

(Re-)reading *Hard Times*: Dickens's Depiction of Dystopian Disorders

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Structured Abstract:

Purpose: Charles Dickens, one of the most celebrated Victorian novelists has dwelt on multiple social issues like childhood, education system, industrialization, class struggle, historical consciousness and so on. His tenth and the shortest of all novels, *Hard Times* is not an exception in the tradition of reflecting social realism in literature. Though it is set in a fictitious place called Coketown, it vividly picturizes the harsh realities of post Industrial Revolution England. The utilitarian philosophy popularized by Bentham and Mill and the doctrine of Laissez-faire have played the role of the catalysts for the growth of capitalism. The conflict between the investors or the capitalist lords and the working class people is easily palpable in the novel. The miserable conditions of the workhouses have also been penned realistically.

In *Hard Times*, Dickens also pinpoints the blemishes of the then education system where the children are not allowed to read folk-tales or fairy tales and even children - rhymes; instead they are taught the importance of commerce, logic and analytics. Thus the basic instinct of childhood - curiosity and fantasy is shattered. The result is the students like Bitzer. 'Metallurgical Louisa' or 'Mathematical Tom'. Thus the undercurrents of darkness and problems in Victorian society made Dickens uncap his pen to protest against the chaotic or chthonic situations. This paper will discuss a plethora of such thematic nuances, realistically painted by Dickens in *Hard Times*.

Methodology / Approach: The present paper will address *Hard Times* as a novel replete with social criticism during the hey-day of Industrial Revolution. To study the societal realities and dystopian elements a historical and comparative approach is needed. It will engage different aspects of society to portray the realities.

Findings / Conclusion: *Hard Times* is an illustrious work to depict the moral bankruptcy of capitalist class and candidly canvasses a counter discourse to the narrative of societal development popularised by the elitist strata.

Originality / Value: The present paper will engage a re-reading of the novel from a realistic pursuit and will frame a discussion in comparison to other texts as references to develop a comparative approach to analyze a text from different dimensions of society.

Paper Type: Research paper

Keywords: Dickens, Utilitarianism, laissez-faire, Capitalism, reality

Introduction

It is acknowledged that a reader can contemplate on the literary text and consider it the mirror of society in which they are written and modeled on. Societal situations are candidly canvassed on the pages of literary texts from the blooming days and the legacy is passed on to the next phases or generations down the ages. It does not escape from the reality and life by the 'viewless wings' of imagination but resides in the hub of the humming crowd and hobnob of human beings. Let us move on to the prestigious storehouse of literariness of Victorian Age for a glance of the real picturization of varied societal aspects as reflected by Dickens in his tenth and the shortest of all novels *Hard Times*.

The Context

Dickens has dwelt on a plethora of issues like childhood, education system, class-struggle exploitations, historical consciousness, etc. *Hard Times* is not an exception of reflecting reality through the realm of literature. It was first published in 1854 in the journal "Household Words". The time of publication clearly suggests that the reign of Queen Victoria was at the peak of prosperity and limelight. But Dickens points out the pangs of problems underneath the illuminating magnificence of industrial prosperity.

The novel is set against the backdrop of a fictitious place called Coketown, taking after the industrial belts of Manchester and Preston and not far from the madding crowd of the busy city-life. The three parts of *Hard Times* are 'Sowing', 'Reaping' and 'Garnering', suggestive of the significance of an idiom-'what you sow, so shall you reap'. The opening chapter called, 'The One Thing Needful' takes us to the 'monotonous vault' of a schoolroom where the teacher is instructed to fill the fanciful innocent minds of the children with the doctrine of facts:

"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 any service to them. This is the principle on which I bring my own children and this is the principle on which I bring up these children. Stick to Facts, sir!"

The Detailed Analyses of the Objectives

The conceptual conflict between fact and fancy plays a pivotal role for the vivid picturization of the education system- a system which does not allow the children to feel the pleasure of infant joy with the cadence of rhymes and fairy tales. Instead, the complex figures of facts, reasons and mathematical calculations overpour the innocent minds and become hostile to the growth of the children in a happy way. The best example can be the student like Bitzer who defines horse as "Quadruped. Graminivorous. Forty teeth, namely twenty four grinders, four eye-teeth and twelve incisive. Sheds coat in the spring; in marshy countries, sheds hoofs too. Hoofs hard, but requiring to be shod with iron. Age known by marks in mouth". Quite expectedly Bitzer is praised and Sissy the 'girl number twenty' is rebuked as she fails to provide such a factual definition.

