



**Epitome : International Journal
of Multidisciplinary Research**

ISSN : 2395-6968

CHARLES DICKENS'S *HARD TIMES*: A SOCIAL DOCUMENT



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ABSTRACT

Dickens wrote his novels with the intimate and first hand knowledge of the persons and places just as he visited Preston to survey the effects of the strike of manufacturers before writing *Hard Times*. He emphasized the importance of reality in his novels by having sympathy for the poor and hapless labourers who were also neglected and suffering lot, all this added an appeal to the novel. His philosophy of facts is a perfect example of the heartless and cruel aspect of materialistic Victorian society where Gradgrind and Bounderby are the chief exponents of this ideology. *Hard Times* is a great social novel and it has exposed the hollowness of the Victorian society

KEYWORDS

Industrialisation, Utilitarianism, Victorian Society, Philosophy of Facts

RESEARCH PAPER

The novels of Charles Dickens belong totally to the humanitarian movement of the Victorian Age, and by far the most significant product and expression and for this very reason he is also regarded as a novelist with a social purpose. In almost all his books he aimed to attack some specific problems in the existing system. Born in February 1812 at Portsmouth, England, Charles Dickens was the son of Elizabeth Barrow, a house wife and John Dickens, a clerk in Navy Pay office drawing handsome salary but was often in debt because of his habit of squandering money to show off his hospitality. In 1814 the Dickens family moved to London and then to Chatham to get education, but he was only twelve when he had to discontinue his studies for earning livelihood as the family was in great financial crisis. His father was sent to the Marshalsea prison for non payment of debts and Charles started working at a London warehouse, he worked daily for twelve hours at a stretch in a shoe factory where shoes were manufactured, cleaned and packed and the small wages which he got was just enough to support his family at this difficult time. This period of hardship played a significant role in his life as he has faced the ample unpleasant experiences as a growing young man which he portrayed in many of his works. As he was a child labourer, exploited, poor, hapless and not properly educated; his anxiety, disillusionment and dejection is reflected in his articles, stories, novels and journals.

When his father was acquitted from the Marshalsea prison for the debtors, Charles could not heave a sigh of relief as his mother compelled him to continue working in the factory for providing comfortable life to the family; this fact emotionally shattered the small child. His father grew a bit kind to him and sent him to study at Wellington House Academy in London from 1824 to 1827 which enabled him to get the job of a law clerk. Later on he worked as a shorthand reporter in the Parliament where he got the first hand knowledge of the inner working of the judicial system which helped him in depicting such scenes in his novels in a life like and realistic manner. *Hard Times* is a novel about general state of affairs in which the lives of people are checked or restricted and in which people are prevented from giving a free vent and spontaneous outlet to their natural feelings and sentiments.

Deborah Vlock rightly emphasized that Dickens' popularity is due "to his intense human sympathy, his unsurpassed emotional and dramatic power, his aggressive humanitarianism and his zeal for the reform of all evils and abuses, whether they weigh upon oppressed classes or upon helpless individuals" (Vlock 18). Dickens has been rightly classed as the most touching and

pathetic mouthpiece of the poor people. Michael Slater well remarks, “It is doubtful whether any English writer has ever been so popular as Dickens was in his lifetime, popular not only with one class or one generation, but with all classes, the rich and the poor, the young and the old alike” (Slater 24). He was one of the most prominent social critics who aimed at pinpointing social, economic and moral problems of the Victorian age. He championed the weak and poor sections of the British society to bring social reforms and to bring awareness in the reading public. As a novelist Dickens has been viewed and studied from different viewpoints by literary critics. They studied him deeply and intensely and came to the conclusion that he was a realist, naturalist, satirist, social reformer, feminist, social documentarist, all rolled in one .

Hard Times written in 1854 was one of the significant writings bearing social criticism and economic inequality. The novel is a severe attack on the industrial vices and faulty political economy which was responsible for the exploitation of the poor working class and weak section of the society. The novel also highlights the current issues like strike at working place which refers to the Preston strike in 1853-54 which was eight months old and had deep impact on the political economy of England. In the word of David Daiches, "*Hard Times* is based on the morality of the utilitarian industrialism and its effect on the possibilities of human happiness" (Daiches 1056).

