

# Saarth

## E-Journal of Research

ISSN NO: 2395-339X

### CHARLES DICKENS – HARD TIMES: AS A SOCIAL NOVEL

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#### **Opposed to the Costliness of Divorce**

There are two theses in *Hard Times*. One is clear enough and pertains to the divorce laws. Through the character, Stephen Blackpool, whose wife is an drunken and almost brutish woman, Dickens expresses his indignation at the costliness of divorce, which remains a privilege of the rich. (He may have been thinking already, in 1854, of the possible collapse of his own married life).

#### **The Other Social Purpose**

The second social purpose of *Hard Times* is more difficult to define. It seems to be concerned with a radical criticism of the very structure of society. Dickens is opposed to the oppression of the poor and of the workers by the rich. But this attitude is partly obscured by his wish to attack, simultaneously, a particular school of economic thinkers, so that his conclusions in that direction remain indistinct. Besides, other elements interfere with the clarity and pungency with which social ideas are expressed in this novel.

#### **An Important Speech by Stephen**

Stephen's defense of the workers when he is suffering of the poor and the cruelty of the privileged class finds a sincere expression in his suffering of the poor and the cruelty of the privileged class finds a sincere expression in Stephen's defense of the workers when he is interrogated by Bounderby. Asked by Bounderby what the workers, in a general way, complain of, Stephen replies\*

“Indeed we are in a muddle, sir. Look round town so rich as it is and see the numbers of people as have been brought into being here, for to weave, and to card, and to piece out a living, all the same one way, somehow, ‘twixt their cradles and graves. Look how we live, and where we live, and in what numbers, and by what chances, and with what sameness; and look how the mills is always a-going, and how they never works us no higher to any distant object excepting always death. Look how you considers of us, and writes of us, and talks of us, and goes up with your deputations to Secretaries of State about us, and how you are always right, and how we are always wrong. Look how this has grown and grown, bigger and bigger, broader and broader, harder and harder, from year to year, from generation to generation.

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Who can look on it sir, and fairly tell a man it's not a muddle?"

This speech clearly defines what according to Dickens, lies at the root of social evil in general. Another relevant speech in this connection is the one Stephen makes, when dying, about the number of deaths that have been caused by the mine-pit into which he himself had fallen.

### **Attack on Utilitarians**

Dickens's attack on the utilitarians of his time is also part of the social purpose of this novel. The opening words of the novel are a parody of the utilitarian doctrine: "Now, what I want is Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life." The portrait of Mr. Gradgrind is no less characteristic "Thomas Gradgrind, sir. A man of realities. A man of facts and calculations". Nor can we ignore the conversation between Mr. Gradgrind and his young daughter Louisa, when the decision about her marriage with the 55-year old Bounderby is taken. The arguments offered by Mr. Gradgrind to convince his daughter show a mind dried up by its habitual worship of a systematic theory. The scene is one of the most successful in the book. To prove to his daughter that she need not take into account the disparity in years between Bounderby and herself, Mr. Gradgrind quotes statistics. Love he declares to be in this context irrelevant, and calls it a "misplaced expression". Dickens seems to have harbored great distrust and dislike of all makers of statistics.

### **Dickens's Dislike of Workers' Unions**

Dickens has nothing positive to offer to improve the state of affairs. His thinking in these matters is not systematic and not capable of being formulated. This deficiency most glaring in chapters devoted to the union agitation in Coketown. He seems to have distrusted the trade unions, and has therefore presented the Coketown agitators in a very ugly light. Dickens's attitude can hardly be regarded as surprising in view of his unfortunate youthful experiences in the House of Commons as a reporter and his own subsequent life-long contempt for all political bodies. But it is never satisfactorily explained why Stephen Blackpool in this novel refuses to join the workers' union, preferring to be ostracized, when he is a genuine believer in the workers' cause. To Dickens himself, it was enough of a reason that Stephen had given a promise to Rachel, but the promise has no solid cause behind it. Stephen's attitude is one other mainspring of the novel's action, so that a considerable part of the book becomes unconvincing. Dickens's dislike of the workers' union seriously weakens the defense of the workers he had intended to effect in this book.

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### **A Kind of Sentimental Socialism**

Handicapped by his distrust of workers' union, Dickens did not succeed in putting forward a clear and coherent thesis. His attitude can be defined as a kind of sentimental socialism. He was conscious of the existence of a problem, but it was one that acted on his emotions rather than on his intelligence. The solutions that he perhaps contemplated were of the benevolent, patronizing kind. He placed his trust in the kindness of enlightened employers to secure for the workers the decent life to which they had a right.

