Times*." *Philosophy and Literature*, vol. 33, 2009, pp. 417-26.
- Matus, Jill L. "'Secrets of the Heart': Emotion, Narration, and Imaginary Minds in *Hard Times* and *Mary Barton*." *English Language Notes*, vol. 48, no. 1, 2010, pp. 11-25.
- Nussbaum, Martha. *Poetic Justice*. Beacon Press, 1995.
- Parkins, Wendy. "Dickens and Affect." *The Oxford Handbook of Charles Dickens*, edited by Robert L. Patten, John O. Jordan, and Catherine Waters. Oxford University Press, 2018, pp. 468-83.
- Phegley, Jennifer. "Family Magazines." *The Routledge Handbook to Nineteenth-Century British Periodicals and Newspapers*, edited by Andrew King, Alexis Easley, and John Morton. Routledge, 2016, pp. 276-92.
- Thomas, Deborah A. *Hard Times: A Fable of Fragmentation and Wholeness*. Twayne Publishers, 1997.
- Waters, Catherine. "Domesticity." *Charles Dickens in Context*, edited by Sally Ledger and Holly Furneaux. Cambridge University Press, 2011, pp. 350-7.