

Friend or Foe (or Family)

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Things come and go. We make friends, we make enemies, we lose friends, and our enemies die. But some things will never change. We can run and run, become tired, and then continue running, but our family will never disappear no matter where and for how long we run. As the fundamental group in society is the family, the successes and failures of this group, consisting of the husband, the wife, and their children, is a crucial determinant of the health of society. The foundation of the family can be found in the relationships that exist between husband and wife, and parent and child. These relationships are usually the closest and most enduring relationships that an individual will encounter in his or her lifetime. Unfortunately, these relationships are seldom perfect. Many problems that exist are out of our control for we do not get to choose our parents and the limited choice we have in choosing a mate is often no better than the choice of parents. The plethora of shaky relationships found in *Hard Times* by Charles Dickens presents an excellent opportunity for the investigation of the causes and possible solutions to this problem.

The husband and wife form the foundations of the family, and the success of this relationship largely determines the success of the family. For example, the failure of the Gradgrind family to amount to much can be traced back to the relationship between Mr. Gradgrind and Mrs. Gradgrind. This Gradgrind relationship was based on the precarious foundation created by Gradgrind's philosophy of facts and only facts. Emotions such as love were suppressed so that everything was handled like an ordinary business transaction between two merchants. Even the death of Mrs. Gradgrind did not cause Gradgrind to change his ways as shown when Gradgrind "buried her in a businesslike manner" (p. 205). However, Mr. Gradgrind was not the only one at fault. A relationship consists of two people, and in this relationship Mrs. Gradgrind was also at fault for her passive support of her husband. Mrs. Gradgrind only repeated her husband's words, as if she had no opinions of her own. Perhaps it was due to her lack of intelligence. She said to her children, "I really do wish that I had never had a family, and then you would have known what it was to do without me!" (p. 61). The disparity between the thoughtful, but perhaps misguided, Gradgrind and his no-brained wife may have contributed to the problem. Mr. and Mrs. Gradgrind did not have equal roles in this relationship, with Mr. Gradgrind dominating with his philosophies. A good and successful relationship needs equal partners, as one person cannot possibly manage a two person relationship.

While a mental flaw held the Gradgrind relationship to an inelastic wall, more tangible and physical flaws in an individual's character frequently plague spousal relationships. Stephen Blackpool and his wife were troubled by

each other's character flaws, leading to an extremely tumultuous relationship. Mrs. Blackpool had several obvious flaws, including her propensity for liquor and her tendency to sell her husband's furniture. Stephen could only look upon her with disgust, describing his wife as, "a creature so foul to look at, in her tatters, stains, and splashes, but so much fouler than that in her moral infamy, that it was a shameful thing even to see her" (p. 74). However, the entire fault of any two person relationship can never be blamed on one person alone. In this case, Stephen's wife was not the only stimulus of the uncontrollable reaction. Stephen, though he was "not a unkind husband to her" (p. 78), provided several ingredients to fuel the reaction. His social standing as a lowly worker guaranteed his destitution and helplessness, trapping him in this relationship. Although Stephen cannot be blamed for things beyond his control, the blame must fall on someone somewhere. Perhaps it should fall on society and the individuals who constitute it. It was society who placed Stephen on the lowest rungs, it was society that designed laws, and it was laws that prevented Stephen from freeing himself with a divorce. Sometimes relationships between two persons involve more than two persons and are therefore difficult to control.

Both the Gradgrind and Blackpool marriages failed during the marriages due to various flaws in the individuals involved. But sometimes a marriage is doomed to fail from the start. The marriage of Louisa and Bounderby is an example of a marriage that failed from the incompatibility of the persons involved. "She never cared for old Bounderby" (p. 138), leading one to believe that this marriage should never have taken place. It was partly Louisa's attitude of "What does it matter?" (p. 105), that led her into accepting Bounderby's marriage proposal. Unlike the cracks that weakened the foundation of the Gradgrind marriage, the foundations for the marriage between Louisa and Bounderby never existed. Louisa confessed to her father, "I never made a pretence to him or you that I loved him. I knew, and, Father, you knew, and he knew, that I never did" (p. 217). The causes of this marriage, and therefore its failure, were mainly external. Louisa's indifference stemmed from her education, so in part, her acceptance to Bounderby's proposal came as a result of a lifetime listening to the Gradgrind philosophy, which allowed for no emotions. Gradgrind said to his daughter Louisa:

"You have been so well trained, and you do, I am happy to say, so much justice to the education you have received, that I have perfect confidence in your good sense. You are not impulsive, you are not romantic, you are accustomed to view everything from the strong dispassionate ground of reason and calculation." (p. 102)

Besides the influence of Gradgrind on this marriage, Louisa's brother Tom also pushed Louisa toward accepting the unfavorable marriage on behalf of Tom. The other participant in the marriage, Bounderby, also can be faulted for his part in the marriage. Loving Louisa meant less to Bounderby than the image that it would bring him to have a young

and beautiful wife. Gradgrind admitted, "Now 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" (p. 103). Without a solid foundation and without the desire to make the marriage last, this marriage had no chance of succeeding.

