

# Charles Dickens Hard Times: A Critique Of Utilitarianism

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## Abstract

Jeremy Bentham, an English philosopher, is regarded as the founder of modern utilitarianism. The doctrine of utilitarianism occupied a central place in the first half of 19th century England. The theory is based on the principle of greatest happiness to the greatest number of people. It proposes that an action is right if it ensures the pleasure of the largest group in society. In a utilitarian state, the residents are obliged to obey the laws and rules made by the state to promote the general welfare of the people. In this system, the state works for the community's welfare and an individual does not exist for the state. This theory, thus, excludes the interests of an individual. It blends individual happiness with the happiness of others. Moreover, utilitarianism is the assumption that human beings act in a way that highlights their self-interest. It is based on the concept of facts and leaves little room for imagination. In his famous novel *Hard Times*, Charles Dickens criticizes the theory of utilitarianism because he believes that it curbs the emotions and aspirations of an individual.

**Keywords:** Utilitarianism, Individual, Community, Welfare, Social, Economic, Philosophy.

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## Introduction

*Hard Times* beautifully exemplifies Britain's rise during the 19th century and it paints a vivid picture of the educational, social and economic aspects of Victorian society. At that time, Britain was changing dramatically because of the Industrial Revolution. "Great Britain was one of the first countries of the world to industrialize, to establish markets and to reinvest profits in further manufacturing developments" (Carter and McRae, 2009:249). The use of new technology gave impetus to the manufacturing sector, and the middle-class businessmen and professionals became wealthy. The age of industrialization left many workers unemployed as machines were now doing the work previously done manually. The rich people owned factories and wealth, whereas the poor had to work in their factories. It created a vast gulf between the rich and the poor and the wealthy class exploited the working class. It was also a period of paradox in England. The publication of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859) had a profound effect on the religious beliefs and moral attitudes of the people. Carter and McRae argue: "Darwin showed the determining factors of chance and necessity in the survival of the fittest, and totally undermined the higher values of religion and morality which, for centuries, society had done so much to create and affirm" (2009:255). The people lost faith in God and moved towards worldly pleasures and materialism. The economic theories of Adam Smith, Jeremy Bentham and Stuart Mill made the English men and women utilitarian. As John Wilson Burgess states, the soul of utilitarianism is "the greatest happiness for the greatest number" (1958:234). *Hard Times* highlights the dehumanising aspects of the Industrial Society of England and calls into question Jeremy Bentham's philosophy of utilitarianism.

## Objective of the Study

This article offers to see how Dickens repudiates the idea of utilitarianism in *Hard Times*. As the novel is a critique of the educational, social, and economic aspects of utilitarianism, the paper will discuss them in detail by quoting lines of the text. Moreover, the study will help to get a clear idea of society at the time it was written

## Discussion

In *Hard Times*, Charles Dickens criticizes the utilitarian aspects of education, society and economy. The first part of our discussion examines the critique of utilitarianism that Gradgrind's education system in the novel represents. The second part analyses the impact of utilitarianism on social conditions, and the third part describes the effects of utilitarianism on the economic system of the Victorian period.

## Utilitarianism and Education

Charles Dickens's *Hard Times* has one of the most memorable openings in literature. As the novel opens, we see how Dickens criticizes the educational system based on Bentham's philosophy of utilitarianism. Thomas Gradgrind is seen instructing the school teacher M'Choakumchild:

"Now, what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing 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 I bring up these children. Stick to Facts, Sir!"(3).

It is apparent from this excerpt that Dickens uses the character of Thomas Gradgrind to critique the ethic of utilitarianism in education. Gradgrind believes that educators should implant in the minds of students nothing but facts. Thomas Gradgrind himself is "A man of realities. A man of facts and calculations. A man who proceeds upon the principle that two and two are four"(4). Even at home, Gradgrind seeks to act in the way his theory requires. For instance, when his daughter Louisa learns that she has been the subject of a marriage proposal on the part of Josiah Bounderby, a boastful and wealthy manufacturer, she asks her father for advice. Gradgrind suggests her to "consider this question, as you have been accustomed to consider every other question, simply as one of tangible Fact" (96). Mr. Gradgrind tries to reduce marriage and love to a question of logic.

