Narrative Devices and Readers’ Empathy in Dickens’ *Hard Times*

The ongoing discussion of the relationship between empathy and literature raises several significant questions, such as whether or not literature actually encourages empathy, by what strategies do authors promote empathy in their works, and whether or not the empathy evoked by literature leads to altruistic action in the real world. Through an examination of Charles Dickens’ *Hard Times*, it becomes evident that literature, particularly narrative fiction, does indeed encourage empathy. In *Hard Times*, there are a number of narrative strategies that Dickens employs to encourage the reader to empathize with certain characters as well as to block the reader’s empathy for other characters, primarily including techniques such as character identification, narrative situation, and free indirect discourse. While it would be very difficult to prove that narrative fiction such as *Hard Times* has a direct correlation to altruistic and prosocial action, it is apparent that literary empathy can lead to positive changes in reader’s attitudes, mindsets, idea, and prejudices. Through the promotion of empathy, literature has the capability to change readers’ perspectives and opinions, which may eventually lead to altruistic and prosocial actions in the real world.

As Amy Coplan notes in “Empathic Engagement with Narrative Fictions,” it can be problematic to reach a “general consensus” (Coplan 147) on the exact definition of empathy, as it can be difficult to distinguish empathy from other concepts or emotions. In her text *Empathy and the Novel*, Suzanne Keen defines empathy as “the spontaneous, responsive sharing of an appropriate feeling” (Keen 4) that “can be provoked by witnessing another’s emotional state, by hearing about another’s condition, or even by reading” (Keen 4). Simply put, empathy is sharing
the feelings of another person, or feeling with another person. For the purposes of this paper, Keen’s understanding of empathy will be the definition applied to the term “empathy.” It is important to distinguish between empathy and sympathy, as the two terms, although related, denote two different concepts. Sympathy is feeling for someone rather than with them, feeling “a supportive emotion” (Keen 5) about another person’s feelings without actually sharing in those feelings. When one feels sympathy, they feel “concern for another’s well being” (Coplan 145) and are not “imaginatively experiencing her mental states” (Coplan 145) as one would when empathizing.

There are some issues surrounding the ethical implications of empathy. One such issue is the tendency of people to more readily empathize with people who are similar to them. Keen discusses this limitation on empathy. Keen remarks on bias in empathy, noting that “whether it is construed as familiarity, similarity, or “in-group” bias” (Keen 19), there is typically a “reduction of response to those who seem strange, dissimilar, or outside the tribe” (Keen 19). Other critics have pointed out this potential limitation on empathy as well. In her article “How Narrative Relationships Overcome Empathic Bias,” Mary Catherine Harrison defines “similarity bias” (Harrison 257) as “our unwillingness or inability to empathize with people who are not like ourselves” (Harrison 257). Harrison suggests that similarity bias “means that the affective bonds and ethical motivations that accompany empathy are significantly diminished in relationships with outgroups” (Harrison 255).

However, Harrison argues that the narrative of a fictional text can direct and help readers to overcome similarity bias and empathize with people from different backgrounds, classes, races, ages, and genders. She believes that “narrative empathy . . . can operate by encouraging readers to identify resemblances that they might not otherwise observe in characters from other
cultural groups” (Harrison 270). Harrison indicates that the “potential long-term ethical consequences of fictional empathy” (Harrison 270) are that fictional empathy can “lead to improved attitudes and prosocial behavior towards relevant groups, thus overcoming the similarity bias” and can also “reconfigure a reader’s criteria for similarity, helping to prevent future cases of similarity bias” (Harrison 270). Harrison suggests that the narrative of a text guides readers to empathize with the protagonist, particularly a protagonist who is part of an “outgroup,” as “readers are cued by the narrative to adopt the protagonist’s viewpoint” (Harrison 262), and as a result, readers are able not only to understand but to share the protagonist’s point of view and emotions.

Mar and Oatley draw similar conclusions in their article “The Function of Fiction is the Abstraction and Simulation of Social Experience.” They indicate that “narrative has the potential to encourage empathy with often marginalized others” (Mar and Oatley 181) and that “a narrative can help us learn to empathize with types of individuals with whom we have no personal experience” (Mar and Oatley 181). Dickens’ *Hard Times* is a novel that directs the reader to overcome their similarity bias and develop empathy for characters who belong to marginalized “outgroups.”

