“The Same Heart Beats in Every Human Breast”

Victorian Realism, Old-School Literature in General, and Why We Should Still GAF

By Michael William Roffo

“We enter the bookstore, see the many volumes arrayed there, and think: so much to read, so little time. But books do not take time; they give time, they expand our resources of both heart and mind,” reminds Arnold Weinstein, Professor of Comparative Literature at Brown University in his New York Times published piece “Don’t Turn Away From The Art of Life”. Notably his arguments for the humanities’ continuing relevance maintain particular pertinence in light of the critical works of Realism from Victorian England. In Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre* a scholarly low-born girl defeats social hierarchy to marry a mysterious Byronic aristocrat. In Thomas Hardy’s *Far From the Madding Crowd*, an ordinary farmer rises to epic heroism for the women he loves. In Charles Dickens’ *Hard Times,* a lowly industrial worker grapples with eco-political forces beyond his control. Moreover in Hardy’s poem “Hap”, a narrator asks whether humanity’s misery can be accounted to God. Finally Matthew Arnold’s “The Buried Life” portrays the struggle of two ordinary lovers, and displays an opposite Realist stance on Fate than “Hap”. Indeed, Realist authors of the Victorian era strove to reveal heroes in everyday people while simultaneously critiquing their era’s social codes and systems. Furthermore Victorian Realism boasts vital significance to modern readers because the “everydayness" of its heroes makes their stories relatable, profoundly real, and undeniably relevant.

Realism pervades *Jane Eyre*, a novel unique in its Realism due to its critique of caste and gender via the tale of a poor governess who rises to marry a wealthy aristocrat. In *Jane Eyre*, the hero is surprisingly Jane Eyre. She’s a poor girl who is abused as a child by her brutal Aunt Reed. By the way, Jane’s “no beauty”, as her cousin puts it[1] (Bronte 171). The Realism of *Jane Eyre,* then, lies in Bronte’s decision to explore a poor woman’s potential independent of her sexual value, by illustrating the life of a female who boasts more intelligence and skill than

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[1] The significance of this detail cannot be overstated. To include a female main character who is not symmetrically beautiful showcases the extent of Bronte’s Realist departure from old-school heroic literature, which either lacks a hero or evokes as hero burly men of exceptional charisma and battle prowess fighting over trophy wives—I’m thinking about Homer.

beauty. When Jane first meets her employer and eventual husband, she remarks that "I felt no fear of him, and but little shyness. Had he been a handsome, heroic-looking young gentleman, I should not have dared to stand thus…" (Bronte 214). Bronte's Realism here borders on comedy in its direct opposition to classical heroic literature, evoking Jane's love-interest as not young, and not handsome. Even more telling that *Jane Eyre* is a work of Realism is Jane's explicit—and most humorous—comment that Rochester is not even "heroic-looking". By specifically noting Rochester as such, Bronte deliberately announces her rejection of Prince Charming-type heroes, further exposing *Jane Eyre* as a Realist novel. In one of Bronte's most pointed critiques of caste, Jane's employer Mr. Rochester frequently neglects the conventions of gentlemanly manners. For example, he admits to Jane: "… I feigned courtship of Miss Ingram, because I wished to render you as madly in love with me as I was with you; and I knew jealousy would be the best ally I could call in for the furtherance of that end" (Bronte 500). By portraying an aristocratic man who exhibits such ungentlemanly manners as manipulation and deceit, Bronte suggests that society's association of the aristocracy with courtesy is unfounded. In this way *Jane Eyre* makes a critique of Victorian social habits, further marking itself as a work of Realism. Mr. Brocklehurst, who presides over the miserably underfunded school for orphans which Jane attends, represents just one preacher of a staid Evangelicalism that influenced Britain in the Victorian era. He expresses horror that some of the girls at the school wear their hair in curls: "'Why, in defiance of every precept and principle of this house… here in an evangelical, charitable establishment… to wear her hair one mass of curls?'" he cries, to which the level-headed tutor Miss Temple replies, "'Julia's hair curls naturally'" (Bronte 119). But Brocklehurst's insistence that the orphan girls live such austere lives lies in direct hypocrisy to the behaviors of his own daughters, who dress "splendidly" in "velvet, silk, and furs" when they visit the school (Bronte 119). In a third way, then, Bronte critiques Victorian society by raising a concern about religious hypocrisy. In sum, *Jane Eyre* stands as a work of Realism because it eschews traditional larger-than-life heroic figures in favor of "realistic" ordinary characters, who emerge as vehicles for Bronte's social critiques on heroism, caste, and religion in the Victorian era.

