

Dickens' Hard Times: A Moral Fable/ A Social Satire

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F. R. Leavis, in his book *The Great Tradition*, calls *Hard Times* a moral fable. He says that the intention or central vision in *Hard Times* is so insistent that the representative significance of everything- characters, scenes and situations- become quite apparent as we read the novel. A 'fable' often involves animals rather than humans, with the objective to entertain us while also suggesting a logical moral conclusion. While *Hard Times* cannot strictly be described a fable, it is a fact that a strong moral purpose permeates through the structure and texture of the novel. The novel is a satirical exposure of some of the evils and vices of an industrial society. Thus, satire always evinces corrective purpose and is essentially moral in its approach to the subject it deals with.

Satire is a literary technique of exposing social ills or deviations through ridicule; it intends to arouse contempt through humour with the objective of improving the conditions of life. It is remarkable that in one of his letters, Dickens himself refers to the satiric design of the novel which seeks to expose those "who see figures and averages, and nothing else- the representatives of the wickedest and most enormous vice of this time." *Hard Times* uses exaggeration and irony to ridicule and criticize social, political, and economic problems during the years after industrialization had taken a firm hold in society. Objects of Dickens's ridicule include Coketown, the masters and their principles that govern life there.

The Victorian age in England was one of industrialization driven by the twin forces of utilitarianism and 'laissez-faire' that was supposed to usher in economic prosperity and development in all walks of life. Utilitarianism as a politico-economic doctrine is based on the basic assumption that anything is fairly moral and ethical if it promotes "the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people." Based on the philosophy of Jeremy Bentham, utilitarianism appears to be that "the end justifies the means" and that one should aim at anything that increases his happiness and decreases his misery. Therefore, this led to a "Pursuit of Happiness" which legitimized the colonial programme couched in the "White Burden". However, it was soon realized that the notion of 'prosperity' is just a mirage with tragic social consequences. In its final outcome, it dehumanizes people rather than helps them achieve happiness. Therefore, it is a nothing but ludicrous delusion. In other words, the pursuit of happiness is the pursuit of mirage, for prosperity becomes meaningful only if it is shared by all the social classes. Dickens, as a social critic, claims in his letters to "strike the heaviest blow in... power" to side with those who struggle against a miserable situation arising from a Capitalist system which permeates every aspect of existence. As such, *Hard Times*, a satirical novel, ridicules the general zeitgeist and philosophy of the age. It provides a harsh criticism of life in an industrialized England, exposing its failure in different areas: the educational, social, political and economic fields.

Throughout the novel, Dickens ridicules the utilitarian system of education as being suffocating in shaping and training tender minds of the children. Instead of developing their creative and imaginative faculties, both Gradgrind and Bounderby seek to indoctrinate their students to think only in terms of 'facts'. The First Book presents the picture of education through caricature: the name of the school itself,

M'Choakumchild is suggestive- a school that suffocates the children with an ideology that makes their life tasteless and devoid of amusement, and innocent happiness. Pupils are referred to as "little jars.... little vessels....who were to be filled so full with facts" The novelist directs his criticism both at school and at home-training. The main story centers on Thomas Gradgrind and his family. Gradgrind is delineated as an "eminently practical father". He has a total control over his children and teaches them to think and behave only according to facts and not according to imagination. He not only ensures that his children imbibe the Utilitarian ideology, but also eliminates in them their emotion, spontaneity, and imagination- the qualities that could have made them humans. Gradgrind's reaction when he finds Tom and Louisa watching the circus shows the authoritarian behavior and implementation of wrong principles of education. At the end of the novel, Gradgrind does not reach happiness but instead gets an important moral; the vicissitude of life must have taught him an unforgettable truth. Dickens describes him as a crippled person who becomes aware of his own misconceptions. Gradgrind ends up defeated; he is "aged and bent ...and quite bowed down; and yet looked a wiser man, and a better man than in the days when in this life he wanted nothing -but Facts."

The failure of education is also apparent in the decisions and speech of Bounderby. In Book II, Bounderby wishes to hang each and every worker. He says that they "ought to be hanged wherever they are found". This seems to be ironic on two levels. First, without workers, factories will not be able to function and, therefore, the banking system will collapse. Hence, Bounderby's welfare is threatened. Therefore, he does not know where his interests lie even though he is an educated banker. Secondly, he comes from the lower social working class. Hence, he should have an idea about their suffering and their harsh conditions. However, being a "bully of humility" he ignores that fact and adjusts his decisions to his interests only. Utilitarianism, as Dickens suggests, has nurtured his egoism.

