

Homosociality, Sexism and Homophobia: An Analysis of Charles Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend* and Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant* and *Fox and His Friends*

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Abstract

Having as its theoretical framework the theories of Michel Foucault and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, among others, this article examines a canonical nineteenth-century British novel and two twentieth-century German art films to reach the same conclusion: how deeply related power and sexuality are. Charles Dickens's novel shows the working of power relations mainly at a heterosexual level. Rainer Werner Fassbinder's films *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant* and *Fox and His Friends* show the same power relations, but in this case at a lesbian/gay level. The conclusion reached is that sexuality can be used as a means to exert power, and that this is irrespective of class, gender distinctions, or sexual orientation.

The aim of this paper is to underline the intrinsic relationship between power and sexuality, in the sense that sexuality can be used as a means of achieving and exerting power. I will also try to demonstrate how this functioning of sexuality affects people without regard to their class, sexual behaviour, or sexual practices. For this analysis I will use Charles Dickens's book *Our Mutual Friend* (1865), and Rainer Werner Fassbinder's films *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant* (1972) and *Fox and His Friends* (1974). Then, I will try to establish common characteristics between some of the characters appearing both in the book and in the films.

Thus, in *Our Mutual Friend*, I will analyse the relationships between Charley Hexam and Bradley Headstone as an example of power, submission and friendship between men in the working class; between Eugene Wrayburn and Mortimer Lightwood as a very different example of friendship between men in the upper-middle class; between Eugene Wrayburn and Bradley Headstone as an example of the class struggle related to the exertion of power, and between Lizzie Hexam and Eugene Wrayburn as an example of class and sex struggle. I will analyse, where pertinent, the dynamics of desire present in the characters' intertwinings, always taking into account the presence of class and economic factors. I will follow Eve Sedgwick's approach in her "Homophobia, Misogyny, and Capital: The Example of *Our Mutual Friend*" (1985, 161-179).

To begin with, I will cite a striking sentence by Eve Sedgwick in *Between Men*, which can be applied to the book and to the films we are dealing with: "the human body is taken as a capitalist emblem" (1985, 170). She makes use of these words when talking about Dickens's novel, but I will also use them as the starting point of this paper. By

directly addressing capitalism, we are setting the scene where everything is to take place, either at the end of the nineteenth century or at the end of the twentieth. Dickens's and Fassbinder's common heritage is the most atrocious capitalist setting that presides over their works, and that could be defined as basically urban, the place where the economic relationships between several characters coming from different social classes take place.

In order to elaborate the idea of power related to sexuality, some theoretical background is needed. Michel Foucault, in *The History of Sexuality*, defines power as follows:

Power must be understood in the first instance as the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization; as the process which, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens, or reverses them; as the support which these force relations find in one another, thus forming a chain or a system, or on the contrary, the disjunctions and contradictions which isolate them from one another; and lastly, as the strategies in which they take effect, whose general design or institutional crystallization is embodied in the state apparatus, in the formulation of the law, in the various social hegemonies. (1976, 93)

Using the words "force relations" as the basis of power, Foucault gives them a total centrality in this issue. Everything will evolve around this concept, which is social in itself. The various struggles and confrontations are the ones that, in Dickens's book, make Lizzie Hexam marry Eugene Wrayburn, or Bradley Headstone try to kill the latter. The support one can find in force relations is exemplified in the relationship between Mortimer Lightwood and Eugene Wrayburn, since they protect one another from a perspective of class. In *Fox and His Friends* this support is also seen in terms of class through the protective reaction of Eugen's family and friends once the relationship with Franz is over. In consequence, the isolation of human beings remains also a central issue in force relations, for the very existence of this kind of relations brings about struggle and an inevitable outcome of winners and losers. These microcosms create in the end the corporality of the macrocosm, that is, society. The process is repetitive in itself, as Foucault points out:

Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere. And 'Power', insofar as it is permanent, repetitious, inert, and self-reproducing, is simply the over-all effect that emerges from all these mobilities, the concatenation that rests on each of them and seeks in turn to arrest their movement. (Foucault 1976, 93)

The capacity of (re)generation that power has makes it a very dangerous weapon.

