



## Hard Times: A Subtext of English Society

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### Abstract

*Charles Dickens provides a substantial analysis of the various social problems that were prevalent in the 19<sup>th</sup> century industrial society of England in his novel, Hard Times. Many social issues while composing the novel influenced Dickens. A reader can notice Hard Times in Stephen Blackpool's character that represents the honest hard working, proletariat class. He has no desire to be what he is not and does not cause or get troubled. All he wishes for is an ordinary and austere life; which he knows is difficult to achieve. Dickens, through Stephen Blackpool brings to light many of the problems rampant in the society.*

*The novel focuses on the mentality of the Bourgeoisie; the upper or ruling class of the English society. They are in a position to rule due to their control over the base and economic means of production. It is*

*because of their control over the base they consciously or unconsciously exercises their ideology on the proletariat, or working class. Hard Times is a class-conscious novel with an attack on Utilitarianism. Mr. Gradgrind, the novel's patriarchal figure, orders his children that they "are to be in all things regulated and governed" (6) by 'facts' and 'reason', but the narrator of the novel describes this process of raising children as the "manufacture of the human fabric" (87) where he is associating children with material. The study will investigate the social problems which are giving people hard times in Hard Times.*

**Keywords:** Bourgeoisie, Proletariat, Utilitarianism, Society, etc.



Charles Dickens was one of the most prominent social reviewers who expended fiction effectively to question and criticize economic, social, and ethical manipulations in the Victorian era. Dickens was empathetic and kind towards the susceptible and deprived sections of English society and gave his contribution to many social reforms. Dickens's traumatic childhood experiences helped him in developing a strong social conscience, an ability to empathize with the victims of social and economic injustice. Dickens believed that a strong piece of writing can bring a change to some extent and made his novels a platform for debates about political and social restructuring. In his novels he analyzed the evils, which were plaguing the society of his time and became a candid critic of unfair economic and social conditions.

Dickens was a prodigious preacher and an insightful social commentator. Though he was not the first novelist to bring attention of the reading public to the denial of the lower classes in England, but he proved to be a success than his predecessors in highlighting the tribulations of the industrial society including class division, poverty, low wages, bad living conditions, etc. all of Dickens's novels come with a social message. However, Louis James maintains that:

Dickens is at once central and untypical in the 'social novel.' A novelist

universally associated with social issues, he was attacked for allowing his imagination to come between his writing and his subject, and his underlying attitudes can be evasive. In his fiction, most characters have a job, but Dickens rarely shows them at work. His novels are centrally about social relationships,...Even his explicit working out of class and industrial issues in *Hard Times*(1854), based on a hasty visit to a factory strike in Preston, identified the factory problem not with economics but with the Utilitarian denial of human imagination, and juxtaposed the factories of Coketown against the bizarre world of Sleary's travelling circus. (548)

*Hard Times* draws attention to the social repercussions of industrialization and urbanization in a most persuasive manner. Raymond Williams describes *Hard Times* as, "a thorough-going and creative examination of the dominant philosophy of industrialism of the hardness that Mrs. Gaskell saw as a little more than a misunderstanding which might be patiently broken down" (93). It is this industrialization that led to the oppression of poor working class by the rich industrialists that term the hard workers as "Hands" with no emotions. This display that they are counted only in terms of work and production. The



novel is a stern criticism against the economic discrimination of the age where the rich are extremely rich and the poor are subjected to poverty. Even the divorce law remains a privilege of the rich class. Stephen Blackpool, a poor worker had a drunk and ruthless wife, wanted to seek divorce from her, but cannot because of his poor financial status, as he was not able to afford the expensive fee of divorce lawyer.

The novel is a perfect example of an “attack on the Utilitarianism” of the bygone Victorian era, which lacked emotions and sentiments but gave importance to facts, numbers, and calculations. For Gradgrind, “Love is misplaced expressions.” He never gave permission to his children to imagine, to loiter or put questions related to emotions. Gradgrind had only one principle called ‘fact’. He did not even hesitate to convert relations into numbers and persuaded his daughter Louisa to marry a man double of her age.

Dickens also satirized the education system in the narrative fiction. The school’s environment and teachers were profoundly, influenced by the Utilitarian principles. The students were taught to study what the teachers taught, but not to think or question upon the teaching given by them. Louisa being a product of those institutional values could not comprehend her own emotions and Tom was

also not able to find solution of a particular problem.

Dickens’s novels and the issues are relevant to present day society due to the fact that these exploited and depraved sections of society are still the most helpless members of today’s scenario. They face ‘alienation’ as they do not possess the fruits of their labour, “The Marxist theory of history posits class struggle as history’s driving force, and it sees capitalism as the most recent and most critical historical stage- most critical because at this stage the Proletariat will at last arise united” (3).

Dickens with great precision illustrates the conditions at the Coketown factory where: Stokers emerged from low underground doorways into factory yards, and sat on steps, and posts and palings wiping their swarthy visages, and contemplating coals. The whole town seemed to be frying in oil. There was a stifling smell of hot oil everywhere. The steam engines shone with it, the dresses of the Hands were soiled with it, the mills throughout their many stories oozed and trickled it. The atmosphere of those fairy palaces was like the breath of the simoon: and their inhabitants, wasting with heat, toiled languidly in the desert. (6)

The poor workers were subjected to horrid lifestyle that was entirely dissimilar and separate from that of the upper classes. Their



slums were surrounded by filth and carelessness. They were given inhuman treatment and were exploited by their employers. However, Dickens on the other hand also shows the positive side of humanity in character like, Sissy. Dickens exposes the excesses of laissez-faire capitalism and the damaging consequences of promoting statistical knowledge at the cost of feeling and imagination. *Hard Times* attests that fancy is a necessary requirement for happiness.

## References

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