

Victorian Epoch and Quintessential Representation of Social Existence in Dickens's *Hard Times*

Sussan Rahimi Bagha

Ph.D. English Literature, Lecturer,
Tehran, Iran

srahimibagha@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper is about thematic details of the *Hard Times* (1854) by Charles Dickens. The situation of England in 19th century is visualized by the author in this novel. It is about the lives of the people from middle and lower class which were completely affected by poverty, discrimination and especially industrialization. All of them cause many problems to the lives of rustic people by oppressing their imagination and emotions which resulted in their working in mill factories under difficult situations. *Hard Times* demonstrates the social separation between rich and poor. The ones who rise slowly usually does not reach much higher than where they started. The wealth could be the opportunities to cover some sorts of social abnormality and odd behaviors. The existence of the wealthy characters are more than poor ones in *Hard Times*. Since in that era the world was moving forward to become more machinery under the industrial 19th century and Victorian era. In this novel, and by becoming the rising of technology and machinery, only the high class families are included, meanwhile the low class and poor families usually never get to have the standard level of the facilities. The characters

who mostly have concern about class differences are the ones who never feel pain because of differences and the gap between rich and poor.

Keywords: Industrialization, Imagination, Poverty, Victorian era, Utilitarianism

Introduction

Hard Times was written by Charles Dickens who was an English writer and social critic. Throughout his lifetime, his works have gained revolutionary popularity. He is considered as a literary genius due to the creation of the world's best-known fictional characters in the Victorian era. *Hard Times* symbolizes Dickens's first work of undisguised social criticism and it demonstrates his disrespect for functional ideals of development which assembled the "greatest good for the greatest number." The ambience of *Hard Times*, is a manufactory place that symbolizes the unappealing features of what the Industrial Revolution had done in Britain in those years. In *Hard Times*, Dickens blames the industrial revolution for England's ethical, psychological, decay.

The central problem insights derived from the disciplines of history, social history, sociology and psychology. The urbanization has been carried out most systematically and in the greatest detail upon England. For one thing, England was among the first, if not the very first, of modern societies to become urbanized: more people in England lived in towns than in the country in early 1850. It is therefore not surprising that the process of

urbanization in England has been studied in great detail from many points of view: historical, sociological, technological, economic, and so on. One aspect of the cultural impact of urbanization in nineteenth century England, as it affected the life and literary work of one man Charles Dickens. As Giddings mentioned, Walter Bagehot magnificently remarks that Dickens described his city “like a special correspondent for posterity,” is one which all subsequent readers would endorse. Dickens who wrote about London in any detail, as the literary response to the city, Dickens alone offers material which is suitable but which also possesses substantial literary merit.

Theory of utilitarianism and the separation between high class and low class

The Victorian era in England is an age of industrialization that themes with economic prosperity and the daily life. The Great Britain was an Empire that ruled over large parts of the world. However, such wealth had serious social outcomes which represented serious worries for a number of theorists and writers, like Charles Dickens. As a social critic, he claims in his letters to “strike the heaviest blow in his power” to side with those who struggle against a miserable situation stemming from a capitalist system which strongly permeates every corner of existence. Keeping his pledge, Charles Dickens published *Hard Times* a satirical social realistic novel in which he deplores the general zeitgeist and philosophy which characterized the era. *Hard Times* is often labelled as an Industrial novel because of its harsh criticism of life within an industrialized England; it exposes the ugly facet of the utilitarian ethics and ‘laissez-faire’ policies which settle the main characters of industrial capitalism.

In that era utilitarianism had become a widely popular set of ethics and based capitalism at a multitude of levels, the ethics of utilitarianism became the center on which

capitalism and industrialism principles developed. Nonetheless, this ethical belief was also the object of criticism from its contemporary writers and philosophers; thereby, Thomas Carlyle describes utilitarianism, as a “pig philosophy” and satirizes it. F.H Bradley shows his disagreements in his *Ethical Studies* (1876), and Dickens does the same in both *Great Expectations* (1861) and *Hard Times* by showing all the mischievousness and weaknesses of this ethical system in Britannica.

