



The Bleak Landscape of Progress: Social Commentary in Dickens' Hard Times

*Muhammad Rizwan**

Department of English, School of Education, Lincoln University College, Malaysia

Email : rizwan6825968@gmail.com

Yumna Khatoon

Department of English, School of Education, Lincoln University College, Malaysia

Email: Yumna.khatoon@fuuast.edu.pk

***Correspondence:**

Email: rizwan6825968@gmail.com

Abstract:

This paper delves into Charles Dickens' "Hard Times" as a potent critique of industrial progress and its dehumanizing effects on Victorian society. Through a close reading of the novel, this analysis examines how Dickens portrays the fictional Coketown as a "bleak landscape" shaped by utilitarian philosophy, relentless industrialization, and the suppression of imagination and emotion. The study elucidates Dickens' social commentary on the widening gap between the industrialist class and the working poor, the detrimental impact of a purely factual education system, and the erosion of individual spirit in the face of mechanization. Furthermore, it explores Dickens' use of symbolism, characterization, and narrative techniques to underscore the social injustices and moral aridity inherent in an unchecked pursuit of progress devoid of human compassion. Ultimately, this paper argues that "Hard Times" remains a relevant and powerful indictment of societal structures that prioritize material advancement over human well-being, urging a re-evaluation of the true cost of progress.

Keywords: Dickens, Hard Times, social commentary, industrialization, utilitarianism, Victorian society, progress, dehumanization.

Introduction:

The Victorian period was the time of enormous social, economic, and technological change when the queen ruled the empire of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland Queen

Victoria in the years between 1837 and 1901. There was no such development in England since the country experienced unprecedented industrial development and the process of urbanization and emergence of capitalistic economy transformed the social order. Even though industrialism led to the economic prosperity of a few, social injustices and environmental deterioration also increased. Manchester, and others like it, which are depicted as Coketown in *Hard Times*, provided not only a stage but also an icon of industrial success and human misery (Altick, 1973). It is under these social transitions that a literary response that aimed at examining the moral implications of progress found a fertile environment with that of Charles Dickens being a classical effort in the same.

Charles Dickens, the greatest writers of the given era, found his great fiction not as a means of a good tale but rather as an instrument of social criticism. His novels had always written against institutional failure and the oppression of the outcasts in industrial society. *Hard Times* (1854) is a departure on the part of Dickens, who usually favored expansively scripted novels, to create a brief, unified lampoon against utilitarianism, industrial capitalism and class division (Flint, 2001). Dickens achieves this by exposing the existing ideologies of his era and distributing a vision of the society where humanity is suppressed to the ideologies of economic rationalism and mechanical perfectionism through his prose and lucid characters.

This paper will discuss the *Hard Times* in regard to its role as a criticism of the socio-economic and ideological formation of the Victorian England. It places the novel in a wider context of reformist ethos of Dickens, and how he creates the resistive narrative against the focus discourses of the time. To be more precise, the paper will dwell upon the way in which the novel deals with the aftermath of the industrialization, criticizes fact-based utilitarian schooling and highlights the issue of class oppression. In this way, the paper demonstrates the timeless effectiveness of the novel as the text that cautions the reader about the price of progress that overlooks emotional, spiritual, and moral needs of persons (Ledger & Luckhurst, 2000).

The model of industrialism presented in the *Hard Times* turns out to be dehumanizing because it deprives life of energy and individuality. The monotonous architecture, constricting smoke, and indefatigable machines of Coketown described by Dickens convey the impression of the aspect of mechanical character of an economy whose business card is production and profit (Hollington, 2000). The people are mentioned as being the same implying that they have been losing their identity to industrial conformity. Moreover,

Dickens also attacks the logic according to which this system operates, that is the logic of utility and subordination of a human being to the means of labor. Widening his critique, this is in line with his objection concerning the ideas of eminent thinkers such as Jeremy Bentham whose stress in the books on utility tended to overlook the complex and emotional aspects of human existence (Taylor, 1983).

Along with critiquing the industrialism, Dickens considers the education system of his era, as well, focusing his attention on what he interpreted as a responsibility in the greater societal ailment. Mr. The formula of facts, facts, facts proposed by Gradgrind turns out to be a sort of emblem of the epistemological system that disdains imagination, empathy and moral evolution. This ideology is contrasted by the character of Sissy Jupe who enhances such virtues as empathy and the ability to adequately understand (Bloom, 2007). Likewise, Stephen Blackpool is the representative of the working class not as the solid block but as the individuals who can be proud and think morally, even though they are deprived of upward mobility. Such descriptions only support Dickens in thinking that the first step in reform should be the acknowledgment of human diversity and sensitivity (Meckier, 1987).