Throughout *Hard Times*, Dickens invites the reader’s empathy for characters of various class statuses and social positions, in particular characters who are part of the “outgroup” of the working poor. At the time Dickens was writing, his readership would have been primarily middle and upper class readers who might have had difficulty empathizing with people of different classes in real life. Through *Hard Times*, Dickens encourages his readers to overcome their biases by strategically inviting the reader’s empathy for characters of the working and poor classes, changing the reader’s outlook on people of similar “outgroup” classes in the novel and
possibly even in the real world as well.

In *Empathy and the Novel*, Keen discusses several different methods by which authors might evoke empathy in readers. One narrative technique that helps to promote the reader’s empathy is character identification. Keen defines character identification as “specific aspects of characterization, such as naming, description, indirect implication of traits, reliance on types, flatness or roundness, depicted actions, roles in plot trajectories, quality of attributed speech and mode of representation of consciousness” (Keen 93). The reader identifying with characters or a particular character promotes empathy through connection. Character identification creates the reader’s understanding of a character that connects the reader to the character and compels the reader to empathize with that character. On the other hand, a lack of character identification can have the opposite effect. If the reader does not or cannot identify with a particular character, it becomes more difficult for the reader to understand and connect with that character, limiting or even entirely blocking the reader’s ability to empathize with the character.

In *Hard Times*, Dickens makes use of character identification to encourage readers to empathize with certain characters. Dickens also prevents the reader from identifying with other characters, indicating that the reader is not supposed to empathize with those characters and blocking the reader’s ability to empathize with them.

Sissy Jupe is the first character introduced with whom the reader finds it easy to empathize. Sissy is the daughter of a circus performer who is adopted by the Gradgrinds after her father abandons her. She displays compassion and genuine concern for others. While at school, her teacher asks her whether or not a nation is prosperous based on the statistic that out of a population of a million people “only five-and-twenty [inhabitants] are starved to death on the streets” (Dickens 60). Sissy replies that she “thought it must be just as hard upon those who were
starved, whether the others were a million, or a million million” (Dickens 60). Sissy constantly considers the feelings of others, and her kindness, compassion, and concern and consideration for others are all characteristics that endear her to the reader, making it easy for the reader to identify with her. Throughout the novel, Sissy maintains her kind and caring disposition. Despite her father’s abandonment, Sissy still loves him and does not become bitter or resentful towards him. Sissy becomes a caretaker for the feeble Mrs. Gradgrind and continues to treat Louisa with kindness, even when Louisa becomes cold towards Sissy. Because the reader finds Sissy likeable and connects to her, the reader can identify and subsequently empathize with Sissy without much difficulty.

Stephen Blackpool is another character whose traits and actions encourage character identification and empathy from the reader. Stephen is initially described as “a man of perfect integrity,” (Dickens 66) and he lives up to that description throughout the text. Stephen’s traits include an upright morality, and a devoted, hard working, self-sacrificing character. Like Sissy Jupe, Stephen demonstrates consideration for other people. After an unpleasant and dissatisfaction meeting with his employer Mr. Bounderby, Stephen encounters an elderly lady. She asks Stephen if he is happy, and despite the fact that Stephen is far from happy, he answers her “evasively” (Dickens 80) because “the old woman appeared to take it for granted that he would be very happy indeed, and he had not the heart to disappoint her. He knew that there was enough trouble in the world; and if the old woman had lived so long, and could count upon his having so little, why so much the better for her” (Dickens 80). Stephen demonstrates selflessness, thinking about the feelings of others before his own feelings, prompting the reader to follow Stephen’s example and empathize with Stephen. Stephen’s characterization creates an ease of character identification for the reader, and the reader can consequently more easily
empathize with him.