Money and Power are the big elements of the minority of rich people they use money to get power, and abuse power to make more money, and all this is done for the sake of well-being, and everything is important if money is the ultimate purpose. This system causes a big gap between the rich over the poor and, finally ruins society by making a social gap. Indeed, the Victorian society is fragmented and the town presents two poles rich bankers, wealthy people who have business, politicians, simple workers who are applauded and can even break rules with the help of money while the poor are not only weakened by poverty, but they are also disadvantaged of the least social justice, the worst of all is that there is no way out to get rid of their misery. The most striking example that might show social inequality may be that of Bounderby advising Stephen Black pool to avoid divorcing his drunken wife; he tells him:

“There is a law [...]. But it’s not for you at all. It costs money. It costs a mint of money.”

“There’s no other law?” “Certainly not!”
“Why then, sir,” said Stephen, turning white, and motioning with that right hand of his, as if he gave everything to the four winds, “‘tis a muddle. ‘It’s just a muddle together, an’ the sooner I am dead, the better.” (*Hard Times* 67)

By that way, Bounderby can request for a divorce from Louisa easily. The divorce laws

are the privilege of wealthy and powerful people and are not accessible to the rest of society specially the poor ones. In a similar way, Dickens goes even way further in the search of the failure of utilitarian political and social by attempting on the notion of love. He sets love, interests and other things in other words and opposite of that of the real, feelings, and tender.

Dickens's *Hard Times* is a satire that shows the problems of that time in Victorian society and it observes with utilitarianism. His critique of the characters and institutions is obviously shown through some literary art works like irony and a sense of sarcasm and disapproves. Dickens works more on irony and sarcasm and irony in his novels. Characterization is different with poor people like Cecilia Jupe and Rachael. Cecilia Jupe's gentle hand adjusted Rachael's shawl upon her shimmering black hair in the normal manner of her wearing. Dickens draws more appealing portraits of the characters who incarnate human values.

Hard Times is not concerned only with the social distance that utilitarianism has brought up, but it also asserts that this philosophy fails to rally its own mischievousness. According to Dickens, the 'pursuit of happiness' is nothing but the pursuit of material profit which finishes in a completely ugly and depressing system which engenders only poor results. Rich people have financial, political, and social problems and the destitute are suffering poor and their unhealthy life conditions; they are enslaved inside factories and deprived of the most vital human rights. The routine and monotony are also depicted as the defining features of a place that is supposed to provide happiness to its inhabitants. Dickens's style shows the sad side effect of utilitarianism on the town through the register of darkness, the use of similes and metaphors. In the Book I of the novel, Coke town is shown as that city which involves many and several large streets all very like one another, and many small streets still more like one another, inhabited by people equally like one another, who all went

in and out at the same hours, with the same sound upon the same pavements and streets, to do the same work and spend time, and to whom every day was the same as yesterday and to-morrow, and every year the counterpart of the last and the next." (*Hard Times* 21) This description evokes a depressive boredom and hints to the humdrum atmosphere that scourged the city. It is noticeable that the description used to depict the ugliness of the city is the same used to objectify human beings. The novel denounces industrialism as a system that dehumanizes people rather than helps them achieve happiness. Therefore, it is a mere ludicrous delusion. In other words, the pursuit of happiness is the pursuit of a mirage, for prosperity makes sense only if it is shared by all the social classes.

This novel explains Dickens' attack on utilitarianism through showing its ruining impact on various fields, namely the educational, the socio-political and the economic areas. The system, by then, as Dickens shows it, proves to be an illusion way to wealth. Though, utilitarianism did not meet the expectations. In other facts, many novelists and philosophers wrote to further condemn this social, economic, and political reform. Among those critics, Charles Dickens stands as the reformer who brought his perspicacity to his readers through his writings; Dickens' comedy and irony pervade his satire in order to show how the industrial revolution has eroded the sense of purpose in human life. Dickens's social realism is the mirror of Victorian England. Classroom, the town of coke town, factory and industrial area, Circus Company and its atmosphere and more over architecture are the fine example of knowing the society where in the novel is set. And they represent the Victorian urban society and its mood and attitude. Class room, Dickens portrays, is not a comfortable ambience for learning.