Jane Eyre's morals boast a foundation in Weinstein's "Don't Turn Away from the Art of Life" as well, since a poignant Realist bildungsroman of childhood misery and eventual happiness lies at its center. As a girl Jane is treated with contempt by her "family" because in their view the late father of the house erred in adopting a lowborn girl to live among them. "You ought… not to live here with gentlemen's children like us," declares her 14-year-old cousin John Reed, before throwing a large book at the ten-year-old Jane, who falls and strikes her head. "The cut bled, the pain was sharp," she remembers pitifully (Bronte 14). Any reader with a history of or even a general awareness of child abuse would respond sympathetically to Jane's story, which is most heart-rending because her misery stems from the Reeds' pride and has nothing to do with any wrongdoing whatsoever on the child's part. In time though Jane escapes her bleak existence among the Reeds. She excels at school, becomes a teacher, and eventually wins for herself a position as a governess in Rochester's wealthy household (Bronte 156). The reader is meant to understand that even for poor and abused children, industry and academic accomplishment open doors towards better lives. Since Jane wrote the novel when she was older and entirely in the past tense, it's difficult to detect clear transitions in her mental state. But it's disturbing to think that, entirely robbed of childhood self-esteem by prejudice and arrogance, Jane likely didn't realize she was actually a bright, likable, capable person—a good person—until she escaped the supposed guardians who instead betrayed her. Weinstein's "Don't Turn Away From The Art of Life" argues for the continuing relevance of the humanities by pointing out exactly what Bronte's Realism in *Jane Eyre* achieves: "Art obliges us to 'first-personalize' the world…" helping to "create lives that others are not only other, but are real" (Weinstein par. 11). And to relate to Jane, it is exactly necessary to 'first-personalize' her story, because the moment we comprehend the modern implications of Bronte's masterpiece on child abuse, grief, and growth, Jane Eyre the person becomes real, alive, and vitality significant.

Thomas Hardy's *Far From The Madding Crowd* evokes Realism by presenting the life of a relatable, ordinary, everyday character as the subject of serious literature. In *Far From The Madding Crowd* Hardy portrays as hero Farmer Oak, or Gabriel, "a young man of sound

judgement, easy motions, proper dress, and general good character" (Hardy 5). Oak's namesake, the Archangel Gabriel, hints at his "general good character", but it's Oak's behavior in church which proves *Far From The Madding Crowd* to be a work of Realism. In church Farmer Oak "yawned privately by the time the congregation reached the Nicene creed, and thought of what there would be for dinner when he meant to be listening to the sermon" (Hardy 5). Notably Hardy does not assign any grandiose heroic traits like exceptional charisma, intelligence, or faith. In this way Hardy announces his intention to expose the heroic in a relatable, ordinary, everyday man—a sure indicator of a Realist work. In addition Hardy achieves that exposition through Realism in his setting as well as in his main character. In lieu of fanciful tales of aristocrats in castles, Hardy aims to accurately portray rural life among the lower and middle class. Accordingly he details the night sky extravagantly in chapter two. No excerpt does the entire paragraph justice, and it is best read aloud:

> To persons standing alone on a hill during a clear midnight such as this, *the roll of the world eastward is almost a palpable movement*. The sensation may be caused by the panoramic glide of the stars past earthly objects, which is perceptible in a few minutes of stillness, or by the better outlook upon space that a hill affords, or by the wind, or by the solitude; *but whatever be its origin, the impression of riding along is vivid and abiding*. The poetry of motion is a phrase much in use, and to enjoy the epic form of that gratification it is necessary to stand on a hill at a small hour of the night, and, having first expanded with a sense of difference from the mass of civilized mankind, *who are dreamwrapt and disregardful of all such proceedings at this time,* long and quietly watch your stately progress through the stars. After such a nocturnal reconnoitre it is hard to get back to earth, and to believe that *the consciousness of such majestic speeding is derived from a tiny human frame* (Hardy 11, emphasis mine).

Such attention to celestial detail indicates Hardy's intent with Far From the Madding Crowd not simply to make social critiques about Victorian culture, but to record the Realistic beauty of nature for future generations in the face of the unstoppable progress of industrialization. In short, Hardy achieves a two-fold Realism in *Far From the Madding Crowd* by doubling his tale of an everyday hero with a work of 19th century rural history.

Further analysis of Hardy's Realism in *Far From the Madding Crowd* reveals his intent to convince the reader that ordinary heroes walk among everyday people, and perhaps to inspire the reader towards such everyday heroism. For years after the young maid Bathsheba refuses

Oak's marriage proposal, he continues to love her and labor on her farm even after she's married a neglectful man of poor character. In his greatest act of heroism Gabriel single-handedly saved 700 pounds-worth of Bathsheba's harvest from destruction at the hands of a violent lightning storm. As Hardy narrates: "Oak *slaved* away… at the barley. Driving in spars at any point and on any system, inch by inch he covered more and more safely from ruin this distracting impersonation of seven hundred pounds. The rain came on in earnest, and Oak soon felt the water to be tracking cold and clammy routes down his back" (Hardy 233). Take note of Hardy's word-choice: even when her true husband fails her, even after she has revoked his love, Oak *slaves* for Bathsheba. Moreover since the crops are of immense monetary value to Bathsheba, Oak notably *provides* for her; and thus his slaving is an unofficial act of husbandry. Such heroic selflessness reveals Gabriel to readers as an example of how unconditional love brings out the hero in everyday people. Furthermore before one dismisses Oak as not truly an "everyday" figure, consider that his heroism is not unhindered by the self-doubt, hesitation, and inner struggle which characterizes everyday people. As he works frantically in the storm Oak reflects on how he fights against nature itself "for a futile love of the same woman" (Hardy 224), revealing that Oak grapples with his feelings in a fashion which is un-Romantic and not classically heroic. But when he "dismiss[es]" those hurt feelings and staying "generous and true" (Hardy 224) to his love, he further demonstrates his heroism through level-headed mastery of those feelings, accessing that everyday heroism which is uniquely available to ordinary human beings in exceptional circumstances. Such everyday heroism cements *Far From the Madding Crowd* as a Realist work, and Farmer Oak as a hero of Realist literature.

The Realism of Dickens' *Hard Times* stands out in its unmatched enthusiasm for Social Realism, as Dickens critiques the relationship between capital and labor via a novel evoking figures from capitalist and proletariat classes alike. As with the novels discussed so far, the first sign of Realism in Dickens' *Hard Times* is its subject matter. The narrator recounts the lives of numerous characters of differing backgrounds over the course of the novel, without making clear any particular main character. This seemingly basic trait of the novel is actually critical

because it in itself reflects Dickens' social-justice motives; as in Hard Times, Dickens would have liked to see people in Victorian England of all classes treated with equality, fairness, and justice. That Dickens ingrained this social critique into the very structure of his novel displays his value of social equality as well as his sympathies for the labor force, ultimately revealing *Hard Times* as a work of Social Realism. Although Dickens' attention is divided nearly equally amongst his characters, the omniscient narrator's bias makes it clear that the laborer Stephen Blackpool is the novel's nearest hero. Though he boasts no exceptional intelligence, nor charisma, "he was a good power-loom weaver, and a man of perfect integrity" (Dickens 59). Like Farmer Oak and Jane Eyre, it is Stephen's everydayness which makes him a hero in *Hard Times*. Dickens' demonstrated enthusiasm for equality and sympathy for workers confirms *Hard Times* as a work of Social Realism.