Finally, the thesis that industrial development in the case of being steered only by the postulates of utilitarianism and economical self-interest results in decay of human values is powerful in *Hard Times*. By the use of allegory, satiric and narrative symbolism, Dickens exposes spiritual and social poverty and injustices that appear in the world of machinery. The novel promotes the idea of an empathic, imaginative and ethical society and his ideal is so superior that it can hardly be forgotten even in present-day discussions of modernization and human well-beings (Eagleton, 2005). This paper will look into the articulation of these issues in *Hard Times* and the place of the work by Dickens in the larger debate of the costs of civilization.

Industrialism and the Mechanization of Society

In *Hard Times*, Dickens creates Coketown as a bleak object of industrial dystopia, a symbol of physical and psychic-vexation of uncontrolled industrial progress. The town is also portrayed in harsh, cruel words, repetitive words with capitalization of red brick, black canal and interminable serpents of smoke related, which portrays a gloomy, dull surrounding atmosphere without any beauty of any change (Dickens, 1854/2001). The dehumanizing goals of mechanized urban planning are enhanced by architectural uniformity, the fact that,

as unfavorable as it is to some people, all the buildings and people are all the same. Dickens intends to wipe out the individuality of the urban landscape to signify the industrialism that represses the individual identity so that economic efficiency can be served (Hollington, 2000). Coketown, then, has environmental imagery that reflects spiritual desolation of a production-engulfed profit society.

The role of industrialism in the development of human life could be traced in the way Dickens shows the life of a worker mainly in the personality of Stephen Blackpool. The workers are not introduced as people, but rather as replaceable parts of a huge wheel of economy, where they are doomed to tedious working with few personal satisfaction. Dickens is critical of the ways in which human labor is commoditized as factory owners only see their workers as a cog in the pipelines of production but do not take into account the individual needs and ambitions of a human being (Eagleton, 2005). This placing of the labor force under automation develops alienation, a state of the world that Marx was to theorize, when the persons in a profit motivated society lose touch not only with work, but with their very humanity. In this the factory itself is both the literal realm of industry and the metaphysical arena of corruption.

The industrialism, as it applies to Dickens, is a process that not only dehumanizes a worker but also degrades nature and even culture. The natural surroundings of Coketown are poisoned by smoke, soot, and dirt creating a rather depressing picture of the landscape in which the industrial pollution is an indicator of a more profound moral taint. Dickens creates a strong opposition between the mechanicalism around and the lack of aestheticism or emotionalism, implying that industrial amelioration involves the destruction of the culture and spiritual health (Altick, 1973). Natural features such as trees, rivers among others are either non-existent or have been polluted highlighting the fact that the growth of the economy mars the physical world. This ravaging of the environment is not just a description, rather serves as an indictment to a civilization, which in its struggle to make progress, is going out of its way to destroy.

In addition, the cultural implications of industrialism are also disastrous. Dickens does not only represent Coketown as a physically polluted world but also shows it as intellectually sterile, where the idea of utilitarianism reigns in the educational system, the inner family life, and politics. This intellectual saturation incorporates what Dickens considered moral myopia of the Victorian industrialists at the time, who valued facts, productivity and maximization

rather than humanity and innovation (Ledger & Luckhurst, 2000). Imagination gets crushed in such a world and art becomes an outdated thing. Mechanization of the society is consequently not only limited to factories, and it has pervaded into thought, emotion, morality. Dickens cautions that the society, where the material interest is the only objective, will inexorably lose the human and cultural values.

Utilitarianism and Its Moral Shortcomings

Hard Times by Dickens is a strong expression against utilitarianism specially in the character of Mr. Thomas Gradgrind who represents the strict and fact oriented approach towards education then. Gradgrind is the extreme example of utilitarian convictions about the possibility to explain and control the reality with the help of measurable facts with his demand that are wanted in life are Facts, facts (Dickens, 1854/2001, p. 1). The ideology is sold to children and the process of education has been turned into rote learning and thought processes mechanized. Sissy Jupe, who was brought up in the world of imagination in the circus, cannot cope with this system as she is a person of emotional intelligence and moral sensitivity, which is not something that generally can be measured according to the rules provided by Gradgrind (Bloom, 2007). On the contrary, Bitzer the model utilitarian student turns out to be emotionally crippled and morally apathetic, an example of how Dickens feared this sort of education breeds technically competent but morally flawed individuals.