Syllabus which is taught is highly ridiculous, by interfering with the learning and teaching methods also being used in the institution, Mr. Gradgrind and Mr. Bounderby suppress the

creative energy and freedom of the innocent school kids. And school teacher Mr. Choakumchild also joins his arms with them communication with the children asking them to define a horse. Dickens condemns Victorian education system and its backbone ideology of utilitarianism. This philosophy was called 'Philosophical Radicalism' or 'Benthamism'. The goal of it was the greatest happiness and joy of the greatest number. This philosophy largely relied on statistics, rules, and regulations. Individualism and imagination are scarcely considered, while the lecturer, Mr. Gradgrind, represents utilitarianism throughout the novel. As he raises his children, he stresses facts over imagination and function over feelings. Mr. Gradgrind heavily becomes the responsible for their school kids' failure in their lives. He offered his daughter Louisa to the Coke town's wealthy, rich, and middle aged banker and manufacturer. He measures and understands life in terms of materials view. For Mr. Gradgrind, what matters would be man's position, social, economical way, and political status. He completely fails in understanding his own kids' feelings and sentiments. As a result, Louisa failed in her marital life; where as his son Tom is misled in involving criminal activities like robbing money from the bank where he works. The education which upholds only facts cannot help his children. Not the money nor even social status, but humanity, good character and conduct, moralities and ethics are to be important.

The Victorian society was full of inequalities, haves, and have nots, poor and rich; working class and owners; cheeky people and elite people. Sissy Jupe, a daughter of an entertainer in the circus company. In the novel he is not directly seen but heard by his daughter. Because he has left his daughter and gone elsewhere. She becomes an orphan, later she is looked after by Mr. Gradgrind. In the city there are millions of orphans like Sissy Jupe. She is a catalyst for the recognition of a form of knowledge separate from Mr. Gradgrind's

Fact that of experience and of the heart and compassion. She is very humble and down to earth.

Dickens has used her to show the social change can only come from outside Coke town. She emerges at the end of *Hard Times*, a sort of companion and moral supporter to Louisa which is following her emotional explosion and as a comforter to Rachael before the whereabouts of Stephen is discovered. Rachael is the representative of an honest working class. But in the end she loses the boy so she becomes alone in the society as well as life. Stephen is one in millions who are suffered by their employers. Neither is he successful as family man nor factory worker. He is victimized. Even law also cannot help him. The setting of the novel is another striking thing to be noticed and mentioned. In all respects it is factory ridden urban town. The story takes place in Coketown, a mill town, where is polarized between the industrialists on the one side and the working class men on the other side. Working class community especially factory workers are known as the ones who have never considered as human being having heart and soul like anybody else. They are just like machines acting as the directions of their masters. Dickens brought out the negative side effects of Victorian utilitarianism through the characters of Thomas Gradgrind and Josiah Bounderby. The practical utilitarianism of Gradgrind and the egotism of Bounderby destroyed the creative spirit and fellow feeling of the small community.

Utilitarianism is a philosophy based on a minimalistic view of man that understood human nature in terms of economic relations alone. Though riddled with self-contradictions, it was responsible in some measure for forming again in administration, sanitation, and education. Utilitarianism, though inspired by the theory of laissez faire came to represent a streamlined civil service and centralization. It was difficult to reconcile the Benthamite idea and thought of general happiness of a politics and legal kind

with Adam Smith's self-harmonizing economic principle of laissez-faire (through minimum intervention from the law). Dickens seemed to be both a victim and chronicler of such a contradictory response to utilitarianism. In *Hard Times* he treats the theme of education and trade unionism from the opposing perspectives.