Foucault then addresses directly the relationship between power and sexuality, and ends up saying that relations of power are immanent in sexual relations. As he says,

“[Relations of power] are the immediate effects of the divisions, inequalities, and disequilibriums which occur in [sexual relations], and conversely they are the internal conditions of these differentiations” (1976, 94). He points out in another part of his study that desire always comes together with a power relation. He also mentions that sexuality is an “especially dense transfer point for relations of power” (1976, 103). He explains this point:

Sexuality is not the most intractable element in power relations, but rather one of those endowed with the greatest instrumentality: useful for the greatest number of maneuvers and capable of serving as a point of support, as a linchpin, for the most varied strategies. (1976, 103)

Sexuality is thus defined by its instrumentality, and also as the device that makes strategies possible.

It is interesting to see how closely Foucault defines the relation between power and sexuality, linking the latter with “an intensification of the body—with its exploitation as an object of knowledge and an element in relations of power” (1976, 107). This focusing on the human body as a direct recipient of the exertion of power is clearly exemplified in Dickens’s novel, basically in all the working-class characters, and also in Fassbinder’s films. In his historical analysis of sexuality, Foucault, after having emphasized the function of the body, proceeds: “sex became a matter that required the social body as a whole, and virtually all of its individuals, to place themselves under surveillance” (1976, 116). This surveillance would be effected from some sort of apparatus that would also have to be created. Thus, the state comes into the picture. The intensification of the body leads us to class awareness, as Foucault says: “one of the primordial forms of class consciousness is the affirmation of the body” (1976, 126). He then reaches the following conclusion:

If it is true that sexuality is the set of effects produced in bodies, behaviors, and social relations by a certain deployment deriving from a complex political technology, one has to admit that this deployment does not operate in symmetrical fashion with respect to the social classes, and consequently, that it does not produce the same effects in them. (1976, 127)

Class relations cause different effects in the deployment of sexuality. In this sense, Foucault specifies that the discourse of sexuality is originally bourgeois, and that the effects of sexual repression were firstly directed against members of that social class. Therefore, “social differentiation would be affirmed, not by the ‘sexual’ quality of the body, but by the intensity of its repression” (Foucault 1976, 129).

Before proceeding any further, it is very important to bear in mind Eve Sedgwick’s words when she states that Dickens contributed to the “psychologization and political naturalization of homophobia about men” (1985, 161). In her opinion, there are

many themes in *Our Mutual Friend* related to male homophobia and homosexuality. Borrowing René Girard's notion of the triangulation of desire, by which desire always implies the presence of a triad, she says that the book creates a triangular heterosexual romance and then suddenly changes the heterosexual bonds of the triangle to the "male-homosocial one" (1985, 162). She goes on to say that

... in these male homosocial bonds are concentrated the fantasy energies of compulsion, prohibition, and explosive violence; all are fully structured by the logic of paranoia. At the same time, however, these fantasy energies are mapped along the axes of social and political power; so that the revelation of intrapsychic structures is inextricable from the revelation of the mechanisms of class domination. (1985, 162)

