

Girl number 20



**ASSIGN
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The 19th century witnessed the beginning of queen Victoria's reign, the industrial revolution, realism as literary movement and realistic novels among other. When we refer to realistic novels, we are not talking about novels being a " reality" but instead we refer to the creation of fictional stories and characters that are very much like real life people and situations. In other words, authors wrote their novels to criticize social unfairness, poverty, struggles, health issues and so forth, as a way to reflect the " truth" just as it was, and it all was possible because their stories and characters were believable.

Charles Dickens was one of the most influential writers of the time, his novel " Hard Times", as the rest of his works, is vivid examples of what realistic novels would be like. He portrays his judgement towards society in a very comprehensible and even entertaining way, providing the reader an idea of the time and era he was living in. Furthermore, he lets readers identify with the situation and characters of the story, reflecting through the narrator his social perspectives of the time. Regarding the novel Hard Times, there are several issues and characters we could point out, such as progress, social limitations, poverty, development, educational patterns of the time, Mr. Bounderby, Mr. Gradgrind, Louisa, Tom, Cecilia Jupe (Sissy), Mr. Harthouse, Stephen Blackpool among others.

However, the one we identified the most with, was " Girl Number 20" or Cecilia Jupe (Sissy). Through out the whole story, Dickens shows her as an innocent, unprotected and abandoned child, but at the same time she becomes one of the most important and influential characters of the story. In addition, the author redefines, in a way, the role women had at the time, by

giving Sissy the power to be herself and the power to do whatever she thought was right. In order to present Cecilia Jupe as the heroine of the story, we will have to consider her background, being it, the cornerstone of the principles she will use for the rest of her life. Having mentioned this, we will begin by referring to the way Dickens gave form to Sissy's childhood. A motherless child, who was raised by her loving and strange father. Even though her father was a sad and a depressed man, Sissy discovered how to please him by being more than a daughter, a caring friend; the author showed it in this quote: And you were his comfort through everything? 'She nodded, with the tears rolling down her face.

' I hope so, and father said I was. It was because he grew so scared and trembling, and because he felt himself to be a poor, weak, ignorant, helpless man (those used to be his words), that he wanted me so much to know a great deal and be different from him. I used to read to him to cheer his courage, and he was very fond of that. p. 51) This is one of the reasons for us to give Sissy the heroic part in the story, though she made simple gestures, she made her father happy no matter what situation he was going through. It is easy to understand Sissy's fairytale life, due to all the elements that surrounded her during her childhood: Her mother a dancer, her father a clown, her readings, most of them fantastic, but nourishing at the same time for both of them, here is one of the moments where she expressed her testimony: " Your mother? ' ' Father says she was quite a scholar. She died when I was born.

She was;' Sissy made the terrible communication nervously; ' she was a dancer... " Father's a;' Sissy whispered the awful word; ' a clown. ' ' To make

the people laugh?’ said Louisa, with a nod of intelligence. ‘Yes. But they wouldn’t laugh sometimes, and then father cried”...” 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. ‘ ‘ And he liked them?’ said Louisa, with her searching gaze on Sissy all this time. ‘O very much! They kept him, many times, from what did him real harm. And often and often of a night, he used 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. ” (Pp. 50-51) Nevertheless, all the elements shown above were used by Dickens as tools in order for us to understand even more Sissy’s personality and character, highlighting her creativity and optimism when facing difficult times. Dickens shows us that her creative, optimistic and attentive attitude was not only present when she was around her father but also through out the rest of her life, even so, most people did not see it as a rilliant attitude; instead they labeled her as an uneducated, an abstract and an unintelligent person.

However, the author uses this attitude to demonstrate that life is not only made out of facts but also of reality, logic and common sense. This situation is well illustrated in the following quote: ‘ Girl number twenty,’ said the gentleman, smiling in the calm strength of knowledge. Sissy blushed, and stood up. ‘ So you would carpet your room- or your husband’s room, if you were a grown woman, and had a husband- with representations of flowers, would you,’ said the gentleman. Why would you?’ ‘ If you please, sir, I am very fond of flowers,’ returned the girl. ‘ And is that why you would put

tables and chairs upon them, and have people walking over them with heavy boots? ' ' 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-' ' Ay, ay, ay! But you mustn't fancy,' cried the gentleman, quite elated by coming so happily to his point. ' That's it! You are never to fancy. ' ' You are not, Cecilia Jupe,' Thomas Gradgrind solemnly repeated, ' to do anything of that kind. ' Fact, fact, fact! ' said the gentleman. And ' Fact, fact, fact! ' repeated Thomas Gradgrind. ' You are to be in all things regulated and governed,' said the gentleman, ' by fact. " (p.