Apart from showing the failure of utilitarian education, *Hard Times* exposes the degeneration of socio-political institutions of a utilitarian society. It depicts utilitarianism as "muddling". Stephen Blackpool says: "Let the laws be.. 'Tis awlus ..a muddle, and that's aw". He means the laws which should work in the interest of everyone, irrespective of their social classes, seem to be rather in favour of the nobles and the bourgeois only. Laws are made by rich people and MPs like Gradgrind to save and serve their interests: "There is a law... but it's not for you at all"

This political system favours the rich over the poor and, therefore, ruins society by creating a social gap. Indeed, the Victorian society is fragmented and Coketown presents two poles: rich bankers, wealthy businessmen, politicians against the destitute, those simple workers who are commonly referred to as the "Hands". Rich people are privileged and can even break laws with the help of money while the workers are not only weakened by poverty, they are also deprived 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 shows social inequality is that of Bounderby advising Stephen Blackpool 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. 'tis just a muddle a'together, an' the sooner I am dead, the better." Bounderby can divorce Louisa easily. The divorce laws are the privilege of wealthy and powerful people and are not accessible to the rest of society. The novel also explores the tragic consequences of social institutions modeled on utilitarian principles such

as love and marriage. The interest-based love is pitched against the emotional and uncalculated one. Louisa's love affair with Harthouse suggests that extra-marital relationship is an offshoot of interest-based marriage. In other words, happiness cannot be calculated in a utilitarian way.

In *Hard Times*, almost every character is a symbolic representation of a certain idea or principle. There are broadly two groups of characters- while one group consisting of Gradgrind and Bounderby symbolizes despicable features of the industrial life, the other group consisting of Sissy, Blackpool and Sleary symbolizes those values of life which are positive and seem to sustain life. In addition to this, the juxtaposition of downtrodden factory workers with joyful circus performers and the selfish upper classes is significant. It brings into focus the issues of dehumanization of the working classes as "hands" and the tragic effects of utilitarian education on personal and social life of individuals.

In *Hard Times*, Dickens satirizes and exaggerates both Bounderby and Gradgrind's reliance on fact and reason to assess situations and make decisions. The exaggerated characterization reveals their snobbish and stubborn obsession with utilitarian model of education based on principles of facts. Gradgrind has an 'unbending, utilitarian, matter-of-fact' face. He is complacent that he is ensuring the best form of education for his children. But his complacency becomes quite ironical when he has to face the consequences of such extreme pedagogy. At last, he sees emotional barrenness, as its result, in Louisa's passivity and inability to deal with her emotional crisis, in Tom's 'rational' justification of his act of robbery and in Bitzer's uncompromising rigidity and selfishness in acting only the way he was trained.

In the satiric design of the novel, the description of Coketown is full of sarcastic exaggerations with the result that the place emerges as a symbolic picture of an English industrial town. The name Coketown itself appears to mean the city of coal which is black in colour. Almost all repulsive colors are used in the description of Coketown: it is a "town of red brick that would have been red if the smoke and ashes had allowed it" and "both the city and its citizens...derive from the black color. In that foggy town, there is...a river that ran purple... a black canal... and serpents of smoke". The routinized and monotonous life is the defining feature of this town that is supposed to provide happiness to its inhabitants. Dickens suggests the suffocating impact of Utilitarianism on the town through concrete images. Coketown is presented as that city which: "contains 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, to do the same work, and to whom every day was the same as yesterday and to-morrow, and every year the counterpart of the last and the next." This description evokes a dismal picture of a city devoid of any air of freedom and creativity. It is noticeable that the terms used to depict the ugliness of the city are the same used to describe human beings. This serves the purpose of exposing the failures and contradictions of the system more clearly. Against the gloomy picture of Coketown stands the vibrant image of the circus which represents humanity and art. The circus people symbolize virtues of sympathy, mutual help and trust which find no use both for Gradgrind and Bounderby. There is a remarkable gentleness about these people, an untiring willingness to pity and help one another. In fact, Sleary of the circus summarizes the moral of the novel when he says that there is a kind of love in the world which is not self-interest, but something very different from calculating. These words sharply indict all that Gradgrind, Bounderby and Sparsit stand for and approve of what Stephen, Sissy, Rachel and Sleary himself represent. Thus, as in a fable, characters in *Hard Times* are symbols, who stand for specific values of

life. There are also instances of direct moralizing which bring the novel closer to a fable. At one place, Dickens warns the “commissioners of facts” against ignoring instincts and emotions of the poor people, for then reality would take a wolfish turn and make an end of everything. Bitzer’s selfish outlook and his refusal to oblige his master, Gradgrind, by showing mercy on Tom, is also a subtle ironical comment on the utilitarian system of life.

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