

Hard Times by Charles Dickens

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1. Basic Information

Title of the book: Hard Times

Author: Charles Dickens

Year of publication: 1854

Setting: Coketown

Characters: Mr. Gradgrind, Louisa, Tom, Mr. Bounderby and his mother, Stephen

Blackpool, Racheal, Sissy Jupe, Harthouse

2. Background

- a. Industrial Revolution: Industrial Revolution is a shift from handicraft and other manual modes of production to mass level industrial manufacturing method. Because of a large scale production and an immediate increase in output, this was called as a 'revolution'. With reference to 'Hard Times' the other side of the so called revolution has been depicted which involves a massive change in the lives of the workers.

- b. Utilitarianism: It is a social philosophy associated with Jeremy Bentham and J.S. Mill. Roughly, the theory believed in greatest good or greatest happiness for greatest number of people. Happiness, here, was referred to welfare. This was, therefore, called a consequentialist approach. In the economic understanding of profit and loss happiness was equated with money and therefore the concept of utility got confined to that of economic utility and hence happiness is seen as a quantifiable commodity. Hard Times analyses this quantifiable, fact based, economic understanding of industrialisation.

3. **Introduction to the text:**

Based on the Biblical concept of “As you sow, so shall you reap”, Charles Dickens’s Hard Times is divided into three sections namely Sowing, Reaping, Garnering. The characters in the novel reaps what they sow. When facts are sown, insensitivity is reaped and when love is sown, compassion is reaped. The story is woven around the impact of industrialisation on the masses. Although the novel seems to be a simple linear narrative with the characters who sound funny, it maintains its seriousness through juxtapositions of the real and the apparent, fact and imagination, profit and happiness. Thus, the novel is a valid commentary on the values of late Victorian society with reference to the social and economic condition. It presents an alternative narrative of ‘development’.

4. **Important Points**

- a. Education: The novel opens in a schoolroom with education method that involves a speaking master and obeying students almost in a monologue. This suggests an authoritarian learning whereby the students are supposed to be the obeying

receiver. This sets the tone of the novel and prepares us to see a similar power structure in school, at home, at the factory, in judicial matter and almost in every aspect of society. Education largely focuses on facts and the students are supposed to plant facts and root out everything else. Basically this sets the tone of the act of sowing which is crucial for the thematic development of the plot. People are advised to sow the seed of facts which is based on concrete and quantifiable understanding of the world. This leads to lack of imagination and hence lack of empathy. This education creates a norm and that norm justifies inequality.

- b. Poverty: Because of a shift in the mode of production from manual small scale production to mechanical large scale production many people lost their jobs and many became workers in the factory. A major difference between cottage industry worker and factory worker is their alienation from the product and therefore alienation from the profit generated through production. These workers are not artists who create but they are labourers who work with the machines and thus they are replaceable. Because of this reduced status, these workers are called 'hands' in the novel.

Poverty is therefore a major issue in the novel. A huge difference can be noticed between the lives of the rich and the poor. Two major differences are those of time and space. The rich, as depicted in the household of Mr. Gradgrind and Mr. Bounderby, have a plenty of time to themselves to reflect on their personal issues whereas the poor are always occupied working according to the needs of the master. Their time has been monopolised by the owners. Also, unlike the rich the poor have space constraints. They live in small spaces which is an extension of their inner suffocation.

As far as depiction of poverty is concerned, it is different for both the classes. For the rich like Mr Bounderby poverty is a tool of attracting attention of people. He boasts of his poverty in the past and that amplifies his present success. On the other hand poverty for the poor is a lived reality and that only confines their desires.

- c. Utility: Because human beings are seen as resources, we can see a shift from moral value to economic value. Humans are seen as 'hands' for their utility purpose. Relations are also seen as opportunity for growth. For example, Louisa's wedding with Mr Bounderby is a deal for profit. Similarly, Harthouse looks at Louisa as an opportunity. Tom too uses Louisa for his benefit. Likewise, many examples can be found.

Utility does not come with moral values or empathy of any kind. Sissy Jupe can be seen as an empathetic character that is the only character to get happiness in life. Thus, the novel presents a sharp contrast between utility and happiness.

5. Important Questions

- a. Discuss the relevance of the opening chapter of Hard Times.
- b. Comment on the depiction of poverty in the novel.
- c. Discuss Utilitarianism with reference to Hard Times.
- d. Elaborate on the effects of industrialisation with reference to the novel.