Dickens also deliberately creates characters with whom it is more difficult to identify, preventing the reader from easily empathizing with these characters. Initially, Mr. Gradgrind is one such character, as he describes himself as “a man of realities. A man of fact and calculation. . . With a rule and a pair of scales, and the multiplication table always in his pocket, sir, ready to weigh and measure any parcel of human nature, and tell you exactly what it comes to” (Dickens 10). Mr. Gradgrind does not have any warm sympathetic or empathetic qualities that endear him to the reader. Although Mr. Gradgrind is not a bad man, he is so absorbed with fact that he appears hardhearted and devoid of empathy. Because of his apparent lack of emotion, the reader cannot easily identify his feelings, let alone empathize with them. Throughout the text, Mr. Gradgrind is referred to as “eminently practical” (Dickens 29, 163). He is also described as “a man perfectly devoid of sentiment” (Dickens 20). Mr. Gradgrind’s extreme practicality and factuality create distance between his character and the reader, blocking the reader’s ability to empathize with him.

Mr. Gradgrind also displays a lack of empathy for others, repeatedly referring to Sissy Jupe as “girl number twenty” (Dickens 10, 11, 12). Mr. Gradgrind’s refusal to call Sissy by her name suggests that he does not treat her as a fellow human being and sees her as lesser. Mr. Gradgrind’s depicted actions and characteristics push the reader away from identifying with him, creating obstacles to the reader’s ability to empathize with him.

Dickens’ narrative also creates difficulty in empathizing with Mr. Gradgrind’s son, Tom Gradgrind. Tom Gradgrind grows up to be both extremely selfish and financially imprudent. He borrows a good deal of money from his sister Louisa, but never pays her back and continues to gamble away what little money he finds. Tom Gradgrind is underhanded, unconcerned for
others, and demonstrates a complete lack of empathy. He frames Stephen Blackpool for a bank robbery that he has committed, creating significant problems for a character with whom the reader readily identifies and empathizes. Dickens distances his readers from Tom Gradgrind not only through his negative characterization and actions, but through naming as well. In the final few chapters of the book, Tom is referred to only as “the whelp” (Dickens 265) instead of called by name. Removing a character’s name places another obstacle between the character and the reader, creating further difficulty in identifying with that character as well as blocking the reader’s empathy for the character.

Yet another character for whom Dickens blocks the reader’s empathy is Mr. Bounderby. Mr. Bounderby, like Mr. Gradgrind, is described as “a man perfectly devoid of sentiment” (Dickens 20). Mr. Bounderby also lacks empathy for other people, repeatedly characterizing all his workers as people who “expect to be set up in a coach and six, and to be fed turtle soup and venison, with a gold spoon” (72). He considers any complaints on the part of his workmen to do the result of laziness and a desire for extravagant luxury, no matter how reasonable the request might be. Mr. Bounderby is also incredibly self-centered, constantly directing conversation back to himself and his supposed struggles. He continually makes statements remarking on the difficulty of his youth, which the reader later discovers to be nothing but lies. Additionally, he fires Stephen, a character with whom the reader does identify. Mr. Bounderby’s lack of favorable qualities combined with the actions he takes that negatively impact “good” characters distance him from the reader, who consequently cannot easily identify or empathize with Mr. Bounderby.

Another technique that Dickens uses to direct the reader’s empathy is narrative situation. Keen defines narrative situation as “the nature of mediation between author and reader” (Keen 93). Narrative situation includes elements such as setting and address to the reader. Dickens
makes particular use of both these aspects of narrative situation. Throughout the novel, Dickens’ narrator frequently addresses the reader and includes the reader in the narrator’s thoughts and contemplations. Dickens often uses the terms “you,” “we,” “us,” and “our” time and time again in *Hard Times*.

One of the earliest instances of Dickens’ address to the reader occurs when Dickens offers a description of Coketown, the industrial setting of the novel. Dickens begins the description with an address to the reader, noting that “you saw nothing in Coketown but what was severely workful” (Dickens 28). Every aspect of Coketown is eminently and depressingly industrial. Even the chapel is but a “pious warehouse of brick red” (Dickens 28). The buildings of Coketown are built only with regard to similarity and practicality, very little consideration appears to have been given to aesthetics, as “the jail might have been the infirmary, the infirmary might have been the jail, the town hall might have been either, or both, or anything else, for anything that appeared contrary in the graces of their construction. Fact, fact, fact, everywhere in the material aspect of the town” (Dickens 28). The narrator continues to guide the reader through Coketown for several passages, giving vivid descriptions of the setting that make it seem more real to readers.