Contemporary readers of Dickens—American readers in particular—should take note that the Realism of *Hard Times* critiques the relationship between capital and labor, ultimately demonstrating how the extremists on both sides of the labor debate fail to do right by the everyday hero. In Dickens' first portrayal of social unfairness, Stephen's request for advice on how to be lawfully separated from his unfaithful and alcoholic wife is arrogantly rejected by his boss, Mr. Bounderby. Bounderby first shames Stephen's work by accusing his fellow laborers of wanting "to be fed on turtle soup and venison, with a gold spoon…!" (Dickens 65). Second he teases Stephen with the news that divorce laws exist, before informing him with sadistic pleasure that such an option is prohibitively expensive for a man of Stephen's means. Just as Bounderby is "swelling at his own portrait on the wall" (Dickens 70)—thinking about how he actually could eat turtle soup with a golden soon if he wanted, Stephen makes a polite remark of departure to his boss, leaving with a "shake of the head and deep sigh" (Dickens 66). In this exchange Dickens dramatizes an arrogant capitalist abusing an honest workman in order to make a Social Realist critique. Specifically, laissez-faire capitalism sometimes places power in the hands of those who would take pleasure in abusing proletariat workers. And neither does the opposite political extreme work in the average worker's interests. Dickens personifies the

leaders of extremist labor interests via Slackbridge, a man made leader by his fiery speeches and passion, though “he was not so honest” and "not so manly” as the men below him in the crowd, substituting his "cunning for their simplicity, and passion for their safe solid sense” (Dickens 124). Indeed, a passionate mob lends power to any laborer at all who is a skilled orator, potentially putting the army of the passionate mob in the hands of men who may have selfish interests rather than public ones. As Slackbridge speaks, Dickens suggests that "every man felt his only hope to be in his allying himself to the comrades by whom he was surrounded…” In accordance with that ominous comment on herd mentality, Slackbridge and all the other hands ostracize Stephen after he refuses to join their strike (Dickens 128). That Stephen is ostracized by the other hands for not joining their strike confirms Dickens’ initial suggestion that a laborer’s “only hope” is in being allied with his fellow laborers. Dickens asserts that organized labor fails the worker because herd mentality hampers rational discussion—in fact it’s exactly Stephen’s rational caution which gets him ousted—and the mob ultimately wields power derived from passion and not sense. Dickens’ Realism thus demonstrates how organized labor affords the individual laborer no more freedom than he has under the capitalist yoke. But Stephen’s final fate defines him as a wholly different kind of Realist hero than Gabriel Oak or Jane Eyre. His conflict with both his boss and coworkers leads to unemployment. Next he’s framed for a the robbery of Bounderby’s bank. Finally he falls into a mine shaft. Stephen Blackpool is rescued too late to survive his injuries (Dickens 244). *Hard Times* distinguishes itself from other works of Realism via the notable detail that the "everyday hero” doesn’t only fail, but dies via a freak accident beyond his control. For readers of Weinstein’s “Don’t Turn Away From the Art of Life”, Dickens’ literature “interrogates us” (par. 8) by demanding that contemporary readers check the validity of Dickens' haunting suggestions. Just like falling into a mineshaft, unchecked war between capital and labor may result in the unintended casualties of those heroes who walk amongst us.

