

# ANIMAL AND FLOWER SYMBOLS IN DICKENS'S *HARD TIMES*

By

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It is a striking feature of *Hard Times* that the novel begins with the question of how to define a *horse*, just as E. M. Forster's novel *The Longest Journey* begins with the philosophical words: "The cow is there." Indeed, the symbols of animals, as well as those of flowers, frequently appear, and are sustained throughout the novel. I think that Dickens's sustenance of these symbols in the novel is far more significant than is generally supposed because he offers us two incompatible types of characters by presenting the fundamentally different interpretations of these symbols.

Dickens's way of introducing animal and flower symbols is skillful. The reader first encounters these symbols in the scene of the Gradgrind school, where Mr. Thomas Gradgrind, an "eminently practical" gentleman, makes "Girl number twenty" (Sissy Jupe) define a *horse*. Though she and her father belong to Mr. Sleary's travelling (horse-riding) circus and though she has been brought up among a lot of horses, she cannot answer him at all. Bitzer defines a horse very well, using the dictionary's definition. Mr. Gradgrind seems contented with this model pupil's definition. Then, a government officer steps forth and asks the pupils whether they would "paper a room with representations of horses" (C. Dickens, *Hard Times*, in Norton Critical Editions, ed. G. Ford and S. Monod, New York, 1966, pp. 2-4. All later page references are to this same work.) To this question one half of the children answer in the affirmative but he forces them to answer in the negative. Mr. Gradgrind is also in the same opinion as his companion. It seems to both gentlemen unreasonable to have the representation of horses on the wall.

Now, this government gentleman asks the children whether they would use "a carpet having a representation of flowers upon it." Sissy is one of "a few feeble stragglers [who] said Yes," because she is "very fond of flowers." Then, she is asked why she would "put tables and chairs upon them, and have people walking over them with heavy boots." Sissy's answer is: "It wouldn't hurt them, sir. They wouldn't crush and wither if you please, sir. They would be the pictures of what was very pretty and pleasant, and I would fancy—" She is interrupted by the gentleman's cry: "Ay, ay, ay! But you mustn't fancy" (p. 5).

Such a question-and-answer seems very important because it reveals the

differences in the philosophical and moral standpoints both of Mr. Gradgrind (and his friend) and Sissy Jupe. It suggests to me that a horse and a flower here have two kinds of meanings respectively : one is denotative and the other is connotative or symbolical. Mr. Gradgrind's (and his companion's) inability to understand the latter meaning is undisputed ; he would say with his companion : "What is called Taste, is only another name for Fact" (p. 5). He can only understand the objects by facts and formula, definition and calculation. In this point, he is just like Mr. Josiah Bounderby of Coketown, a "banker, merchant, [and] manufacturer" (p. 11), who would rather lay down "Turkey carpets on the floors" to "improve the mills themselves" (p. 96) than to use the carpets having representations of flowers and horses (pp. 4-5), and who would, therefore, prefer "to grow cabbages in the flower-garden" in front of his country house instead of growing a lot of pretty roses (p. 128).

To begin with flower symbols : it may be noted that rose symbols recur at the critical moments of two characters, Stephen Blackpool and Tom Gradgrind (Mr. Gradgrind's son). First, in Stephen's case, a rose symbol is split into two parts, that is, flowers and thorns. Dickens comments : it is said that "every life has its roses and thorns ; there seemed, however, to have been a misadventure or mistake in Stephen's case," whereby someone else had become the possessor of his roses, and he had become the possessor of that person's thorns, in addition to his own. "He had known, to use his words, a peck of trouble" (p. 49). No doubt the author here means "happiness" by the roses and "unhappiness" by the thorns. Stephen is the most unhappy character in the novel ; baffled by his drunken, dissolute wife, sent to Coventry by Slackbridge and his fellow weavers, discharged by Mr. Bounderby, and suspected of the bank robbery, he fell into the old coal pit (the Old Hell Shaft), and died. Secondly, in Tom's case, he sits in Mr. Bounderby's rose-garden, "plucking buds and picking them to pieces"(p. 134), and "chewing rosebuds" (p. 136). Now Tom is in a desperate and uneasy state of mind immediately after he robbed Mr. Bounderby's bank, while the robber has been pursued persistently by Mr. Bounderby.