In *Hard Times*, the social consciousness of urbanization and industrialization is delineated very vividly because the writer was touched to the heart by the prevailing conditions. Although some critics call it as a moral fable, and this consideration still affects the general perception of Dickens's novels. It is significant that *Hard Times* throws light on the actual conditions of life of the poor and the prosperous of the nineteenth century England. Moreover it can be considered a defence of fancy, of which Dickens was a great supporter, against the philosophy of Facts. However, in *Hard Times* as well as in the utilitarianism doctrines, fancy and imagination are avoided. Dickens describes a city regulated by the utilitarian rules that influence life at every stage in family and work place, from infancy to adulthood. *Hard Times*, more than any other of his novels exposed the conditions of England, its social problems like education of the poor people, industrial relations and the unequal rights of people which showed class distinction. The novel shows that divorce laws were not easy. Cazamian observes Dickens in this novel as an “intermediary link between the social thought of Carlyle and Ruskin” (Cazamian 173). In this novel, Dickens created a 'condition of England', which is directly concerned with contemporary

problems and social issues. He lays bare the exploitation of the labour class by merciless industrialists. He also shows the drastic results of suppressing feeling and imagination to teach them only Facts. Dickens is critical about utilitarian laws so he aimed at ensuring justice through ethical and moral means.

Through his narrative and characterization, Dickens explains the ideals as well as the harmful effects of industrialization and utilitarianism. Dickens felt that a dependence upon capitalistic practicality without sympathy and brotherly understanding causes continued difficulties in the relations of capital and labor. G.B. Shaw contends:

Here you will find, no more villains and heroes, but only oppressors and victims, oppressing and suffering in spite of themselves, driven by a huge machinery which grinds to pieces the people...(Shaw 126)

Shaw means to say that in this novel the oppressors are so much callous and self-centred that they can go to any extent to nourish their monetary greed and so one can find everywhere poor and helpless victims. Dickens has presented the growing anger of the sufferers resulting into a revolt against the oppression and suppression of the prevailing industrialism. In *Hard Times*, the utilitarian principle finds its exponents and champions in the two leading characters, Gradgrind and Bounderby. Gradgrind's theory of education is manifestly an offshoot of utilitarian attitude to life. Gradgrind's philosophy of facts had effacing effects on society because children were regarded as empty bottles waiting to be filled with knowledge which means, pure facts. The innocence, fancy and imagination of the children are brutally killed by this type of education. Gradgrind is commanding his power when he addresses the teacher Mr. M' Choakumchild: "Now what I want, is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts: nothing else will ever be of service to them... Stick to Facts, sir!"(1).

"No little Gradgrind had ever learnt the silly jingle, Twinkle, twinkle little star; how I wonder what you are!"(Dickens 10). Even the very name Gradgrind represents the qualities of measuring reality in an insensitive manner and emphasizes the effect of grinding something to pieces. In this novel, one can observe that the students are not called by their names but by numbers. Addressing Sissy Jupe, the utilitarian Gradgrind calls her pupil number twenty and asks her to define a horse factually. As she is the daughter of a horse rider at circus, she is not able to

describe a horse as Gradgrind wanted. In that class, there is another student named Bitzer who is a devout follower of the philosophy of facts, when he is asked to define a horse accurately, he says, "Quadruped. Graminivorous. Forty teeth, namely twenty-four grinders, four eye-teeth, and twelve incisive...Age known by marks in the mouth" (6). Then Gradgrind tells Sissy that in this way she should know what a horse is

The industrial mechanization had damaging effects on personal and family life and relations of Gradgrind and Bounderby also. The house of Gradgrind aptly called 'Stone Lodge' as it was hard, factual and devoid of all sentiments. All these qualities are the qualities of stone and as a result his children Tom and Louisa were so full of facts that they were tired of this monotonous life and they wanted some welcome and refreshing change. As he scolds and sberat the children, they tell him that they wanted to learn more than they had. From the cradle, Tom and Louisa have been brought up with facts; but Tom surrenders to the doctrines of his father, whereas Louisa knows that there is something missing in their lives.