Thomas Hardy’s poem “Hap” evokes Realism by proclaiming Hardy’s argument for whether fate can be rightfully blamed for people’s sorrow. More specifically the poem’s Realism

works by attempting to account for a relatable, often-asked question of life: if God is good, why am I miserable? “Thou suffering thing, / Know that thy sorrow is my ecstasy, / That thy love's loss is my hate's profiting!” Such are the words Thomas Hardy would like to hear a “vengeful god” speak to him, so that he would be eased in knowing that his misery was a matter of fate. “But not so,” he affirms. Rather, “purblind Doomsters” scatter “Blisses about [his] pilgrimage” as often as “pain”. The staunch Realism of Hardy’s work lies in confronting an unpleasant perceived reality: that God is not vengeful, and life is not out to get him. Rather, his misfortunes are entirely a matter of happenstance, the fitting origin of the poem’s title. And though this is an unpleasant reality to face, the poem’s hard Realism is not entirely unappealing to a reader. Even as one accepts that they cannot blame God for their unhappiness, in the same breathe they accept responsibility for their life, embracing the bit of Realism that they are the only ones with the power to change their lives. Hardy’s Realism in “Hap”, then, leads us to accept life’s accidents of chance; and in a deep, serious way, I submit that it exposes the meaning of life. If life is nothing but an accident of chance, the purpose of life is as simple as making the best of our time of time on Earth, every day, in the best way we know how.

“The Buried Life”, a poem by Matthew Arnold, marks itself as a work of Realism by addressing the everyday topic of how to be authentic, deep, and true in our love. It compels me personally because I’m also obsessed with “Why, why why!” After introducing the setting of the narrator trying to relate to his lover his “nameless sadness”, he despairs, "Alas! is even love too weak / To unlock the heart, and let it speak?” Arnold makes his misery poignant by announcing that even love is too weak, and is love not often praised as the most powerful force accessible to humankind? Even love is too weak!? Oh, the despair! And then, "Are even lovers powerless to reveal / To one another what indeed they feel?” Arnold’s poetry here eschews literary stuff and just goes for the heart. He exits the realm of the rationally analyzable and counts on his poem affect readers by being relatable. More specifically, he enters the realm of Weinstein’s “Don’t Turn Away From the Art of Life”, where art is accordingly praised as the method to “first-personalize the world,” something which "will help create denser and more generous lives, lives

aware that others are not only other, but are real" (par. 11). One objective of art is indeed to capture those feelings and put them into words, sounds, and sights that compel our senses into feeling whatever-it-is all over again. But more than that, art is a conversation, an opportunity to develop whatever vocabulary it takes to better communicate our feelings to one another. And I add to Weinstein's claims my own, that art is about communication, which is about love, which —to quote my favorite writer Jonathon Franzen—"is about bottomless empathy, born out of the heart's revelation that another person is every bit as real as you are." In short, Arnold's Realism succeeds in achieving Weinstein's goals for art by combining a personal, deeply relatable topic with straight-forward language that seeks to understand why humanity struggles to love one another.

Victorian Realist authors offered social critiques on the codes and systems of their era, largely by revealing that heroism lies too in the hearts of everyday men and women. Even more importantly Victorian Realism maintains modern relevance because the everydayness of its stories' heroes makes their lives relatable, and their heroism inspiring, to any reader. Jane Eyre conquers the supposed limitations of her penniless birth. The seemingly ordinary Farmer Oak emerges as a hero in service of the woman he loves. Lowly laborer Stephen Blackpool meets an unjust end which moves us to rise beyond political extremism. Thomas Hardy denies Fate a role in his unhappiness, accepting responsibility and taking charge of his life. Matthew Arnold moves us with vulnerably conveyed despair that he may never love, for Fate has ordained against it. That such deeply compelling stories can be derived from dated Victorian Literature indicates that while the outward appearance of art shifts over centuries, humanity's sources of inspiration do not. In this way the historical trends of art simply reflect trends of opinions on how best to live human life. Finally, each and every trend, no matter how foreign its artistic delivery, maintains vital significance in the modern age, because as Arnold wrote, "the same heart beats in every human breast."