In both cases, the roses do not serve Tom and Stephen as life symbols because, I suppose, both characters do not comprehend the symbolic meaning of the roses.

As for the animal symbols, I think that they are more important than the flower symbols because the former are more directly related in the novel to philosophical and moral standpoints of the characters, as partly mentioned above. It is the greatest pleasure of Mr. Bounderby to look out from over his "red brick castle" (with "no graceful little adornment," p. 97) and Coketown ("a triumph of fact"), where "the piston of the steam-engine" works "monot-

onously up and down like the head of *an elephant* in a state of melancholy madness" (p. 17; italics mine). The simile or metaphor of an elephant usually appears with the "Smoke-serpents" (p. 53), tall chimneys like "Towers of Babel" (p. 62) — these symbols may be called the death symbols in the novel, which kill all the joys and wonders of the sensitive, imaginative Coketown people (p. 38).

The most vital and significant are the symbols of horses and dogs. The horses are to Sissy something more than a mere definition and demonstration. In other words, they are developed into the symbols of her imaginative and sympathetic life beyond a mechanical, utilitarian "education of reason"—the reason which is "the only faculty to which education should be addressed" (p. 14). It is necessary to remember that Sissy, the backward pupil (who is said to need the "infinite grinding at the mill of knowledge," p. 43) at the Gradgrind school (where the "Good Samaritan" is taught to be "a Bad Economist," p. 164), belonged earlier to Mr. Sleary's horse-riding circus, and that her father (who deserted her) was a clown to "make the people laugh" (p. 45). Though she herself is taken care of, Sissy has acted as if she were a savior of the Gradgrind family in Stone Lodge, which is described as a great square, calculated, well-balanced, and proved house (p. 8), and which is compared to a "jail" (p. 103).

The dogs may not be neglected. It is Merrylegs, Sissy's father's faithful dog, that "Mr. Sleary's Canine Philosophy" — the philosophy of love, sharply contrasted with Mr. Gradgrind's and Bitzer's philosophy of "self-interest" (pp. 217-219)—has been firmly based upon (pp. 222, 242). It is very interesting to see Mr. Sleary's horse and dog corner Bitzer, an "extremely clear-headed" model pupil at the school (p. 88), who wants to arrest Tom, the bank robber, and get a better position in Mr. Bounderby's Coketown Bank on the principle of "the nicest and coldest calculation" (p. 88), and on the principle of self-interest and reason.

As has been observed above, the animals and flowers in *Hard Times* play an important role in the development of the characterization, plot, and setting of the novel. It may be noted that no animals nor any flowers become the symbols of human love and vitality as long as their true meanings are not really understood by the characters. This explains the reason why the horses, dogs, and flowers provide Mr. Sleary and Sissy with the sources of life, while the same ones suggest to Mr. Gradgrind (while he was confined in the narrow region of his own mechanical philosophy), Mr. Bounderby, and Bitzer, something to disturb and baffle their own scheme. To the men of fact, only the turkeys, cabbages, mad elephants, and smoke-serpents are the sources of their cold pride, excessive calculation, statistics, avarice, inhumanity, and false pretense. The fundamental differences in the characters' interpretations of

the animal and flower symbols suggest to me a basic incompatibility of the temperaments, moral and philosophical views of these two types of characters, described by Dickens in the novel.

Lastly the fact that the novel almost begins with the discussion of a *horse* (how to define it) and ends with a *horse* (at the end of the novel, a horse is represented as a more concrete, real one) thwarting Bitzer's selfish scheme, and that horses belong to Mr. Sleary's circus, sharply contrasted with those engine-elephants and smoke-snakes that belong to Mr. Bounderby's factories in Coketown, seems to reveal Dickens's sympathetic attitude towards a symbolic horse (not a defined one) in his *Hard Times*.

### 要 約

動物と花の象徴が、*Hard Times* において終始一貫して用いられていることに注目して、これらの象徴が、小説の登場人物、背景、筋の展開に密接な関係があることを指摘すると同時に、これら動物や花のもつ浅薄な表面的な物質的な意味しか理解出来ない人物たちと違って、これら象徴の美的価値を洞察し、そこに愛と生命の原理を認め得る人物たちには、悲惨な社会の中にも、常に救いの光明が残っていることを、象徴的に示唆することが、作者 Dickens の意図であることを明らかにした。