The principles that dominate Mr. Gradgrind's school are the principles that dominate Coketown and its industry. His philosophy of facts is a perfect example of the callous and ruthless phase of materialistic Victorian society where Gradgrind and Bounderby are the chief exponents of this ideology. Bounderby is described as a "man perfectly devoid of sentiment"(15). While Gradgrind does show some signs of human feeling by taking the abandoned Sissy under his protection and he certainly changes his outlook upon life by the time the story ends, Bounderby shows no sign of any human feeling and remains till the end what he is at the beginning – cold and insensitive to human needs. So he keeps them confined to abject poverty and to sub-human level of existence. Bounderby is depicted as formidable, domineering, mighty and highly mechanized person who represents the negative and destructive influences of the industrial Coketown on its citizens as he looks after his own interests. Actually Bounderby occupies a privileged and dominating position in Coketown who wants to assert his authority and power for his monetary gains and he expects docility and obedience on the part of the workers. He is frankly scornful of the needs, requirements, and demands of his workmen. Mukesh Williams remarks, "*Hard Times* is a harsh indictment of the relentless industrialisation of the 19th century made in the name of progress that was making men into machines" (Williams 380). According to Briggs, "*Hard Times* can also be considered a dark fable. The industrial city represents the sad reign of the fables, colonised by soul less humans" (Briggs 19). Bounderby is a man made out of

a coarse material who constantly boasts of his being self-made. He looks upon his workmen as tools by using them properly he wants to grow richer. Bounderby's only purpose in life appears to check these workers to go upwards in society and improve their economic condition.

It is worth mentioning that Stephen Blackpool is not as self-centred as Mr. Bounderby, because he thinks of others' well being also. When he faces a labour dispute at Bounderby's factory, he refuses to go on strike as he does not want to increase the problem of the workers. The workers have established a union in Coketown and Stephen does not want to join in their plan. He is condemned by the other workers and dismissed from the factory by Bounderby when he does not agree to spy over his colleagues for Bounderby. On the other hand, Bitzer, who was a good student at Gradgrind's school and he followed everything of utilitarian education. He is selfish to the extent that he becomes spy at Bounderby's bank and even stops Tom from fleeing to a foreign country after it is found that he is the bank robber, not the poor weaver of the crime. Bitzer wants that Tom should be arrested by the police so that he may get a better position in the bank. When Gradgrind requests Bitzer to help Tom as he has been at good terms for many years at school, Bitzer clearly says that the basic principle of his philosophy is that everything should be considered in terms of money whether it is love or respect. Bitzer at this juncture says, "My schooling was paid for, it was a bargain, and when I came away, the bargain ended" (288). The utilitarian form of education which uses Arithmetic as its fundamental tool, demanded that "nobody was ever on any account to give anybody anything, or render anybody help without purchase...every inch of the existence of mankind, from birth to death, was to be a bargain across the counter" (288). So, even education was also considered a business like other businesses where relationships and interactions have their profit and loss balance. The virtues like love, affection, gratefulness and sweetness have no place in the world of calculations

Now I arrive at the conclusion that Charles Dickens's *Hard Times* is a great social novel and it has exposed the hollowness of the Victorian society. Dickens wants to support an idea by presenting his characters in opposite situations and meeting with failures and frustrations in life. His main aim is to expose the negative aspect of this education system and emotion and fancy are like skeleton and flesh of a body, both vital to make the system worthwhile. Dickens wants to give the idea that fancy is a positive alternative to the philosophy of facts so that people can lead a contented and progressive life and the theme of the novel is vital and outstanding in presenting the social turmoil and transformation in the 19th century Industrial England.

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