### **Satire Against a Kind of Thought**

Hard Times is one of Dickens's most thought-about books. In the fifties his novels began to show a greater complication of plot than before; one reason for this is that he was intending to use them as a vehicle of a more concentrated sociological argument. All his journalism shows too that he was thinking much more about social problems, whereas earlier he had been content to feel mainly and to record a thought, when it occurred, in emotional dress. The objection to such a character as Gradgrind is not just that he is a burlesque and an exaggeration but rather that in him the satire is directed against a kind of thought. He is in fact the only major Dickens character who is meant to be "intellectual". Dickens was caught with the idea of a man living by a certain philosophy. However, Dickens did not understand enough of any philosophy even to be able to ridicule it successfully.

### **The Idea of Personality in an Individual Industrial Worker**

Stephen Blackpool, Dickens tried to rescue the idea of personality in an individual industrial worker. Stephen defeated by the law, the trade union, and his employer might have become the material of genuine tragedy if Dickens had been prepared to accept his death from the beginning as inevitable and unanswerable; but he was hankering all the time after a solution to avoid the proper tragic solution, and the result is nothing but a slow record of inglorious misery and defeat. Dickens did not want to admit that Stephen's bargaining power against Bounderby, or against his marriage, or against life itself, was negligible, but wrote as if there might be an unexpected solution at every turn. The crux is of course in the part of the plot that deals with the trade union, and three points have been emphasized here, (i) Stephen's inexplicable obstinacy refusing to join it; (ii) Dickens's hatred of Slackbridge; and (iii) the difference of mood and attitude of the other workers towards Stephen as men and as union members under Slackbridge's influence.

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### **Attitude Towards Industrialism**

The failure of *Hard Times* in two main strands of its plot, and in so many of its major characters does not lessen the force of the mixture of fascination and repulsion that Dickens felt for the industrial scene. The repulsion is more marked; but underlying it there is ceaseless indignation at the impoverishment of human life that resulted from industrialism. This indignation is not crude or immature anger, but rather a disturbed mood that colors every perception, contributing a good deal to the unpopularity of this book.

### **Narrative Insufficiency**

*Hard Times* is an indictment of Victorian society. Of all Dickens's books, this is the clearest in its statement of his economic beliefs. However, for various reasons, its thesis is not fully developed; Dickens did not find enough room for developing his contrasting plot sequences. He also had difficulty in focusing all his narrative technical resources on his subject, so that the novel does not call upon many of his best devices. One needs a relatively large scope for many contrasting plots in action. The novel sometimes gives the effect of choppy episodes, of undeveloped contrasts, of unfinished business.

### **A Satire on Utilitarian Economy**

*Hard Times* retains force because of its purpose. It was influenced materially by Carlyle's economic ideas. As the novel stands, its thesis is a satire on utilitarian economy. Dickens felt that a dependence upon capitalistic practicality without reference to sympathy and brotherly understanding causes continued difficulties in the relations of capital and labor. His scene was Manchester or Leeds or some other such industrial center, and he called the place "Coketown". However, the thesis of the novel includes also criticism of the educational system, the caste system, and divorce laws.

### **A Warning to Capitalists**

Dickens's criticism of the economic system is quite plain. He is obviously opposed to the excesses of selfish capitalism; he knows that too many workers are underpaid. If laborers do not get a fair chance to make a reasonable living, there will be trouble. He urges utilitarian economists and commissioners of fact to cultivate in the poor the utmost graces of the fancies and the affections, lest reality should take a wolfish turn and make an end of the rich. This view indicates that Dickens is aware of the threat of revolution or other violence.

### **Strikes and violence Futile**

Yet Stephen, a sympathetic character, does not join the workers' union. The union leader, Slackbridge, speaks in a most offensive manner, and the general impression of the union is that it forms because foolish capitalists will make no

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concessions to reality. At the same time, Dickens's description of the workers implies that strikes and violence do not help in the long run.

### **The Criterion of Judgment**

Hard Times should be judged on its artistic merits: it should not be underestimated because of its narrative insufficiency, nor overestimated because its thesis appeals to the reader who is concerned with weaknesses in the capitalistic system.

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