This brings to mind John Clum's analysis of British playwright Caryl Churchill's play *Cloud Nine*, in which he establishes what he calls a "destructive trinity" between homosociality, sexism and homophobia (1988, 96). In my opinion, the "fantasy energies" Sedgwick mentions are the ones in which the outcome is sexism and homophobia. Being closely related to social and political power, these fantasy energies are the result of male homosocial bonds, in other words, of the relationships of friendship between men. A further division is related to class. An example of this is the creation of a figurative contract between Charley Hexam and Bradley Headstone by which Lizzie Hexam should marry Bradley. Bearing in mind the specific capitalist setting present in the book and the different economies that are in place, Charley and Bradley's relationship shows two working-class males disposing of a female, who is seen as the merchandise in their economic transaction. This is also an example of the exertion of power at both class and sexual levels. Both males, oppressed by males of the upper classes, adopt the ideology of power and unite their efforts into a force relation that tries to make Lizzie become the sexual partner of one of them. Before talking to Lizzie, Charley is confident: "We have everything on our side ... Respectability, an excellent connexion for me, common sense, everything!" (Dickens 1985, 450). Then, he addresses Lizzie as follows: "I know in a general way what Mr. Headstone intends to say, and I very highly approve of it, as I hope—and indeed I do not doubt—you will" (Dickens 1985, 451-452). Men have agreed on the convenience of the marriage, and therefore Lizzie's refusal to accept makes her the enemy, the opposing force to be vanquished. Charley, in consequence, renounces her. Lizzie, being considered for her economic value, and therefore not being able to provide Charley with the material advantages he was expecting to receive had she married Bradley, has no value whatsoever.

Eve Sedgwick's analysis is also influenced by this perspective. She states clearly that she is going to use *Our Mutual Friend* "to explore the uses of homophobia in the domestic political terms of mid-Victorian England" (1985, 163). Coming back to the concept of homosociality, the male-homosocial triangle in the book can be represented by two sets of characters: Eugene Wrayburn, Lizzie Hexam and Bradley Headstone, and

Charley Hexam, Lizzie Hexam and Bradley Headstone. I have already analyzed the second triad, but the first one is also interesting. Enemies because of Lizzie, Eugene and Bradley's relationship becomes more and more hostile. It is as if Lizzie was only an excuse to fight, to invent new methods of male seduction and attraction through their difference of class.

I have chosen two films by Rainer Werner Fassbinder which I find are very closely related to each other and to the topic of this paper. Both films deal with the issue of power and sexuality, with roles of domination and submission in a specifically capitalist setting. Also, they paradoxically coincide in the depiction of male and female homosexual characters. *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant* presents these issues from a female homosexual perspective, whereas *Fox and His Friends* does so from a male homosexual one. However, the main analysis made in both films is the link between power and sexuality under a capitalist frame, regardless of the personal choices made concerning sexuality.

The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant shows a famous fashion designer and her relationship with two women: Karin, a young working-class girl who seems to be in the process of divorcing her husband, and Marlene, Petra's ex-lover and personal secretary. Petra falls deeply in love with Karin, who in turn uses Petra to achieve a career as a model and eventually leaves her. Marlene, on the other hand, has a peculiar relationship with Petra, who treats her like a slave. In the end, Petra is left by both women and ends up in bed, emotionally shattered. Previously, she has introduced absolute chaos into her life, drinking progressively more and more, and destroying her family and her circle of friends.

The first conversation with Karin is already significant:

PETRA: What do you think, or dream about.

KARIN: Very little. I'd like to find a place for myself in the world. Is that asking too much?

PETRA: No, quite the contrary, Karin, quite the contrary. That's what it is to be alive, to struggle to establish a place for yourself.

KARIN: And ... is it necessary to ... fight for it?

PETRA: Definitely. Even I had to fight, and hard, let me tell you. That's just the way it is. (Fassbinder 1985, 29)

The rules of the capitalist game have already been established. Petra, on the other hand, is here lecturing Karin on the appropriate behaviour to follow in order to win. There is also the issue of class. Petra comes from the upper-middle class, whereas Karin is a product of the working-class. Petra does not foresee that Karin can be a bright student.