Gradgrind wishes to convert human beings into mechanical figures by using his theory of education in which there is no place for imagination. He is glad to see his theory working when Bitzer, a pupil, precisely states what a horse is:

"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."(6).

The scientific definition of horse signifies that M'Choakumchild has stuffed his head only with facts. Bitzer is devoid of all human affection and imagination. In sharp contrast with Bitzer is Sissy Jupe, whom Dickens creates and makes a symbol of wisdom, poor honesty, and devotion. She is an incarnation of the balance of intelligence and emotion, of the equilibrium between the logic of the mind and that of the heart. Therefore, she achieves true happiness.

Gradgrind imposes his philosophy of education on his children, Tom and Louisa. They are not allowed to think for themselves. Tom finally, fed up with his father's strictness and repetition, revolts against him and leaves home to work in Mr. Bounderby's bank. He begins to drink and gamble heavily and robs a bank to pay off his debts. When Bitzer finds that Tom has robbed the bank, he catches him. Mr. Gradgrind begs him to let Tom go. Ironically, Bitzer replies that he will hand over Tom to Mr. Bounderby. He further says: "I am sure you know that the whole social system is a question of self-interest"(288). Bitzer makes Mr. Gradgrind realize the faults of his philosophy of facts and rational thinking. Bitzer is the perfect product of the political economy. He is devoid of love, altruism and morality. In *Hard Times*, states Balkaya, "The moral and spiritual decay of the British people is narrated through a reflection on the utilitarian ideas of progress"(2015:3). Louisa also faces a dilemma when she falls in love with Mr. James Harthouse. She does not know what to do in such a situation. Her father never allowed her to think for herself or even love someone. That is why Louisa goes frantic and ends up crying in her father's lap. Faced with these hardships, Gradgrind admits, "The ground on which I stand has ceased to be solid under my feet"(222). His children's failure in life teaches him the importance of feelings in life and Gradgrind emerges as a wiser and humbler man. Thus, in *Hard Times*, Dickens attacks the Victorian educational system because it dehumanized the children, killed fancy, and destroyed the importance of emotions.

### **Utilitarianism and Society**

The second aspect of utilitarianism on which Dickens focuses in *Hard Times* is social. In it, as Martin Stephen says, Dickens "moves from the criticism of individuals to the criticism of the whole society" (2000:239). Charles Dickens believes that the English Victorian legislation is only for the benefit of the rich, and it is heedless to the needs of the poor. In *Hard Times*, Charles Dickens exposes the social division of his times. The people of Coketown are sharply divided into two groups of the rich and the poor. The rich are usually the bourgeois who are factory owners, bankers, and governmental officials. The poor make the lower classes of the society who are under the influence of the rich and whose destination is determined by them. Josiah Bounderby represents the rich people of the industrial town of England. His only mission is to attain power and earn money. Charles Dickens gives a vivid description of his character in the following lines:

"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. A man with a great puffed head and forehead, swelled veins in his temples, and such a strained skin to his face that it seemed to hold his eyes open and lift his eyebrows up. A man with a pervading appearance on him of being inflated like a balloon.... A man who was the Bully of humility"(15).

Bounderby is not a gentleman of Coketown but a man of shrewd nature and temperament. He creates a false story of his life to impress his listeners. The story is so designed that the people start believing that he suffered a lot in the early days of his life and then worked hard to earn money. Bounderby's hypocrisy shows that he is an irresponsible fellow and uses his power and wealth to befool the innocent folk of the industrial town. The novelist shows that the industrialists see labourers as 'hands', not as fellow human beings. For Gradgrind and Bounderby, the working class is a means of achieving wealth and power.

In *Hard Times*, Stephen Blackpool is a representative of the poor or the underprivileged society of England. Physical features of Blackpool indicate that poverty is a curse. Dickens describes him thus:

"In the hardest working part of Coketown; in the innermost fortifications of that ugly citadel ... lived a certain Stephen Blackpool, forty years of age. Stephen looked older, but he had had a hard life.... He was usually called old Stephen, in a kind of rough homage to the fact" (62).

