

***Hard Times* as a Dickensian Dystopia**

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Abstract

Hard Times is a dystopia. *Hard Times* investigates and launches the deplorable Victorian industrial society through the presentation of its setting and characters. The society which the *Hard Times* explores is one characterized by poverty, denial and oppression. Freedom and happiness were established by the political and economic elites. Right to think and right to fancy was determined by the dominant. The prevalent Utilitarian educational philosophy created havoc in the lives of pupils who were prepared to work in the factories. This paper is an attempt to map the dystopian account of Victorian industrial society as portrayed by Charles Dickens in the *Hard Times*.

[**Keywords:** dystopia, Utilitarianism, education, industrialization, power]

I

Dystopia, a combination of Latin *dys* and Greek *topos*, means “bad place.” If “utopia” refers to an “ideal” place, “dystopia” refers to a place where everything is imperfect. Dystopia is an imagined society present in the future where/when the state of life is wretched and dismal. It is the distorted and corrupt government that maintains the poor quality of life conditioning the masses to suppose the society is just. Collectivism infused through education forms the key to the disintegration of the societal values. Collectivist education drives the notion that the masses that are nothing more than parts of the whole and their existence correspond to the advantage of the state. Individual ambitions are crushed for the ambition of the state. Lack of nature is an attribute of dystopian setting where nescience of morals and emotions guide to inhuman relations.

Dystopian literature offers an effective and open medium to critique the socio-political conditions reflecting upon the short comings, blemishes and malfunctions of the imaginative and ideal societies. Dystopian literature is a literary representation of bad places elaborating the possibility of future or near-future social order that might effect through hypothetical political and social environment augmented by history. Often written as satires, dystopian literature warns the current miserable trends of life in the society. The dystopian protagonist often feels entrapped struggling to set free, questions the existing socio-political systems with the belief that the society in which he lives is appallingly wrong.

Prominent dystopian literature includes Swifts *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), Voltaire's *Candide* (1759), Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty Four* (1949) Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) and Zamyatin's *We* (1924). Dystopian literature offers a negative vision of the future society. Technology enchains humans dividing people into class groups. Nature becomes unproductive and uncreative isolating the characters from the natural world and thereby the natural world is distrust. Society inflicts ruthless social constraints and restrictions where the citizens undergo constant surveillance and live in a dehumanized state making. Generally malevolent political elites dictate the dystopias. The evils of dystopias include ignorance, poverty, deficiency, overpopulation, and commercialism. A decisive and obdurate hierarchical society is characteristic of dystopia.

Bobby Newman identifies the following as the attributes of a dystopian fiction: "a) suspicion of scientific social planning, b) the unhappiness of the characters portrayed, c) suspicion of sources of control of behavior outside the individual, d) violation of presumed inherent need to struggle, and e) suspicion of behavioral methods of governance" (167). Dystopian fiction features dissenting exposing the rift between the manner in which things are and the manner in which things might be. It also emerges out of the suspicion that arouses at the inner dynamics of the ruling system.

Gardner calls Dickens the "founding father of dystopian fantasy" (141). Dickens provides a glimpse into this dystopian world reflecting the inadequacies of the society in his tenth novel *Hard Times*. *Hard Times* depicts "the life of a population with a rich variety of qualitative distinctions and complex individual descriptions of functioning and impediments to functioning, using a general notion of human need and human functioning in a highly concrete context, it provides the sort of information required to assess quality of life and involves the reader in the task of making the assessment" (Nussbaum 52). Set in the fictional, grimy and murky industrial slum in northern England, Coketown is a gripping victim of the oblivious Utilitarian social policies and added injustices such as the widening gap between the classes and limiting divorce laws. Dickens challenges the capitalist archetypes of class by investigating the relations between the manipulative and affluent factory owners and the workers. *Hard Times* is not a "socialist polemic" but "its satire, launched from the vantage point of a demand for emphatic, almost religious vision, argues for a social construction of the imagination at the expense of solipsistic visioning of the meaning of human enterprise" (Olson 228).

II

Hard Times is a "direct indictment on Utilitarianism" (Narita 186). Dickens hits at the prevalent Utilitarian system of education, the kinds of schools and teachers they endorsed and the pedagogy they consecrated. Jeremy Bentham's philosophy is that human institutions should supply to the benefit of all in the society providing "the greatest happiness of the greatest number" (3). One might find in the novel an absolute

contrast between abstract reasoning and concrete experience. Sexton finds in “the unremittingly utilitarian focus on political economy deftly skewered in the narrator’s matter of fact announcement that Gradgrind was endeavouring to prove that the Good Samaritan was a bad political economist” (Sexton).