Petra insists on the savage 'way of the world'. Living in a capitalist regime implies a certain behaviour marked by the repression of sexuality. Petra intends to follow the rules of the game, subverting some of them as a kind of survival technique. However, she is scared and lonely: "People are bad news. In the end they tolerate everything. People

are hard and brutal, and one's no different from the next. We just have to accept that" (Fassbinder 1985, 33). Her constant fear about Karin's reasons to stay with her is also expressed: "I never really know why you're here. Because I have money, or connections, or because ... you love me" (Fassbinder 1985, 38). Karin seems to be bored with Petra, nor does she seem to be able to declare her love to Petra either. However, when Karin's picture appears in the newspapers she shows affection for the first time, even hinting at making love: "Quite lovely, quite lovely. It's *amazingly* wonderful. My first time in the papers. Wild. I love you. Come on ... I want to kiss you" (Fassbinder 1985, 39). Soon after this episode, Karin receives a call from her husband and decides to leave Petra and meet him in Frankfurt. The following scene takes place:

PETRA: But what took you so long? I wonder why you didn't get right down to it, and start pimping yourself sooner.

KARIN: Because with you, dearest, it didn't take as much exertion. (Fassbinder 1985, 39-40)

All affective relations consist then in the application of rules dictated from the capitalist machinery. The heart of the matter turns out to be the intrinsic economic value of love and affection. Everything is reduced to a matter of materiality, of value in terms of money. Petra realizes her situation and she says: "That's exactly what I'm good for. The payoff" (Fassbinder 1985, 40). When she spits at Karin, Karin says: "You'll pay for that" (Fassbinder 1985, 40). Similarly, when later in the play Petra, desperate, insults her friend Sidonie, Sidonie says: "I'm going to make you pay for this, Petra" (Fassbinder 1985, 48). Petra then utters her most desperate words: "I'm not paying for anything anymore ... I want to die" (Fassbinder 1985, 48). The metaphoric act of paying acquires here another literal meaning, directly related to the economy of desire, and to the apparatus of the state. At the end of the play, however, Petra seems to have learnt her own motivations: "It wasn't love I felt for her. I just wanted to possess her. Only now, that it's all over, am I beginning to experience love" (Fassbinder 1985, 50). She is then denying the possibility of love through possession, at any level. Her new awareness leads her to change her relationship with Marlene, her old lover and now servant, into what is hinted at as being a more egalitarian relationship. In this sense, the end of the written text as a play differs from the end of the movie Fassbinder made. In the movie, Marlene leaves when Petra tries to change the terms of their relationship. Petra is left utterly alone, and the possibility of, or the hope for, an equal relationship between human beings is completely denied.

Fox and His Friends shows the protagonist, played by Fassbinder, as a working-class hero. He works in a circus, and the film begins when he learns that it has to close. By chance, Fox wins the lottery and gets in contact with Eugen, a middle-class business man who introduces him to a different world; one of tacky clothing and furniture. Fox falls in love with Eugen, despite a somewhat tense relationship due to their different social origins. They move together and, progressively, Fox gets in touch with Eugen's world.

Working together in Eugen's family's unprosperous business, Fox gives him a substantial amount of money to save the business. Fox is also convinced by Eugen about the necessity of buying an apartment, and later on Fox insists on putting the apartment in Eugen's name so that the bank can have a financial guarantee of the resources of his family. In the end, Fox turns out to be used by Eugen, who takes all of Fox's money and leaves him with nothing. The powerful final sequence shows Fox, dead from an overdose of barbiturates, lying on the Munich underground. Two children discover him and, to the audience's amazement, rob his corpse and run away. We could draw a parallel with *Our Mutual Friend*, with Gaffer Hexam taking corpses out of the river and robbing them. This example shows that in harsh capitalist terms, dead bodies are only good for whatever money they contain.

Ronald Hayman, in his book about Fassbinder, suggests that both Petra and Fox suffer from "anxiety about buying love" which overlaps with another anxiety about whether they are being loved for their own sake (1984, 68). The possibility of "buying love", of making love an economic transaction, marks the terms under which the relationship will take place. This new economy will give rise to two new presences: those of the "giver" and the "manipulator" (Hayman 1984, 73). Both Petra and Fox love (or, using the new term, give), whereas Karin and Eugen manipulate. Marlene is more ambiguous. She seems to be clearly manipulated, accepting her role as Petra's slave. However, when Petra at the end of the movie proposes to her a different sort of relationship, she leaves. It is then that the audience is allowed to think that she is in fact a manipulator.

