Hard Times

Chapter 4

# Mr Bounderby

The text is an extract from the fourth chapter of Charles Dickens’ “Hard Times”, a novel written in 1854 that aims at showing the reader a critical portrait of the English society of that time. The principle on which it is based is utilitarianism, a philosophy theorised by Jeremy Bentham that perfectly reflects the industrial, practical and pragmatic mentality of the nineteenth century’s lower middle class.

Right from the title of the extract, the reader might get some expectations about the content of the text. Indeed it is a name of a man (“Mr Bounderby”) and it contains the word “bounder”, which means “a man who doesn’t behave well” or “a man who doesn’t like women”. Thus, the reader might expect the text to be the characterisation of Mr Bounderby and he or she may also wonder why the author decided to associate with this man the word “bounder”, which helps to create a negative impression about the character.

The extract begins with a question (“who was Mr Bounderby?”), which is preceded by a negation that has the function to increase and to procrastinate the reader’s curiosity about the main character’s identity. Then the characterisation starts: from the first lines the reader understands he is the “bosom friend” of Mr Gradgrind, “as a man perfectly devoid of sentiment can approach that spiritual relationship towards another man perfectly devoid of sentiment”. The two Messrs are both compared to very selfish men, who don’t feel any sentiment and are therefore unfit to take part in a sentimental relationship such as friendship. There is therefore a big contradiction, which is very well explained by the writer in the following lines: the two characters are at the same time “near” (because of their common selfish attitude and of their lack of sentiment) and “far off” (it is indeed unlikely to people like that to be friends and therefore to feel affection for each other). This passage aims at creating doubts into the reader’s mind. Indeed, the writer goes on with his technique and leaves the reader’s curiosity unsatisfied, giving him or her only contradictory and partial information.

The second paragraph contains the physical description of Mr Bounderby and some information about his social background, his laugh, his voice, his attitude. As the writer tells, he is a rich man, who can be considered as the symbol of the triumph of the middle class, as the triumph of fact. Indeed, Dickens associates with him very practical works, that imply a utilitarian mind (“banker, merchant, manufacturer, and what not”). Even his laugh and his overall physical appearance are associated with something material. Indeed, his laugh is “metallic” and he seems to be “made up of a coarse material, which seemed to have been stretched to make so much of him”. The word “coarse” contributes to create a very negative and low portrait of the character who, despite his economic welfare, is described as a man of “old ignorance and old poverty”. Another aspect of Mr Bounderby’s attitude is his vanity, which is very well conveyed through the metaphor that sees him as an “inflated balloon”, an image that mixes together both the idea of his great physique and big ego. As regards his voice, it is metaphorically compared to a “speaking trumpet”. All these aspects contribute to create an exaggerated portrait of the character, an image that mixes together pathos and grotesque through the use of hyperboles and exaggerated adjectives and metaphors. Moreover, the anaphora of the word “man” contributes to create a sense of boredom and repetitiveness that underline the lack of creativity and sentiment that characterises Mr Bounderby’s life.

The word “old” is also repeated in the third paragraph, referring to the fact that the character looks older than what she is, even if he is a bit younger than his “eminently practical friend” (Ma Gradgrind). The description goes on in an atmosphere of total squalor and negativity: he hasn’t got much hair and “that what was left , all standing up in disorder, was in that condition from being constantly blown about by his windy boastfulness”. The man is again described as a vainglorious “balloon”, with the aim to fix into the reader’s mind this aspect of this attitude through the image of wind and through the rhetorical devices of hyperbole, irony and exaggeration.2

In the fourth paragraph a place is introduced: the “formal drawing-room of Stone Lodge”. The word “formal” again underlines the total lack of creativity and freedom in the character’s life; this aspect is also highlighted by the use of several anaphora (“Stone Lodge” x 2, “before the fire” x 2, “partly because” x 3).

The following part of the text consists of a dialogue between the two “bosom friends”, Mr Bounderby and Mr Gradgrind”, who are sitting together in front of the fire. There is therefore a passage from the technique of telling to the technique of showing, in which the writer shows the characters in action (during a conversation). This allows to the reader to make up a more personal idea about the two men, an idea that will probably be influenced by the writer’s will to make a critical portrait of the middle class (to which the two characters belong).

The theme of the conversation is Mr Boundeby’s tenth birthday (it’s suggested by the fact that that day is his actual birthday), a day he spent in a ditch and in a pigsty. The word “ditch” is repeated three times and aims at underlining the modest origins of the man. Indeed, he asserts that “he hadn’t a shoe on his foot and, as to stocking, he didn’t know such a thing by name”. This passage can be connected to the definition in the previous lines that draws him as a “bully of humility”. Indeed, he is somehow distorting the meaning of humility, hypocritically professing himself as a man of poor origins and at the same time behaving like a “inflated balloon”.

After Mr Bounderby’s speech there’s the description of his “friend”’s wife, Mrs Gradgrind, who is physically described as very different from Bounderby: she is a little and thin white lady and “whenever she showed a symptom coming to life, was invariably stunned by some weighty piece of fact tumbling on her”. The words “invariably” and “fact” might suggest the reader her belonging to the utilitarian mentality and her lack of will to change the monotony of her daily routine and of her way of thinking. Her question is indirectly told by the narrator (“Mrs Gradgring hoped it was a dry ditch?”) and it’s followed by Bounderby’s answer (“No! As wet as a sop. A foot of water in it”). So far, the conversation is of a quite low level: they’re using a very simple and materialistic words and references ( “sop”, “a foot of water”) and the absurdity of Mrs Gradgrind’s question conveys to the reader a quite comic and pathetic image of the conversation. In the following passages Mr Bounderby somehow commiserates himself, making a list of all the illnesses he had as a child: “inflammation in the lungs, and of everything else, I believe, that was capable of inflammation”, “for years I was one of the most miserable little wretches ever seen. I was so sickly, that I was always moaning and groaning. I was so ragged and dirty, that you wouldn’t have touched me with a pair of tongs.” Exaggeration and contradiction are again the devices the writer uses to create a comic effect that has both the function to entertain the audience and to openly criticise the society of that time and, in particular, the middle class to which Gradgrind and Bunderby belong.

In the following lines the writer gives the reader some additional information to reinforce the grotesque figure of Mr Gradgrind’s wife: she looks “faintly” at the tongs (just mentioned by Bounderby in his discourse) without any comprehensible reason, “as the most appropriate thing her imbecility could think of doing”.

The last part of Bounderby’s conversation with Mrs Gradgrind underlines again his very selfish attitude and his victimism. Indeed, he tells the woman he doesn’t know how he managed to fight through his difficult situation and that “nobody to thank for my being here, but myself.” Individualism and competition are therefore other important aspects of the character’s attitude. Anaphora is again used in this passage (“I suppose”, “determined”).