Urban Social Consideration in *Hard Time*

In *Hard Times*, Dickens extended his analysis of the contemporary city to the industrial north, and though in doing so he located a different source for urban social malaise, the particulars of the indictment of city life remained substantially as they had been in Bleak House. "Dickens's main intention, as Leavis says, was to comment on certain key characteristics of Victorian civilization. He was concerned about the difference ... between fact and fancy. The purpose of the novel was to emphasize ... that ... any method of ruling conduct or affairs that lacks sympathy, love, and understanding between human beings – is, in the end ... bitterly destructive" (Fielding, 132). It is not often that the continuities of *Hard Times* with Dickens' other works are stressed, but nevertheless they are substantial, and are present not only in relation to the earlier novels but to those that follow as well. It is particularly strong, and in number of respects, demonstrates the curious moral identity of people and places which Dickens was now stressing and exploring far more explicit in *Hard Times* than in other works. Dickens was consciously making connections between dwelling and dweller based on aristocratic town house. But when, in *Hard Times*, he calls Gradgrind's Stone Lodge "calculated" (10), an interesting grammatical ambiguity has entered into the following description. This relationship holds equally for the multitude's dwellings in Coke town, whose chimneys were "built in an immense variety of stunted and crooked shapes, as though every house put out a sign of the kind of people who might be expected to be born in

it" (63). From this statement, a house will collapse under the pressure of moral iniquity committed within its walls, it is but a very short step.

In Bleak House, the greatest risks of urban life are essentially various extreme forms of self-dissolution, madness, dissipation, and/or gradual death. In all these cases, though the danger is to

the self, the cause is outside in the world of events and things:

[I]t is the relentlessness of the pressure of a cruel reality which breaks the self-down. The risks are still the same in the world of *Hard Times*, but the causal agent is no longer external. The agent has moved inside and appears not as the pressure of circumstance but as a disease of the will. Mrs. Gradgrind fades into a transparency of life; Sissy's father apparently wills himself away to 'save' her from the Circus; and even as a young girl, Louisa is sick of life, sighing that, "I was tired ... I don't know of what of everything, I think." (13)

The key character in understanding this atrophy of the will is Stephen Blackpool, to whom everything in life has become a muddle. The personal muddle centers around his drunkard, whorish wife, from whom he is unable to procure a divorce. His plight was hardly unique under the current laws, divorce was available only to those wealthy and influential enough to arrange sponsorship and passage of a private parliamentary bill. It is impossible not to see Stephen's situation as in part a fantastic analogue of Dickens' own marital distress. The feeling that he had that he was trapped in his marriage to Catherine, and slowly suffocating in it, exploded only later in 1856-57, but there had been signs of distress for many years previous. (Indeed, Dickens later dated the troubles from the late 1830s.) What is true is that while his despair was growing, he showed no open signs of it yet, even to himself. The directness of the translation of his own disturbed marriage into

his fiction argues that he probably was unaware of the parallels. He had repressed the anxiety deeply enough to force it to seek unconscious outlets of expression. But in Stephen, and many other of the novel's characters, the part of Dickens' character which, prior to his separation from his wife in 1858, felt only despair and lacked the will to act in any capacity already can be seen. Present in Stephen and Louisa is the germ of the character of Arthur Clennasi, whose chilling lament will be, 'I have no will.'

The Symbolic Features of Social Existence

Dickens has used symbols in his *Hard Times* in order to give an exact shape to his moral goal to the readers. Most of the characteristic figures in the story are a personification of a considered idea or thought. There are two groups of symbolic characters: one is symbolizing the objectionable qualities of Victorian life, and other is symbolizing certain positive qualities; thus, these two opposite poles are challenged with the novel. Dickens not only has used characters as symbolic things, but also considered the ambience of Coketown as a dark jungle and a symbol of ugly industrialization. The industries and the important factories are setting in the towns make the city dirty with black smokes and pollutions symbolize unnatural dying of the workers by the modern monster like machines. The characters and their characteristics are symbolizing vice and evils, abuses and pitfalls of the ugly society is Mr. Gradgrind who keeps the first and the most and important position in his society. He successfully symbolizes the negative qualities of the utilitarian education system. He entirely just thinks on the facts, calculation and numbers and denies the purposes with fancy, love, emotions and all of his thoughts. He is the fragile and blind follower of the absurd utilitarian educational theory.