The utilitarian education denied any vent for emotion and creativity. To describe “cow as a graminivorous ruminating quadruped with several stomachs” (12) and horse as “Quadruped. Graminivorous. Forty teeth, namely twenty-four grinders, four eye-teeth, and twelve incisive” (6) is what the Utilitarian education has taught the pupils. “That’s it! You are never to fancy” (8). The discrepancy of teacher’s coin and the fancy objects the school boys allegedly carry mirrors “the worlds of construction and of utility” (Olson 230). The creative ability in students are cultivated with “no less important to their own happiness and that of society than their knowledge of things and reason” (quoted in Olson 232).

“M’Choakumchild’s and Gradgrind’s school stresses regulation and control; it is interested in manufacturing the obedient and compliant workers the industrialists needed, and thus brings to light a crucial problem with utilitarianism” (Bradley 75). The factory owners approved the educator’s objective to produce children for the jobs in Coketown through which they can attain happiness in their lives. Louisa’s miserable and repressed childhood and catastrophic marriage life is an example of the impotence of Bentham’s utilitarian educational philosophy. Adam Smith Gradgrind and Malthus Gradgrind, the names of Grandgrind’s children is a reminder of his affinity to the *laissez-faire* theorists. “Utilitarian economic policies that encourage scoundrels like Bounderby to construct purgatories like Coketown spell the beginning of the end for an unjust capitalist system that refuses to reform itself” (Meckier 85, 86). Bitzer permitted his mother

half a pound of tea a year, which was weak in him: first, because all gifts have an inevitable tendency to pauperise the recipient, and secondly, because his only reasonable transaction in that commodity would have been to buy it for as little as he could possibly give, and sell it for as much as he could possibly get; it have been clearly ascertained by philosophers that in this is comprised the whole duty of man – not a part of man’s duty, but the whole (125,126).

Hard Times illustrates the plight of a mechanized society—physical and mental mechanization—symbolized in its fictional characters. Mechanization of the society begins with school. Gradgrind:

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 up my own children, and this is the principle on which I bring up these children. Stick to Facts, sir! (3).

However, Dickens finds in Mr. Sleary the foil to Utilitarian principles ridden Gradgrind. Sleary presents the "overtones of art and entertainment which appeal directly to the heart" (Karl 150). Hilarity and merriment, absent in the Utilitarian philosophy, are essential aspects of human happiness.

Thquire, thake handth, firth and latht! Don't be croth with uth poor vagabondth. People mutht be amuthed. They can't be alwayth a learning, nor yet they can't be alwyth a workin, they an't made for it. You mutht have uth, Thquire. Do the withe thing and the kind thing too, and make the bethth of uth; not the wurthth! (312).

Grandgrind with his Utilitarian principles of education ruins his own children and pupils. Sissy is an independent and imaginative person. Gradgrind fails to impress Sissy, an epitome of imagination and free thinking leaves school. Sissy's rejection of Gradgrind is natural. On the other hand, Louisa is crippled in her natural features as she is influenced by Gradgrind's teachings. Louisa, after having been spied, accuses her father of unpleasant child rearing which created in her a never-ending Sinai wilderness created by the Utilitarian ambience around her:

How could you give me life, and take from me all the appreciable things that raise it from the state of conscious death? Where are the graces of my soul? Where are the sentiments of my heart? What have you done, O Father, what have you done with the garden that should have bloomed once, in this great wilderness here! (231).

She regrets her past life which was influenced by Utilitarian motifs:

Yet, father, if I had been stone blind, if I had groped my way by my sense of touch, and had been free, while I knew the shapes and surfaces of things, to exercise my fancy somewhat, in regard to them; I should have been a million times wiser, happier, more loving, more contented, more innocent and human in all good respects, that I am with the eyes I have (232).

Gradgrind is an embodiment of the beliefs of industrialization. He is "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 talked into allowing for anything over" (4). He is an honourable member of the parliament.

Time hustled him into a little noisy and rather dirty machinery, in a by comer, and made him Member of Parliament for Coketown: one of the respected members for ounce weights and weights and measures, one of representatives of the multiplication table, one of the deaf honourable gentlemen, dumb honourable gentlemen, blind honourable gentlemen, lame honourable gentlemen, dead

honourable gentlemen, dead honourable gentlemen, to every other consideration (101,102).