Blackpool faces problems at both the places, i.e. at home and his workplace. When he comes home, he has to face his alcoholic wife. The novelist highlights how unfair treatment and desperate living conditions make the labourers search for peace and comfort in wine. Stephen's wife is presented as "A disabled, drunken creature" (66). For Stephen, life at the workplace is also very challenging. When a labour dispute occurs, Blackpool refuses to join the union of workers as he firmly believes that the strike cannot solve the problems of working class. The workers force him to leave their group because they think that Stephen belongs to the party of factory owners. On the other hand, he refuses to spy on workers for his employer Bounderby, who consequently feels agitated and abandons him. Both, the rich and the poor find him unfit for their groups, making him a pathetic figure in the novel. Thus, Stephen's character allows Dickens to state that it was difficult to live a life of honesty in an industrialized society.

### **Utilitarianism and Economy**

Economic utilitarianism is the third aspect that Dickens attacks in *Hard Times*. The time of Dickens is the most remarkable time in the history of Victorian England because of the material affluence, political consciousness, democratic reforms, industrial and mechanical progress. The industrial revolution during this time transformed the agrarian economy of England into an industrial economy. Mills and factories were established at important centres and the whole of England hammed with the rattle of looms and booms of weaving machine. David Lodge wrote in his study *The Rhetoric of Hard Times* as: "On every page *Hard Times* manifests its identity as a polemical work, a critique of a mid-Victorian industrial society dominated by materialism, acquisitiveness and ruthlessly competitive capitalist economics. To Dickens at the time of writing *Hard Times*, these things were represented most articulately, persuasively, (and therefore dangerously) by the Utilitarians (1969:86). The economic life situation of the Coketown is utilitarian. This fictional industrial city is an example of the reign of callousness and exploitation. Coketown lacks vitality, and the readers notice that the town's pictorial details present a dark and gloomy look. The lines of text show that Coketown is a very dull place:

"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...where the piston of the steam-engine worked monotonously up and down, like the head of an elephant in a state of melancholy madness"( 22).

Here the novelist uses a metaphor of an elephant to describe how the factories and the machines work like a group of mad and sick animals who stops at nothing. All the town buildings have red bricks, and the city has lost its natural redness as it suffered because of the evolution of the industrial world. We notice that every single thing in Coketown looks exactly the same. We see that no one but the rich are different, which means that the novelist has looked at Coketown from the workers' point of view, where everything and everybody is the same, but the people of working-class are different. The factory owners of the town assume that the workers have access to the best food and resources. However, its opposite is true because the workers have access to very little. Coketown gives us an excellent idea of what it was like to be 'a worker' in the Victorian era.

The city is fit for the men who are utilitarian in their approach towards life. Josiah Bounderby, the manufacturer and factory owner, and the prosperous banker, is one such person who takes delight in economic progress in life. He is a boastful man. He

boasts of something which other people would like to hide. He can purchase anything costly and can afford any comfort for him in the Coketown for his satisfaction. Bounderby makes men and machines equal to each other. He regards man as having so much horsepower to be bought in the cheapest market. Conditions of life held no charm for labourers and workers in the field, for they were required to dwell in slum areas with no amenities of life attending them at any stage of their miserable existence. As Andrew Sanders says, *Hard Times* is “a bitter satire on the effects of the industrial revolution in northern England” (1966:407). The economic gap created unrest among the poor because a few people acquired wealth and left others to suffer. Walter Allen says, in *Hard Times*, Dickens is “attacking a whole social system in all its complexity whatever it seems to him to impede or prevent the flow of impulse between man and man, the exercise of natural kindness and trust” (1960:188).

**Conclusion**

The discussion proves that Charles Dickens repudiates the idea of utilitarianism wholeheartedly by exposing the educational, social, and economic aspects of the Victorian era. Thomas Gradgrind represents the utilitarian philosophy of education, who believes that facts alone are needed in life. The second aspect of utilitarianism is social. Dickens’ people in this novel are either rich or poor. There is almost no character that stands somewhere in between. The rich are superior to the poor socially. The last aspect of utilitarianism is economical. The economic life of Coketown is utilitarian as the masses of Coketown are poor, whereas the people like Mr. Bounderby are wealthy. It shows the economic disparity of the people living in an industrial city of Facts. The novelist is against this kind of mechanical society. He establishes his point by presenting the defeat of Mr. Grandgrind through his children Tom and Louisa. The novelist advocates a harmonious existence of fact and fiction, the high and the low and the rich and the poor.

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