The significant point is the factual knowledge not the practical learning because of which he has to lose the attraction and

beauty of his kid's lives. Another major character Bounderby, the banker and maker, is the symbol of utilitarian in the economic theory and the theory of 'Laissez Faire' the theory which believes that economy works best if private industry is not regulated and markets are free. This ugly man clearly shows the begging for money and inhumanity in his practical life. When it comes to the purposes of the basic requirements of his workers, he changes his deaf ear and moreover he dismisses Stephen Blackpool. The daughter of Gradgrind mentions Louisa becomes the symbol of the suffering and victim of wrong and a mistaken education, upbringing, imposition of fact, avoidance of imagination from one's life. She receives our sympathy when she can't identify her feeling of love and pain. Tom, brother of Louisa, too symbolizes the same dangerous product of his father's absurd theory of education and upbringing. Bitzer also has symbolized another evil of the then existing society and culture. He is the best product of Gradgrind's main of education for whose everything is the matter of bargain who is controlled by self-interest. Mrs. Sparsit becomes the symbol of greatness and unique style of the upper class of the Victorian era. The other group of people who show a good positive features of that society are Stephen Blackpool, Rachel, Sissy and the Circus. Stephen and Rachel are the important symbols for noble minded and generous persons. Sissy Symbolizes vitality as well as goodness.

She has a silver heart and full of spirit of service. She represents the opinion of the antithesis of calculating self-interest. The circus and its people are the symbol of humanity and art where different colors of life are counted and emotion, sentiments have right place and value. Also in this symbolic manner of writing we can see that Dickens has used many symbolic features to show the social problems such as the great social gap in that era which made people into different groups and classes. Dickens has shown his literary style by using many symbols in his

novels, it is obvious that symbolism is one of his big elements that he has used through his work, the poor girl with ripped clothes, the rich merchant, and the city of Coke town is a good reminiscence of a great social gap in that era. Many quotes have been written in *Hard Times* by Charles Dickens which show the clear view of Dickens in that era, and by reading them, it could be convey plenty of information about the utilitarian way of those days and also the most important issue of the Victorian time which is the great social gap. Many judgements have also been written in the book that clarifies the social ambience and the clear lifestyle:

From the beginning, she had sat looking at him fixedly. As he now leaned back in his chair, and bent his deep-set eyes upon her in his turn, perhaps he might have seen one wavering moment in her, when she was impelled to throw herself upon his breast, and give him the pent-up confidences of her heart. But, to see it, he must have overleaped at a bound the artificial barriers he had for many years been erecting, between himself and all those subtle essences of humanity which will elude the utmost cunning of algebra until the last trumpet ever to be sounded shall blow even algebra to wreck. The barriers were too many and too high for such a leap. With his unbending, utilitarian, matter-of-fact face, he hardened her again; and the moment shot away into the plumbless depths of the past, to mingle with all the lost opportunities that are drowned there. (*Hard Times* 183)

Dickens has showed many symbols and the love affairs which are caused by social gaps. Mrs. Sparsit who has not quite gotten over having to leave Mr. Bounderby's house to make way for Louisa, maliciously watches the affair between Louisa and Mr. Harthouse actions with glee. As the two slowly draw closer and closer together, she imagines that Louisa is slowly descending a

great winding staircase while Louisa finally shows or disgraces herself publicly in some other way with Mr. Harthouse, Mrs. Sparsit considers her stepping off the bottom of the staircase and falling into a dark abyss. Louisa, of course, never quite falls off this staircase as she refuses to elope with Mr. Harthouse. Also it is shown that the great merchant has an undeniable love for philosophy and education which represents a symbol for showing how education and studying was becoming such an important thing in that era. The school, philosophy and other elements which are used in this way are a good symbol for this. The heartless scientific education of his times did not fit Dickens' moral vision of an ideal society. Instead of developing the mind of the students and teaching them to think, English education was making them memorize useless facts. "I want facts sir! What I want is facts, sir!" the teacher's voice booms in chapter one. It is a classroom scene where only the voice of the teacher echoes. The one word that comes out of the lesson is facts and next reason. The voice of the teacher is imperial and authoritative.