The relationship between the "manipulator" and the "giver" is therefore a very interesting element in *Fox and His Friends*. As Hayman puts it, at the end of the movie "the theme of exploitation ha[s] become intertwined with the theme of identity" (1984, 78). Fox, then, is denying any alliances with power or, in other words, with the representation of the state. He refuses any longer to be part of a transaction. He tries to negate the economy of love and is therefore destroyed because he fails to learn the rules of the game from the very beginning. Fox leaves Eugen only to realize that he has been swindled, for Eugen decides not to give him back the money Fox had lent him for the business. Eugen argues that Fox's money was paid back as a salary while he was working for the firm. The second surprise comes when he learns that Eugen is keeping the apartment (which, as mentioned above, Fox had put under his name, trusting Eugen) and that Eugen's former lover (whom Eugen was seeing all along) is moving into the apartment. Fox has tried to set the rules by himself quite arbitrarily and does not realise that he is destined to lose. Quite naïvely, he thought that only because of the money he unexpectedly received he would automatically be accepted into the new society. Not recognizing himself in the new world of economic and sexual exploitation, he gives up. Thus, Fox can never obtain a middle-class identity, and on the other hand, he inevitably loses his identity as a working-class man. The bleak final sequence of the film is, in this sense, almost frightening. The children in the underground rob whatever of economic value is left on Fox's corpse. They take money, his watch and, finally, his denim jacket.

The loss of his denim jacket, a visible sign of the identity he was desperately trying to recuperate, is linked to the loss of his life. This film is even more pessimistic than *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant* for, apart from the issue of sexual domination and the impossibility of equal relations between people, it also negates any possibility of class understanding (although Fox's alcoholic sister offers help, and the locals of a gay bar seem to protect each other from the outside world, living in a sort of womb). The children that rob Fox of his jacket are working-class children. The only law under capitalism is thus seen to be the law of survival. People's bodies are merchandise, only valuable in terms of what they can offer during life or after death.

In thinking about possible motives that account for Petra's and Fox's behaviour, Hayman states that "nothing preoccupied Fassbinder more deeply than loneliness and the Angst that ensues from it" (1984, 108). In referring to Petra, thus, he thinks that:

... it is loneliness that drives Petra into the unlikely liaison with Karin and loneliness that makes its failure unbearable. The anger she discharges on the crockery, her daughter, her mother, her friend Sidonie and on Marlene does not distract her from the emptiness in her life. (Hayman 1984, 108)

This loneliness is the result of the isolation brought about by the existence of the Foucauldian force relations.

Thus, in a capitalist economy desire is a transaction one must pay for. Petra von Kant pays dearly for the price Karin costs. Fox also pays Eugene's price. Eugene Wrayburn pays Lizzie's price with two broken arms. Bradley Headstone pays it with his own life. Desire can also be a way of exerting power, since we have seen that it comes inevitably with the latter. It will adopt the forms of either the person who gives or the person who manipulates. Instead of the terms "giver" and "manipulator", used by Ronald Hayman, we could just as well use the terms "oppressor" and "oppressed", used by Joseph Marohl. He suggests this as an alternative to the traditional binary division male/female, as the former being the oppressor and the latter the oppressed (Marohl 1987, 387). This new terminology adds complexity to the field of human relationships. From now on, the roles can vary completely, shift incessantly, without any gender-specific characteristics. Thus, men can oppress women, or (more rarely but equally possible) be oppressed by them. Men can oppress or be oppressed by other men. Women can oppress or be oppressed by other women.