Introducing the contrast between instrumental reason and emotional and imaginative strengths, Dickens makes the clash between logic and human feeling the emblem of his moral sense. Whereas utilitarianism treats the measurable outputs and economic usefulness as important, Dickens promotes human ability to empathize and intuition. Gradgrind and Bounderby, epitomes of pure rationalism, are depicted as desolate, blind and emotionally poor personalities in relation to those whose lives are ruled by emotion (Sissy) who provide a moral balance and strength (Eagleton, 2005). By this opposition, Dickens suggests that imagination and feeling are not incompatible with reason but are the prerequisites to the ethical judgment and self-development. His moral interest in a balanced view is a deeper gesture towards an ideology obtained by the Enlightenment that disenfranchises subjective, spiritual life (Ledger & Luckhurst, 2000).

The political and social meanings of the critique supplied by Dickens are vast. Utilitarianism, in its vision of human experience as the mere quantitative product, the number in a test or

money in the bank, the utility index, strips the life of society of all moral substance and cultural content, in the opinion of Dickens. It is particularly seen in institutions where people are regarded as numbers or objects of economics, and the sense of individual dignity is lost and the aspect of communal responsibility is diminished (Taylor, 1983). *Hard Times* cautions against the dangers of a policy and governance process that makes only statistical sense as opposed to being sensitive to the multidimensionality of human needs and lives. In such a way, Dickens prophesizes the contemporary criticism of technocratic law making and emphasizes the necessity to incorporate emotional intelligence and moral values into every aspect of social life.

Class Inequality and the Failure of Reform

In *Hard Times*, Dickens provides a poignant depiction of class inequality through the character of Stephen Blackpool, a working-class man whose quiet dignity and moral integrity stand in stark contrast to the systemic injustices he endures. Stephen represents the voiceless labor force, trapped in harsh industrial conditions without legal protection or viable avenues for reform. His rejection by both the factory owners and the trade unions reveals the limitations of organized labor, which, in Dickens' view, often mirrored the same exclusionary tactics as the capitalist class it opposed (Bloom, 2007). Stephen's fate—ostracized, falsely accused, and ultimately dying alone—underscores the novel's message that without genuine systemic change, the working class remains condemned to cycles of exploitation and suffering (Altick, 1973). Alongside his representation of the oppressed, Dickens sharply critiques the bourgeois elite, particularly through Josiah Bounderby, whose self-fashioned narrative of —rags to riches is revealed to be a fabrication. Bounderby's arrogance and performative philanthropy serve as a satire of Victorian capitalist morality, exposing how social mobility myths are used to justify inequality and dismiss structural disadvantage (Eagleton, 2005). Dickens unmasks the futility of superficial charity by showing that gestures of goodwill from the upper class do little to address the roots of poverty and disenfranchisement. Instead, such actions reinforce a system in which power remains concentrated and reform is reduced to hollow rhetoric. Through this portrayal, Dickens calls for a moral awakening that goes beyond charitable acts and confronts the deeper injustices embedded in class hierarchies (Ledger & Luckhurst, 2000).

Gender Roles and Emotional Repression

The character development of Louisa Gradgrind in the book *Hard Times* by Charles Dickens is a heart-rending example of what the utilitarian philosophy can cost a person when brought up inside a framework of Victorian gender constructs. As Louisa is conditioned since her infancy to repress her emotions and focus on reason, she becomes an emotionally retarded person who is unable to express her needs, to label them, and why them. It is this emotional breakdown at the conclusion of her life that shows us the psychological harm done by an education system that teaches facts more than emotions, especially detrimental to women who were to be inhibited and at the same time morally right (Dickens, 1854 /2001). Dickens does not merely introduce Louisa as the victim of the suffering, the author reveals the concept on the level of a social tragedy arguing that the interactions of the patriarchal and utilitarian doctrine deprived women of their agency, intimacy, and a chance of becoming morally developed (Taylor, 1983).

Sissy Jupe, on the contrary, represents another set of behavior, which is based on empathy, imagination, and emotional intelligence. A child on the realm of fiction and human empathy, Sissy is a living contradiction to Gradgrind fact-based philosophy. She has constant understanding and emotive scientific rectitude that can help her to mentor and ultimately redeem her fellows in the Gradgrind family, especially Louisa (Bloom, 2007). By means of Sissy, Dickens tries to disrupt the styles of dominant masculine logics of containment and calculation, implying that the feminine virtues, which were pushed to the periphery of Victorian society, play a vital role in individual repair and societal recovery. Using Sissy, Dickens proposes such an educational and moral model, which is capable of appreciating emotional complexity and ensures the development of imagination that is so vital to a humanistic society (Ledger & Luckhurst, 2000).