The narrator’s address to the reader and subsequent “tour” through the setting draws the reader further into the narrative. As a result, the reader feels as if they are a part of the narrative, and readers are therefore better able to connect to and empathize with the characters in the narrative. Additionally, the industrial setting of the novel mirrors what would have been contemporary reality for Dickens’ nineteenth century readers, making the story in the narrative, including the characters and the events that occur, seem even more real for those readers and might compel readers to a deeper sense of empathy with the characters. As modern readers, the
knowledge that the novel’s setting represents a setting similar to historical reality creates the sense that perhaps the story really could have happened, which further evokes the reader’s empathy for the characters in the novel.

Dickens goes on to depict the working population of Coketown, describing the repressive nature of the community’s emphasis on “fact” and industry before all else. Once again, the narrator addresses the reader, noting that “none of us in our sober senses” (Dickens 30) would suppose that the Coketown workers would have no desire for “Fancy” (Dickens 30), despite “fancy” being severely frowned upon by Coketown’s ruling elite. Dickens’ use of “us” (Dickens 30) and “our” (Dickens 30) engages the reader, drawing the reader further into the story. The narrator’s address and appeal to the reader primes the reader to empathize with the feelings of the workers that are subsequently described in the following passage. The narrator notes the workers’ desire for repose, stating “that exactly in the ratio as they worked long and monotonously, the craving grew within them for some physical relief – some relaxation, encouraging good humor and good spirits, and giving them a vent” (Dickens 30). The reader feels the repressive and oppressive rule of fact over every other feeling and consideration with the workers. The want of relaxation and enjoyment is a basic human desire that all readers can understand and identify with, creating empathy with the Coketown workers’ feelings of displeasure and resentment.

Later in the novel, Dickens addresses the reader just after Stephen leaves Coketown. Stephen’s parting from Rachel is both brief and melancholy, and just after the narrator refers to their parting as “a sacred remembrance to these two common people” (Dickens 160), the narrator directly addresses the reader, remarking, “the poor you will always have with you. Cultivate in them, while there is yet time, the utmost graces of the fancies and affections to adorn their lives
so much in need of ornamentation” (Dickens 160). Here, Dickens reminds the reader that real people just like Stephen and Rachel suffer in similar situations brought about by a lack of empathy and understanding from others.

Another very significant use of narrative situation, perhaps the most significant, occurs at the end of the novel. The novel closes with the line “dear reader, it rests with you and me, whether, in our two fields of action, similar things shall be or not” (Dickens 288). Dickens’ direct and clear address to the reader directs the reader to consider the situation of the characters about whom they have just read, and reminds the reader that real people exist in the world who are just like these fictional characters for whom the reader has developed empathy and a sense of connection and concern. The direct address reminds readers that the plights of fictional characters are also the plights of real people in the world around the reader, that real people face the same situations and struggles. Dickens calls the reader to altruistic action, imploring readers to remember their responsibility to act in the best interests of their fellow human beings in the world of reality. Although the reader knows they cannot actually help fictional characters, Dickens directs the reader to transfer their desire to help fictional characters into altruistic action in the real world for people like the characters in the novel. Dickens’ hopes of translating the empathy evoked for fictional characters into empathy and helping behaviors benefitting real people become clearly evident at the close of *Hard Times*.

A third narrative device Dickens employs to evoke the reader’s empathy is free indirect discourse. Free indirect discourse is a style of third person narrative that presents the inner thoughts of a character (Vermeule 75). Free indirect discourse functions somewhat similarly to character identification, as free indirect discourse deepens the reader’s understanding of and connection to a character. By revealing a character’s inner thoughts, the reader is better able to
connect with that character and understand that character’s actions, and consequently the reader can more easily empathize with that character. In *Hard Times*, Dickens uses free indirect discourse with characters who best illicit the reader’s empathy.