Successful marriages are rare due to the many problems that can occur from the fault of one, both, or neither party involved. Characteristics of successful marriages can be derived from the many unsuccessful marriages seen throughout the book. As there was little or no love shown between the Gradgrinds, Blackpools, and Bounderbys, probably one necessary characteristic in a good marriage is love. Sissy Jupe's parents perhaps showed the most love, having the most successful marriage in the novel. When Louisa asked if Mr. Jupe loved his wife, Sissy replied, "Oh yes! As dearly as he loves me. Father loved me, first, for her sake" (p. 65). Even though love may be a prerequisite for a successful marriage, there are other aspects that can significantly influence a marriage. The compatibility between the two individuals is a critical determinant as shown by the differences in beliefs, characters, and ages between the Gradgrinds, Blackpools, and Bounderbys. Mrs. Sparsit confirmed a possible cause of the Bounderby woes when she said, "I inferred, from its being so miserable a marriage, that it was probably an unequal one in point of years" (p. 79). The rarity of successful marriages makes them a precious commodity to be treasured.

The relationship between parent and child is another extremely important relationship in the family. Each one of us is at one time a child, and it is the time when we are children that we need to be nurtured the most. In the Gradgrind family, the relationship between Mr. Gradgrind and his children failed to nurture the children to their full potential. Similar to Gradgrind's other relationships, his children were raised with Gradgrind's rigid philosophy. This is another example of the failure of one-sided relationships. It was a one-sided relationship, as Gradgrind discouraged his children from thinking. Gradgrind acknowledged, "I am sensible that it may not have been a part of my system to invite any confidence of that kind" (p. 221). Tom described his home as a "Jaundiced Jail" (p. 58). Jaundiced, meaning prejudiced or unfriendly, is an accurate description of the Gradgrind home. The children are prejudiced toward facts and taught to be only friends with the facts. While Gradgrind did not lack love for his children and had "meant to do right" (p. 221), the best of intentions could not make up for flaws in his thinking and ideas. The result of the Gradgrind philosophy manifested itself in the children. The selfish, dishonest, and heartless Tom, who blamed someone else for his crime, and the depressed Louisa, who had no chance of a happy life, were the product of a not incompetent but inflexible father.

Another example of a loving parent with a failing relationship is Mrs. Pegler and Bounderby. In this case, it was the child, Bounderby, that controlled the one-sided relationship. Bounderby put the humble image that he would have others perceive of him before his mother, by paying Mrs. Pegler to stay away from him, which Mrs. Pegler gladly did.

“And I’ll give you to know, sir—for this my dear boy won’t—that though his mother kept but a little village shop, he never forgot her, but pensioned me on thirty pound a year— more than I want, for I put by out of it—only making the condition that I was to keep down in my own part, and make no boasts about him, and not trouble him. And I never have, except with looking at him once a year, when he has never knowed it.” (pp. 257-258)

The problem lay in a character flaw of Bounderby that impelled him to feel humble. Mrs. Pegler’s love for Bounderby and Bounderby’s love for himself and his image ruined the relationship. This idea of one’s image ruining a relationship can also be seen in the Jupe family between Mr. Jupe and Sissy. As in the other parent-child relationships, there was not a lack of love: “Because those two were one. Because they were never asunder. Because, up to this time, he seemed to dote upon her” (p. 41). However, with Mr. Jupe seeing himself as a failure, he ran away rather than have Sissy see him disgraced. “At last poor Father said that...he was a shame and disgrace, and I should have done better without him all along” (p. 68), said Sissy. While it is strange that Mr. Jupe would be “A man so fond of his daughter that he runs away from her!” (p. 40), it is not unlike the cause of separation between Bounderby and Mrs. Pegler. Both Bounderby and Jupe were concerned with their image and the way society perceived them. Similar to other relationships, individuals are affected by society and by factors that may not be completely controllable.

Comparing the two types of family relationships, one finds that the bond and love is generally stronger between parents and children than between husbands and wives. Yet, regardless of the degree of love involved, both types of relationships have recurring problems as seen through the lives of the characters of this novel. If love is not the major problem in these relationships, then perhaps it is the one-sidedness that contributes the most to the failures. With only one person participating, there is twice the chance that some weakness or flaw will take over the relationship. These weaknesses that can cause problems come from an individual’s character, an individual’s mind, and an individual’s environment. Character flaws, such as Bounderby’s egotism, are difficult to change. Flaws in thinking such as Gradgrind and his philosophy also require much work to change. And other factors influencing an individual, originating from society and one’s environment, can never be eliminated. As long as we are imperfect humans living in an imperfect world, problems will be inevitable and will occur at every level of society from the

slave to the master. Perhaps Bitzer was the most practical character in the novel. By believing that wives and families stemmed from improvidence and by shutting his mother in a workhouse, Bitzer faced none of the family problems that tormented the other characters. Although Dickens may have exaggerated the problems to prove his point, problems certainly exist outside the novel's characters in the real world. Maybe humans are not sociable creatures and were not meant to live with others. Or it may be a part of the human experience to live and deal with these problems. Whether as friend or as foe, we have to live with each other as a family.