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The Industrial Revolution: A Watershed in Human Society in Charles Dickens's *Hard Times.*

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Master's Degree in Literature and Civilization***

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Dedications

I dedicate this work to my dear parents whose love, patience and encouragement was indispensable. This work is also dedicated to Mr. Cheboui, Ms. Maameredine and Ms. Rezoug, and to my siblings Amjed and Hadjer.

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Abstract

This dissertation examines Charles Dickens's *"Hard Times"* as a powerful literary response to the Industrial Revolution and its profound transformation of human society. By portraying industrial England as a space of mechanical routine, emotional repression, and social inequality, Dickens presents industrialization as a watershed that reshaped not only economic structures but also human relationships, moral values, and individual identities. Drawing on historical and socio-critical perspectives, this study explores how utilitarian ideology and industrial capitalism contribute to dehumanization, class division, and emotional alienation. Through an analysis of setting, characterization, and narrative technique, the dissertation argues that Dickens critiques the reduction of human life to facts, profit, and productivity, while advocating imagination, empathy, and social responsibility as necessary correctives. Ultimately, *"Hard Times"* is shown to be a moral and social indictment of industrial modernity whose concerns remain relevant in contemporary societies shaped by technological and economic rationalism.

Keywords:

Industrial Revolution, Victorian society, utilitarianism, dehumanization, social criticism.

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General Introduction

General Introduction

By the mid-18th century, the Industrial Revolution swept through Britain and later spread across the globe by the mid-19th century. It was an era that signified a change to the course of human history, unlike any before. Fundamentally, the Industrial Revolution was marked by a rapid shift toward mechanized production after having relied on agrarian means and labor for millennia. Factories grew in size and scope using a variety of new technologies, which transformed the way goods, were produced and distributed. Put simply, the age of industrialization witnessed a sharp break with the past, a break that saw the birth of a more secular, urban, and industrial society.

This era also witnessed a capitalist explosion, which paved the way for a bourgeois factory system that created new class structures and conflicts. Besides the bourgeois class, the proletariat class appeared whose labor became alienated under the demands of profit-driven production.

This dissertation uses Dickens's work, primarily his 1854 novel "*Hard Times*," to explore how the Victorian belief in progress led to major social and moral downsides. This is because this important text of Dickens realistically represents different social classes in Victorian society (Ingham 1996). His approach of displaying the reality of English people's living conditions, styles of education, and class pressures there becomes a necessary tool for understanding the two faces of industrialization: the technological and the moral.

Charles Dickens appears in *Hard Times* as a clear and honest observer of the social conditions in England during his time. Although he came from the middle class, Dickens strongly rejected classical economic ideas and showed deep moral concern for the well-being of society. His novels portray the filth, decay, disorder, and human suffering of modern industrial cities.

Dickens broadly sympathises with the suffering of the oppressed. He criticizes the ways in which society deteriorated to serve an upper class that did not care for anything except how to grow its pockets. However, his critique remains within a liberal-humanist framework rather than endorsing political radicalism, as his scepticism toward collective labour action — evident in Stephen Blackpool's refusal to join the union — suggests a complex and sometimes ambivalent relationship with the working class. *Hard Times* shows Dickens's role as both a cultural critic and a social commentator. Charles Dickens's *Hard Times* (1854) stands as a seminal work of Victorian literature, offering a powerful and realistic portrayal of industrial society, utilitarianism, and class struggles in mid-19th-century England.

Set in the fictional town of Coketown, a disguised version of Preston or Manchester, the novel shows the harsh reality of factory life, the dominance of utilitarian ideas, and also the human suffering. Dickens criticizes how capitalism turns human life into something mechanical. This realism is clear in his descriptions of Coketown: "It was a town of red brick, or of brick that would have been red if the smoke and ashes had allowed it" (Dickens 22), which symbolizes the pollution of those overcrowded industrial towns.

Hard Times examines English society and mocks the social and economic conditions of its time. The novel uses realistic detail and stays faithful to Dickens's method of writing, called *Verisimilitude*, which aimed to depict reality as best as possible onto the page. This is not only valuable from a literary standpoint but also from a sociological one, as sociologists believe literature offers a true lens into society (Corse 2012).

Dickens clearly challenges the idea that industrial progress is always positive. Through its structure and characters, the novel shows how economic forces affect real human lives. Its realism exposes hidden criticism of class power and the way people are treated like objects rather than human beings.

This study focuses on how the Industrial Revolution marked a major turning point in society, both in history and in literature. It asks how *Hard Times* presents the disruptive effects of industrialization on social values. It also argues that the novel reflects a transformation in nineteenth-century Britain and not only a change in technology.