For example, Dickens uses free indirect discourse to relay Stephen Blackpool’s inner thoughts to the reader. Stephen is a character who easily evokes the reader’s empathy, and it appears that part of the reason Stephen does so is due to Dickens’ use of free indirect discourse. Later in the novel, Stephen’s fellow factory workers are manipulated into turning against him, and Mr. Bounderby unjustly dismisses Stephen from his job at Mr. Bounderby’s factory. Stephen decides that he must leave Coketown and walks through the town to depart it, contemplating how town looks “as entirely deserted as if the inhabitants had abandoned it, rather than hold communication with him” (Dickens 161). Stephen’s thoughts and observations here reveal his dejection and resignation to his fate. He has been cut by from his fellow workers and was forced to leave behind the only life he has known, his livelihood, and the woman he loves. The reader empathizes with Stephen here, sharing his feelings of sadness. Through the use of free indirect discourse, Dickens tells the reader exactly what Stephen is thinking and feeling, allowing the readers to better understand Stephen as a character and to more easily share in Stephen’s emotions.

Later on in the same chapter, Stephen exits Coketown, and Dickens once again employs free indirect discourse to invite the reader’s empathy for Stephen. Stephen’s dejection and resignation mingle with a sense of wonder and relief as he exits the industrial unpleasantness of Coketown. Stephen muses that it is “so strange to turn from the chimneys to the birds. So strange to have the road-dust on his feet instead of the coal-grit. So strange to have lived to his time of life, and yet to be beginning like a boy this summer morning” (Dickens 162). In Stephen’s
thoughts, Dickens juxtaposes elements of the manufactured unpleasantness of Coketown with images of simple, natural beauty, indicating to the reader the mixed emotions Stephen feels, the sadness he felt in the earlier passage and the relief he feels at leaving Coketown. The reader shared Stephen’s feelings of sadness and resignation in the previous passage, and soon after in this passage, the reader again shares Stephen’s emotions, this time sharing his relief at finally being able to leave Coketown. Because the reader knows exactly what Stephen is thinking, they can understand and empathize with the mixture of emotions he experiences at this point in the novel.

Dickens also uses free indirect discourse to compel the reader to empathize with Louisa Bounderby, the daughter of Mr. Gradgrind and wife of Mr. Bounderby. Mr. Harthouse attempts to provoke Louisa into conversation, and she wonders:

“why should she be shocked or warned by this reiteration? It was not so unlike her father’s principles, and her early training that it need startle her. Where was the great difference between the two schools, where each chained her down to material realities, and inspired her with no faith in anything else? What was there in her soul for James Harthouse to destroy, which Thomas Gradgrind had nurtured there in its state of innocence” (Dickens 163).

Through knowledge of Louisa’s thoughts, the reader understands why she acts the way she does and develops compassion and empathy for her. The reader shares in Louisa’s feelings of growing despair, resentment, and anger, particularly towards her father. The reader too becomes angry at Mr. Gradgrind for his role in Louisa’s development and his responsibility for placing her in her current unenviable situation as Mr. Bounderby’s unhappy wife and the object of Mr. Harthouse’s insistent and unwelcome affections. In the same section, Louisa wonders over and over “what
did it matter . . . what did it matter . . . what did anything matter” (Dickens 163). Louisa’s increasing despair and despondency is evident in her thoughts, which are made clear to the reader through Dickens’ use of free indirect discourse. The reader feels with Louisa in her despondency, marking Dickens’ use of free indirect discourse as successful.

Repeatedly throughout the novel, Dickens is able to employ the narrative technique of free indirect discourse to inspire the reader’s empathy for the novel’s characters. It is interesting to note the lack of free indirect discourse used with other characters. Dickens does not employ free indirect discourse at all with Mr. Bounderby, indicating that withholding free indirect discourse or direct insight into a character’s inner thoughts is an effective tool for blocking the reader’s empathy for that character. Dickens does not frequently use free indirect discourse to reveal young Tom Gradgrind’s inner thoughts either. The lack of insight into Mr. Bounderby’s and Tom Gradgrind’s inner thoughts makes it more difficult for readers to understand and empathize with these characters, suggesting that withholding free indirect discourse from certain characters can effectively help prevent the reader from empathizing with particular characters.