Grandgrind is more a manipulator, creating zombies, than an educator creating sensible pupils. "Do you ever see horses walking down the sides of rooms in reality – in fact? Do you?" (7, 8). Grandgrind's treatment of the children is similar to Bounderby's treatment of factory workers. *Hard Times* "suggests a subtle internal critique of certain species of utilitarianism, not its complete repudiation. The suggestion is that what is finest in the theory has not been well served by the theory in its full elaboration (especially, though not only, in contemporary economics); that a different a fuller vision of persons is necessary to do justice to the deepest insights of Benthamism itself" (Nussbaum 33).

III

Dystopia? Waste land? Coketown:

It was a town of red brick, or of brick that would have been red if the smoke and ashes had allowed it; but as matters stood, it was a town of unnatural red and black like the painted face of a savage. It was a town of machinery and tall chimneys, out of which interminable serpents of smoke trailed themselves forever and ever, and never got uncoiled. It had a black canal in it, and a river that ran purple with ill-smelling dye, and vast piles of building full of windows where there was a rattling and a trembling all day long, and where the piston of the steam-engine worked monotonously up and down, like the head of an elephant in a state of melancholy madness. It contained 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 (25).

The grotesque, materialist inclination of the city is explained in words like "red brick," "smoke and ashes," "unnatural red and black," "painted face of a savage," "interminable serpents of smoke," "never got uncoiled," "black canal," "ill-smelling dye," "vast pile of buildings full of windows," "rattling and trembling," "steam-engine worked monotonously," and "elephant in a state of melancholy madness." Smoke is "the healthiest thing in the world in all respects, and particularly for the lungs" (137). According to Dickens, the mill-owners create the hell by preventing the worker's children education, by providing an unsafe work place for the workers through smoke pollution.

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 as 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 places was like the breath of the simoom: and their inhabitants, wasting with heat, toiled languidly in the desert" (121).

The non-conducive and precarious working environment in which the factory workers work is evident in Dickens' description of Coketown. Their living quarters were also equally bad and squalid. "Oh, my friends, the down-trodden operatives of Coketown! Oh, my friends and fellow- countrymen, the slaves of an iron-handed and a grinding despotism!" (150) reflects the plight of defenseless workers.

The Gradgrind education and the existential mode in Coketown are congruent to each other in their refutation to the natural growth blueprints. Nature is not absent but has gone wrong.

Fact, fact, fact, everywhere in the material aspect of the town; fact, fact, fact, everywhere in the immaterial. The M'Choakumchild school was all fact, and the school of design was all fact, and the relations between master and man were all fact, and everything was fact between the lying-in hospital and the cemetery, and what you couldn't state in figures, or show to be purchaseable in the cheapest market and saleable in the dearest, was not, and never should be, world without end, Amen (26).

"*Hard Times* presents a natural world metamorphosed into an inferno by the forces of Bounderby and Gradgrind" (Olson 246). The nonexistence of green in the Coketown hearts and countryside communicates that implicit nature of the denial.

"...in the innermost fortifications of that ugly citadel, where Nature was as strongly bricked out as killing airs and gases were bricked in; at the heart of the labyrinth of narrow courts upon courts, and close streets upon streets, which had come into existence piecemeal, every piece in a violent hurry for some one man's purpose, and the whole an unnatural family, shouldering, and trampling, and pressing one another to death;" (70).

Hard Times presents the transition Industrial Revolution caused the British Society. Coketown is a representative of industrial society. Industrial society was pragmatic, materialist and self-interested. "During this time, society was like wax, constantly being shaped and reshaped by the profound changes the revolution brought" (Bradley 70). The displacement of workers from the rural areas to the cities underwent a complete adjustment like working round the clock to earn meager wages and living in substandard domiciles. It was also the period of when capitalism dawned coupled with the outdated labour laws and stratified socioeconomic class. These situations wrecked havoc on the lives of the common people. The conceit of the rich and the callousness of the government created panic among the inhabitants of

Coketown. Coketown is not only a no-place but also an awful place. Though created by Dickens, Coketown is an epitome of "savagery" revealing the socio-economic plight of his own society. In opposition to the fantasy ridden utopia, Dickens' imaginary Coketown is a dystopian tangible.