Once again the conflict is clearly shown in the chapter entitled 'A Loophole'. The children of Thomas Gradgrind, Tom and Louisa are found peeping through the loophole of a circus tent to have the taste of the wonderful world of enjoyment. This curiosity is a basic instinct of infants and also significant of the urge to escape from their drab, dull and monotonous life based upon 'facts'. Their nicknames are also interesting 'Metallurgical Louisa' and 'Mathematical Tom'. This is how the capitalist Lords use children as the mode of their wish-fulfillment of great expectations. The exploitation of childhood is easily palpable. In another novel *Oliver Twist*, Dickens too points out the blemishes of the exploitation of childhood in post Industrial Revolution England, where children are driven to the chaotic world of darkness in search of fortune from the very little age. Thus the tenderness of innocence is murdered (Dickens calls the second chapter of Book the First- 'Murdering the Innocents') in the factory of facts. Blake in his poem *The Schoolboy* from *Songs of Experience* criticizes the contemporary education system that destroys the promising petals of innocence-

"But to go to school in a summer morn,

O! It drives all joy away;

Under a cruel eye outworn,

The little ones spend the day

In sighing and dismay”.

The character-portrayal of Mr. Gradgrind and Josiah Bounderby is also interesting. To depict the character of Grandgrind Dickens writes

“Thomas Grandgrind, sir. A man of realities. A man of facts and calculations. A man who proceeds upon the principle that two and two are four and nothing over, and who is not to be talked into allowing for anything over”.

Like Gradgrind, Bounderby is also “... a rich man: banker, merchant, manufacturer and what not, A big, loud man, with a stare and a metallic laugh. A man made out of a coarse material, which seemed to have been stretched to make so much of him.” They represent the industrialist or owner class with a crave for capitalist arrogance. The complex calculations of profit and loss have made them complete materialists for being drenched in the shower of mundane pleasures. To Gradgrind, Bounderby is the best one to get married with Louisa in order to provide her financial security. Gradgrind pays no heed to Louisa's conjugal happiness. The result of this money-driven marriage is disastrous and Louisa once again suffers and becomes the victim of his father's illusory judgement. A very holy and private relationship like conjugality is thus commodified in the hey-day of capitalism. This is how the rapid motion of scientific and industrial development snatches away the emotions.

It is clear that *Hard Times* is a critique of the utilitarian philosophy introduced by Jeremy Bentham and later popularized by J. S. Mill. According to this philosophy the greatest happiness should be achieved by the greatest number of people which has a moral purpose and any measure can be taken to grab the happiness. As a result of this rat-race the society is polarized and the development of the poor or working class people is denied as they enjoy no privilege. The struggle between moneyed class and the helpless people has been penned realistically in this novel. Even the bank robbery committed by Tom can be assessed as an offspring of the education system and social conditions based on utilitarianism. In the same way Gradgrind and Bounderby are satirized very much and through them the satire is directed against the contemporary society running after money and power. Thus Dickens has contemplated on the shortcomings of utilitarianism that banish human beings from their emotional outbursts and the pleasures of wonder,. However, there is a triumph of aesthetic philosophical truth and illumination of good sense over the illusory world of facts and chaotic craze for money and power when Gradgrind can understand his own faults.

Dickens also criticizes the doctrine of 'laissez-faire', popularized by Adam Smith in his celebrated book *Wealth of Nations* (1776) emphasizing the freetrade-ship without the interference of the government. The license of free-trade plays the role of the catalyst for the growth of capitalism and utilitarianism for running after financial prosperity by hook or by crook.

Conclusion

In the fag-end of this discussion we can call Dickens a master painter for the portrayal of social realism. His other masterpieces like *Oliver Twist*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, *David Copperfield*, *Great Expectations* too reflect the reality with a galore of thematic nuances. In the conclusion we must acknowledge that with the device of realism Dickens does not sing the glory of the concepts like capitalism, utilitarianism, laissez-faire and materialism during the post Industrial Revolution period but vitriols the gory deeds replete with the undercurrents of darkness and problems which made him uncap his pen to protest against this chthonic world of dystopian disorders.

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