Through *Hard Times*, it becomes apparent that narrative fiction does indeed promote empathy, particularly through character identification, narrative situation, and free indirect discourse. However, the other half of the question of the relationship to empathy and literature has not yet been fully addressed. If literature does evoke empathy, what effect might that have on the real world? In both her previously mentioned article and another article titled “The Paradox of Fiction and the Ethics of Empathy,” Harrison discusses a “synechdocal” model that transfers the reader’s empathy for fictional characters into empathy for people in the real world. In Harrison’s latter article, this “synechdocal model,” where the reader interprets characters by “taking the part (individual) to refer to the whole (group)” (Harrison 258) can translate the
reader’s “emotional responses to fiction individuals” (Harrison 258) into “an emotional, and ethical, response towards the group of people whom [the fictional characters] represent” (Harrison 258). In *Hard Times*, Stephen Blackpool can be interpreted through Harrison’s synechdocal model. As a member of the working class with whom the reader comes to identify and empathize, Stephen comes to represent the struggling and ill-treated industrial workers for the reader. In the text, Stephen literally becomes the representative of his fellow workers, as he pleads their case to Mr. Bounderby, the factory owner. Stephen attempts to humanize himself and his fellow workers, telling Mr. Bounderby that the workers are “true to one another, faithfo’ to one another, ‘fectionate to one another, e’en to death. Be poor amoong ‘em, be sick amoong ‘em, grieve amoong ‘em . . . an’ they’ll be tender wi’ yo, gentle wi’ yo, comfortable wi’ yo, Chrisen wi’ yo” (Dickens 146). Stephen goes on to ask Mr. Bounderby to “look how we live, an’ where we live, an in what numbers . . . look how you considers of us, an writes of us, an talks of us” (Dickens 148). Stephen’s speech to Mr. Bounderby calls the reader’s attention to the treatment and welfare of industrial workers, which were, and remain today, real life issues in the world as well. Through the synechdocal model, Stephen becomes the representative of his entire class. The reader already empathizes with Stephen, which makes it easier for people to translate their empathy to people like Stephen, even in the real world.

There is some evidence to suggest that this synechdocal model can work and have positive effects in the real world. In the article “Reading Narrative Fiction Reduces Arab-Muslim Prejudice and Offers a Safe Haven from Intergroup Anxiety,” Johnson et al. discuss the impact of empathy inspired by fiction on real world prejudices. The researchers conducted two experiments where the subjects’ prejudices regarding Arab Muslims were tested both before and after reading a work of narrative fiction featuring an Arab Muslim protagonist. The researchers
found that readers were able to empathize with the protagonists, and the subjects who read the narrative fiction piece demonstrated reduced prejudice towards Arab Muslims after reading. Both of the experiments conducted “demonstrated narrative fiction’s power to reduce implicit and explicit prejudice” (Johnson et al. 593) and “analyses indicated empathy served as one mechanism” (Johnson et al. 593) that helped to reduce prejudice. Although this is only one set of experiments, the article still suggests that the empathy evoked by narrative function can play a role in the real world. According to the study, narrative fiction can change people’s attitudes, mindsets, and perspectives. The experiment does not indicate that empathy arising from literature leads to prosocial behaviors, but nor does it prove that altruism cannot be linked to empathy that results from reading literature. The link between literature and changed attitudes deserves further consideration, as changed attitudes can lead to changed behaviors and perhaps even to altruistic action.

Through an examination of Charles Dickens’ *Hard Times*, it becomes clearly evident that literature can and does encourage empathy. Several of the strategies by which narrative fiction encourages empathy also became apparent in the text. In employing narrative strategies such as character identification, narrative strategy, and free indirect discourse, Dickens directs the reader to empathize with his characters and successfully evokes empathy for particular characters. Dickens’ narrative compels the reader to connect with the characters through the use of such narrative techniques, and the connection between reader, character, and narrative promotes the reader’s empathy for that character. While it is apparent that literature does promote empathy, it is still unclear whether or not the empathy evoked by literature leads to prosocial action. However, as there is evidence that indicates the power of literature to change attitudes, the
changed attitudes brought about by literature and narrative empathy have the potential to bring about altruistic action and positive change in the real world.
Works Cited