IV

Hard Times satirizingly "mythologizes the central power relationships of the new order" (Olson 236). The capitalist in Bounderby, the reformist in Gradgrind, decaying Coketown, the organizational Blackpool and Slackbridge, the waning aristocracy of Mrs. Sparsit and Mr. James Harthouse are all in a symbiosis of power relationships. The bond between Bounderby and Gradgrind establishes a sequence of familial and power formations. Tom, Gradgrind's inutile son works under Bounderby and his daughter Louisa enters into a pointless wedlock with Bounderby without any amatory desire for him. Gradgrind and Bounderby attempt to discipline the Sleary's circus whom they imagine as perpetrators in an otherwise Utilitarian world. The inspection of schools by government inspector is reminiscent of how education becomes part of government agenda. Blackpool represents recurrences and bareness. The system undervalues the sincere Blackpool and sensitive Sissy in their pursuit for life's progressive challenges.

Power denies imagination. Bounderby's life declares the story of a young man "who created himself from the detritus of an abandoning mother, a drunken grandmother, a chandler's shop home, an egg-box home, and a vagabond childhood that became the prodigal's sty (Olson 244). The childhood fantasies and fairy stories were dried by the rigid and mindful school education. "I hadn't a shoe to my foot. As to a stocking, I didn't know such a thing by name. I passed the day in a ditch, and the night in a pigsty. That's the way I spent my tenth birthday. Not that a ditch was new to me, for I was born in a ditch" (18). Others in the Coketown also live in different forms perverse imagination. Louisa's pent-up connubial fantasies, Blackpool's fancy of freedom from his wife are antithetical to existential reality corresponding to the failure of utopian myth.

Blackpool is encumbered not only with poverty and poor working conditions but also with a drunken wife whom he cannot divorce to marry the woman he loves. He is married/welocked to a horrible drunken woman, a woman who is deficient of femininity and discards her role as a wife.

Such a woman! A disabled, drunken creature, barely able to preserve her sitting posture by steadying herself with one begrimed hand on the floor, while the other was so purposeless in trying to push away her tangled hair from her face, that it only blinded her the more with the dirt upon it. A creature so foul to look at, in her tatters, stains and splashes, but so much fouler than that in her moral infamy, that it was a shameful thing even to see her (74,75).

Louisa, a casualty to loveless marriage, has an adulterous relationship with James Harthouse, suffering from guilt, loses her husband and disinherited by her father. She is a victim to the constrictions of the society. "She seems to be affectionate at heart, and to be in need of someone whom she is able to show affection for, but she is, at the same time, ignorant of what love actually is and of what to do with it, thought she is surely able to "pity" her warped brother" (Yatsugi 129).

As Meckier observes, "the futurist in Dickens is a dystopian who both fears and desires the purifying power that an uprising of unpacified workers might bring" (86). By the time the systems of power disintegrate, Bounderby finds a trust in his own unsuccessful educational and societal deliberations. The collapse of the power in the novel denotes the "denial": "the suppression of the basic human growth ... the stunting of the human imagination and human needs for affection; and finally the destruction of the light and air that feed the nonhuman organic world" (Olson 239).

V

Hard Times, as a representative dystopian fiction, presents "the inhumanities of Victorian civilization are seen as fostered and sanctioned by a hard philosophy, the aggressive formulation of an inhumane spirit" (Leavis 1990 341). The Utilitarian philosophy of education and life unwittingly enters into the minds of pupils who struggle to come to terms with the meaning of good and evil, life and death, happiness and sadness. It aversely impinges on the posterity with its ill-effects. *Hard Times* also shows us "the nightmare world that results from certain perverse tendencies inherent in society getting free play. The worst effects of dystopia are likely ...certain features in his society that most directly threaten his own social function as a writer. The cult of facts and statistics is a threat ...to unfettered imagination" (Frye "82, 83). Dickens does not in any way attempt to present a moral teaching but concretizes the reflection of a Victorian Industrialist society in and through Coketown and brings to life English characters/life from his environment. It concerns Dickens' contemporary concerns regarding education, right of the labours, right of the common people for entertainment and domestic relations. Undoubtedly, he registers a protest against the Victorian industrialized society anticipating impending and possible catastrophe which industrialism might bring. One should also be mindful of the fact that the literary representation of dystopia as portrayed in the *Hard Times* is also a mirror to the incredible adversity and penury Dickens himself underwent in his childhood. "Dickens presents the reader with a dark vision of a fully industrialized town that consumes its human inhabitants as fuel. ...his depiction of the town is a lament for what is being wasted there under the oppression of life in such an environment" (Rogers 3). Dickens' attempt symbolizes futuristic hope, not ideal but existential: "rather than present a specific political-social remedy to the dystopia of Coketown, Dickens contents himself with portraying human behaviour

which, if followed, would result in a kind of utopia, because it would usher in the Kingdom of God here on earth" (Sexton).

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