Conclusion

Hard Times by Charles Dickens is an excellent example of literary criticism of socio-economic and ideological influence over the Victorian England. In the novel, Dickens not only reveals the dehumanising effects of industrial capitalism, the narrow-mindedness of the philosophy of utilitarianism and the established inequalities of class relations. With the help of characters like Mr. Gradgrind, Josiah Bounderby and Stephen Blackpool, and the setting of an industrial dystopia such as Coketown, Dickens creates a cosmos where emotional suppression, factory-regulated work, and social inquiry work harmoniously to eliminate the individual soul. These aspects form the key elements of his plot and characters, where

Dickens has succeeded to unite other genres with satire, symbolism, and highly personalized development of his characters (Eagleton, 2005; Hollington, 2000).

The themes discussed in *Hard Times* are still very topical to the present society. Proceeding toward an era that was still uneconomic and that still has environmental abuse and the significance of education and technology as hot topics, the warnings by Dickens on the price of progress remain very valid. Dickens is aptly put in the present modern society where there is a clash of productivity and humanity, governance through information and care of the individual; a situation that is very common in the current society (Taylor, 1983). His technological mocking of the dehumanization of labor, the shortsightedness of rote education facilities, and the inane fake charity in the context of the presentation of his work directly address the issues many people—globally, nowadays, are worried about in regards to automatization, climate change, and neoliberal economic strategies.

As it is evidenced in *Hard Times*, literature is crucial in raising social awareness. Dickens did not write the novel as a simple response to the social experience but as a challenge to it, providing a channel of ethical interaction to the reader by way of narrative compassion as well as inquiry. Through the exposition of the emotional life of the marginalized and critique of the ideologies that structure the lives of the people, Dickens locates books and fiction as a form of moral interest and catalyst of change (Bloom, 2007). Through that, he makes the reader test his limits and cease to be passive user of information but rather an active user as this will promote critiques on the systems that govern our society.

Finally, *Hard Times* is remembered as a lesson of how unwise it can be to value progress at the expense of people. Dickens urges on the need to find a balance between material progress and human values and which is as difficult to find even nowadays. His novel offers the readers to contemplate the possibility of living in a society that is not based on utility and profit, but on caring, imaginations, and justice. So long as these tensions remain a part of the contemporary world *Hard Times* will always remain a worthy and vital reminder of the consequences of failing to remember what it means to be human (Altick, 1973; Ledger & Luckhurst, 2000).

References

Altick, R. D. (1973). *Victorian people and ideas: A companion for the modern reader of Victorian literature*. W. W. Norton.

- Bloom, H. (Ed.). (2007). *Charles Dickens's Hard Times*. Chelsea House.
- Dickens, C. (2001). *Hard times* (K. Flint, Ed.). Penguin Books. (Original work published 1854)
- Eagleton, T. (2005). *The English novel: An introduction*. Blackwell Publishing.
- Flint, K. (2001). The Victorian novel and its readers. In D. David (Ed.), *The Cambridge companion to the Victorian novel* (pp. 15–33). Cambridge University Press.
- Hollington, M. (2000). *Charles Dickens: Critical issues*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ledger, S., & Luckhurst, R. (Eds.). (2000). *The fin de siècle: A reader in cultural history, c. 1880–1900*. Oxford University Press.
- Meckier, J. (1987). *Hidden rivalries in Victorian fiction: Dickens, realism, and reevaluation*. University Press of Kentucky.
- Taylor, B. (1983). *Eve and the new Jerusalem: Socialism and feminism in the nineteenth century*. Virago.
- Bowen, J. (2014). *Other Dickens: Pickwick to Chuzzlewit*. Oxford University Press.
- Brantlinger, P. (1985). *The spirit of reform: British literature and politics, 1832–1867*. Harvard University Press.
- Gallagher, C. (1985). *The industrial reformation of English fiction: Social discourse and narrative form, 1832–1867*. University of Chicago Press.
- Jordan, J. O. (2001). *Supposing "Hard Times": A reconsideration*. *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 29(2), 293–307. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150301002057>
- Norris, C. (1990). *What's wrong with postmodernism: Critical theory and the ends of philosophy*. Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Flint, K. (1995). *The woman reader, 1837–1914*. Oxford University Press.