10) Through this lines Dickens was trying to show how reasonable Sissy was in comparison to other characters, she knew that flowers were just an image that people could delight in and not just a simple definition. In addition, there is another important aspect of Sissy's life which we find interesting to note: her social awareness. A good example to prove this is the following quote: "... But today, for instance, Mr M'Choakumchild was explaining to us about Natural Prosperity. ' ' National, I think it must have been,' observed Louisa. ' Yes, it was. - But isn't it the same? ' she timidly asked. ' You had better say, National, as he said so,' returned Louisa, with her dry reserve. ' National Prosperity. And he said, Now, this schoolroom is a Nation. And in this nation, there are fifty millions of money. Isn't this a prosperous nation? Girl number twenty, isn't this a prosperous nation, and a'n't you in a thriving state? ' ' What did you say? ' asked Louisa.

‘ Miss Louisa, I said I didn’t know. I thought I couldn’t know whether it was a prosperous nation or not, and whether I was in a thriving state or not, unless I knew who had got the money, and whether any of it was mine. But that had nothing to do with it. It was not in the figures at all,’ said Sissy, wiping her eyes....

” (p. 48) Through this quote, Dickens gave us a fantastic explanation of his thoughts on the economy of the time through Sissy’s opinion; in other words, he was emphasizing his ideal economical pattern for society: everyone having an equal amount of richness in order to be a prosperous nation. One of the remarkable things about Sissy is that throughout the whole story, Dickens presents her as a unique girl with many exceptional traits, for instance, her loyalty and perseverance towards her father’s return, her compassion and attentive spirit towards the Gradgrind family, her respect for others’ opinions and the one thing that make her the heroine of the story: her outstanding personality. Nevertheless, there are several times when the author mentions that just like any human being, Sissy doubted herself and at the same time wished to be someone else (Louisa). Dickens expressed it clearly on this extract: ‘ It would be a fine thing to be you, Miss Louisa! ’ she said, one night, when Louisa had endeavored to make her perplexities for next day something clearer to her. ‘ Do you think so? ’ ‘ I should know so much, Miss Louisa. All that is difficult to me now, would be so easy then’”... ‘ Have I always hated you so much? ’ ‘ I hope not, for I have always loved you, and have always wished that you should know it.

But you changed to me a little, shortly before you left home. Not that I wondered at it. You knew so much, and I knew so little, and it was so natural

in many ways, going as you were among other friends, that I had nothing to complain of, and was not at all hurt. ” (Pp. 48, 182-183) At the same time, letting aside her desires to be like someone else, Cecilia did not let such a thing bring her down, instead she stood up and defended her territory and her “ own”, becoming courageous enough to confront and to send away Louisa’s suitor who stood against everything that was right. The following quote reflects it: ‘ Mr Harthouse,’ returned Sissy, with a blending of gentleness and steadiness that quite defeated him, and with a simple confidence in his being bound to do what she required, that held him at a singular disadvantage, ‘ the only reparation that remains with you, is to leave here immediately and finally. I am quite sure that you can mitigate in no other way the wrong and harm you have done.

I am quite sure that it is the only compensation you have left it in your power to make. I do not say that it is much, or that it is enough; but it is something, and it is necessary. Therefore, though without any other authority than I have given you, and even without the knowledge of any other person than yourself and myself, I ask you to depart from this place tonight, under an obligation never to return to it. ” (Pp. 188-189). Nonetheless, this was not the only an unselfish and brave act she performed; the previous action triggered the beginning of Sissy Jupe as the care-taker and the protector of the Gradgrind family that even the father came to a place where he recognized Cecilia’s help, not only towards him but also towards his wife and son; he finally accepted the fact that without Sissy’s presence they would have succumbed. In the following quote Dickens proves that at last “ Girl Number

20”, the least expected to have the solution to all of the Gradgrind’s problems, became the moral and the grand victor of the story after all.

Sissy has effected it, father. ’ He raised his eyes to where she stood, like a good fairy in his house, and said in a tone of softened gratitude and grateful kindness, ’ It is always you, my child! ” (p. 222) Lastly, as the story ends our heroine is all we expected her to be, starting by being a great and faithful daughter, a help in time of need for those who surrounded her, and last but not least a good wife, a happy mother and a wonderful friend to her “ humbler fellow-creatures”. 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,- did Louisa see these things of herself? ” (p. 238) As a conclusion, we dare to say that Dickens was the realist novelist far excellence; throughout the whole novel he expressed his criticism in a very audible voice, illustrating his thoughts and opinions on several social concerns of his time. Additionally, he created a story and characters that were believable due to their resemblance with the real world; he made the reader understand that he was not making the situations up, but he was showing real common life. Nevertheless, it seems as if Dickens

broke the pattern with Cecilia Jupe, when giving her the heroic part of the story and at the same time made her as an example of genuineness, boldness and bravery, even when her humble background, her eccentric education and all those things made her the contrary of what a Victorian Lady should be like.

All situations she went through were against the idea of her being the heroine of the story, but ironically, Dickens chose her as if taking her from another world and inserting her into Victorian times, in order to make his point clear, which was: the role of the woman in a society like his.

References: Dickens, C. (1854). *Hard Times*. London, England: Editorial Matter.