Dickens is ironic here. He presents the school as a model school in which Bitzer is the best student defining a horse clinically and in a very disappointed way. There is no thought or something like a creation in education, just dry scientific facts. It is obvious that the city of Coke town can clearly represents and show humans becoming so machinery and the industrial revolution which leads to the social gap. Coke town in *Hard Times* symbolizes the negative effects of industrialization on English towns. Dickens was born in 1812 and was a product of the industrial revolution, which was the rise of factories in England and the progress of iron founding, textile manufacture, and steam power increased production by leaps and bounds, bringing pollution, social imbalance, and individual confusion. Dickens was poor and had no enough education. At the age of 12, he has worked in Warren's Blacking Factory attaching labels to bottles which had a traumatic effect on his

imagination. As Engel, Monroe. Charles Dickens' *Hard Times* has explained Dickens developed a strong sympathy for orphaned and abandoned children and often showed them in his stories. He labored hard to educate himself and wrote novels to make a decent living. He, like the denizens of Coke town, had no time for idle fancy. The people of Coke town have no exuberance, in this way Dickens knew London better than Coke town but he could still bring out the listlessness of the townsfolk in Coke town. He shows the dehumanizing aspects of industrialization in urban Victorian society but does not show details of the environment.

In *Politics of Welfare State*, the author has mentioned that a variety of cross-cutting lines of political conflict, emerging from the transition to a post-industrial economy, allowed governments to engage in strategies of political exchange and coalition-building, fostering broad cross-class coalitions in support of major reform packages. The factories were also destroying the landscape because of the economic policies and the great power. They were changing the social order and making wealth for the high classes while leaving others poor. The soot-coated, black, and savage Coke town gives the sense of something repetitive. The streets, inhabitants, and homes have lost their uniqueness and they look so much alike. The repeated use of the word 'same' and the phrase 'like one another' reveal the monotony of Coke town and the drudgery of its forms. Everything in the redbrick Coke town is importantly full of works and jobs and the idea of sameness extended to the eighteen churches of different religious persuasions, the jail, infirmary, town hall, school, and cemetery. The blasting furnaces of Coke town make the place hot as hell; the gas-filled air makes people feel choked and full.

Conclusion

In *Hard Times*, Dickens has very strongly demonstrated how wishes and aspirations of innocent lives are killed and burned by the

strong interference of ideologically-ridden father. Totally Victorian society had given space and a very good feeling of need for ideology and theory but not for ideal choice. The parents have failed in understanding emotions and offering a normal life to their kid. The traumatic and tragic feelings have surrounded them. Houses or the society seems to be prisons. So the consequences are that their lives become full of hard time. Victorian time philosophy like utilitarianism manner of the Victorian society have been critically shown and imaged in this novel. As different parts of the country grow there arose problems like unemployment, the great population etc. everyone from village started to migrate towards cities in search of jobs and obviously factories in cities attract people. Those who are leaving their own towns to come and start another life in the industrial and polluted cities are culturally disconnected, because they root in the villages. Once human being loses his cultural style and beliefs he may not emotionally be strong. So human relationships lack emotional and sentimental bond. This tendency leads human beings to be very machinery. *Hard Times* demonstrates all these changes in a very significant way.

References

- [1] Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "F.H. Bradley". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Invalid Date, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/F-H-Bradley>. Accessed 15 February 2021.
- [2] Dickens, Charles. *Hard Times*. New Delhi: UBSPD, 1995.
- [3] Engel, Monroe. *Charles Dickens, Hard Times*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1990.
- [4] Fielding, K. J. Charles Dickens. A Critical Introduction. Bristol: Longmans, Green and Co. Ltd. 1958.
- [5] Giddings, Robert. *Dickens Studies Newsletter*, vol. 12, no. 1, 1981, pp. 19–24. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/45290748. Accessed 14 Feb. 2021. SAID, EDWARD

- W. (1993). *Culture and Imperialism*. London: Chatto & Windus.
- [6] Hausermann, Silja. *The Politics of Welfare State Reform in Continental Europe: Modernization in Hard Times*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.
- [7] Hicks, Granville. "The Literary Opposition to Utilitarianism." *Science & Society*, vol. 1, no. 4, 1937, pp. 454–472. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/40399111. Accessed 14 Feb. 2021.