All the relationships in *Our Mutual Friend* (with the possible exception of Eugene and Mortimer's) have to do with power. Bradley Headstone is Charley Hexam's teacher, and thus is in a superior position in the sense that he is the person that can provide him with the means to achieve a better life. The episode in which Bradley is rejected by Lizzie puts Charley in a rage: "Mr. Headstone has always got me on, and he has a good deal in his power, and of course if he was my brother-in-law he wouldn't get me on less, but would get me on more" (Dickens 1985, 460). However, when at the end of the novel Bradley's reputation falls apart, Charley is merciless to him, knowing that Bradley will

not be of use to him anymore, and tells Bradley his plans: "I have made up my mind that I will become respectable in the scale of society, and that I will not be dragged down by others ... My prospects are very good, and I mean to follow them alone" (Dickens 1985, 781). Charley is behaving in the same way the young Bradley did. Considering his past as something to hide, he tends to avoid any relation with people that remind him of the past or of his origins. Bearing in mind that Bradley helped him to get an education, Charley's behaviour towards Bradley once the latter gets into trouble is a sign of his utter identification with the rules of capitalist society, of his internalisation of the class system. Bradley may fall, and he could drag down Charley with him. The sad paradox is that both of them are from the working class, and that their origins are transparent to any member of a superior class. Their efforts to conceal what to other people is obvious underline the absurd dynamics on which class issues are based in a capitalist regime. When Bradley says to Eugene, "You think me of no more value than the dirt under your feet", Eugene retorts, "I assure you, Schoolmaster, I don't think about you" (Dickens 1985, 344). Then Bradley makes a declaration of principles:

You reproach me with my origin, you cast insinuations at my bringing-up. But I tell you, sir, I have worked my way onward, out of both and in spite of both, and have a right to be considered a better man than you, with better reasons for being proud. (Dickens 1985, 346)

Eugene Wrayburn has power over Bradley because socially speaking he is in a higher position and because of that he can create a different sort of relationship with Lizzie Hexam. Also, by his very class origins he despises Headstone. Capitalist society creates a hierarchy based on power that defines the relations between people. So, Charley Hexam oppresses his sister, but he is oppressed by the system in general. Bradley Headstone indirectly oppresses both Charley and Lizzie, but he is directly oppressed by society through Eugene's scorn.

Lizzie Hexam, as a woman, is the direct recipient of all the main characters' inclinations to oppress. She is oppressed by her brother, whom she helped to go up in society, when he tries to make her marry Bradley. She is oppressed by Bradley when he directs his fury against Eugene towards her. Indirectly, she is oppressed by Eugene, for although he redeems her by marrying her, Lizzie acts as a means to help Eugene progress in life.

As a counterpoint to the violence that presides over the human relations of the working-class characters, Eugene and Mortimer represent upper-middle class homoerotic harmony. Two bachelors who met at a public school, living together in what seem to be scenes of domestic bliss. Mortimer acts as a light counterpoint, the bridge between Eugene and his class, represented in the social gatherings at the Veneerings' dwellings. Their relationship seems to be devoid of any hint of struggle for power; it is seen as an oasis in the middle of the destruction and violence that surrounds them. It is also an example of the possibility of relationships for their own sake, without any ulterior objective.

Therefore, it is subversive in itself.

Both Dickens's and Fassbinder's works can be linked if looked at under the perspective adopted in this paper, that is, the intrinsic relationship between power and sexuality. Both authors show an interesting combination of realism and other tendencies. Dickens combines elements of the Gothic with strict realism. Fassbinder combines elements from melodrama, full of excess, with realism (especially in *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant*, for *Fox and His Friends* is utterly realistic). Using realism, a bourgeois movement *per se*, and therefore a product of capitalism, it seems as if both Dickens and Fassbinder are trying to subvert the ideological meaning on which the regime is founded. The repression of sexuality that is characteristic of the bourgeoisie through the Foucauldian deployment of sexuality is transferred to the lower classes when their members try to go up the social scale. The repression of sexuality is also closely related to the equally Foucauldian force relations. These force relations operate at many levels of society, irrespective of class, gender distinctions, or sexual orientation.

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