To investigate these claims, the study attempts to answer the following:

- How does Charles Dickens represent the Industrial Revolution as a decisive turning point in human society in *Hard Times*?
- In what ways does Charles Dickens criticize utilitarianism and industrial capitalism's impact on human values and emotions?
- How does Dickens expose the social and moral consequences of industrialization on class relations and individual identity?

To answer the above-stated questions, a number of hypotheses are formulated as follows:

- Charles Dickens depicts the Industrial Revolution as a decisive turning point by contrasting mechanical, fact-driven industrial values with human imagination, compassion, and individuality. Ultimately, criticizing industrial society for prioritizing efficiency over humanity.
- In *Hard Times*, Charles Dickens critiques utilitarianism and industrial capitalism by showing how their emphasis on efficiency, profit, and "facts" suppresses human values such as compassion, imagination, and emotional connection, leading to moral and social decay.
- In *Hard Times*, Dickens exposes the social and moral consequences of industrialization by portraying how rigid class divisions and factory-driven values distort class relations and erode individual identity, reducing people to economic roles rather than whole human beings.

Using a Marxist approach informed by modernization theory, this dissertation analyzes how Dickens presents class conflict in the novel. By viewing industrialization in *Hard Times* as a major historical turning point, the study reveals the problems hidden behind the idea of progress promoted by modernization theory.

While Marxist criticism guides the analysis of class relations and ideology in the novel, modernization theory is used to place the novel within the broader historical process of change in Victorian society, especially the strong belief in progress. The study also examines the novel from the perspective of Bentham's utilitarianism.

The present study is divided into three chapters. Chapter One is devoted to the historical and theoretical background, which is necessary to understand *Hard Times* properly. It explains what the Industrial Revolution was and how it transformed work, cities, and social relationships, all from a Marxist and utilitarian perspectives. Chapter Two moves from the theory to the literary analysis, introducing the reader to the novel itself, namely, its presentation of Coketown and the institutions it holds within it, which foster the industrial society. It showcases other systems like education and the philosophies that governed it. Then, chapter three puts the characters front and center. It examines their moral and emotional lives. It considers the ways their psychologies are direct consequences of the industrial monotony observed in the previous chapter. The study attempts to reveal the human cost of industrialism. Therefore, the dissertation travels from society to the town and finally to the individual human being.

Finally, the conclusion brings these points together and examines Dickens' continued relevance to modern and post-industrial societies.

Chapter One:

The Historical Background of the Industrial Revolution in Victorian Society

Chapter One: The Industrial Revolution and Victorian Society

1.1 Introduction

As time passes, people's perception of their surroundings changes, their beliefs and values differ, reflecting their new understanding of their environment. Societies and ideas about life are not fixed; they are shaped by everyday experiences and by big events. One major event in nineteenth-century Britain was the Industrial Revolution. In their article "*The Influence of Historical Events on Victorian Literature*", Alaviyya Nuri explains that "the author explains that the Victorian period was marked by profound social change and reform. The rapid growth of industrialization reshaped both society and the economy, leading to deep social inequalities that sparked strong demands for reform (191). Hence, the era bid its farewell to the simple life people used to know, paving the way to new machinery, social life, and economy.

Nevertheless, although there were undeniable advantages that set the pace for progress, industrialization also brought serious social issues, unfair working conditions, and inequality. As a result, this chapter undermines the Industrial Revolution as a social and historical phenomenon and traces its economic and technological foundations. Further, it explores the rise of factory towns and the human consequences that shaped Victorian society: from class division and the emergence of the industrial working class to the dehumanization, poverty, and labour exploitation that marked this period. It also takes into consideration Charles Dickens' critique and work, *Hard Times* (1854).

1.2 Historical Background of the Industrial Revolution

The Industrial Revolution was not a single event but a gradual process that took time to unfold and take shape. Britain moved from a mainly farming economy to an industrial one. This shift changed work, social life, and economic growth. Literature reacted to these

changes and questioned the moral and social effects of industrialization. Stories became mirrors of people's lives. For example, Dickens's *Hard Times* (1854) shows how machines affected human life.

1.2.1 Economic and Technological Transformations

The Industrial Revolution grew from new technologies. It was "... marked by rapid technological advancements, such as the advent of the steam engine and mechanised production; it revolutionised industries like textiles, mining, and transportation" (Nuri 189). Nonetheless, while production increased in speed and efficiency, traditional crafts and skills decreased. Moreover, beyond being a technical shift, industrialization had also impacted daily routines, employment, and personal identity. That is to say, the machine began to structure life. However, factories demanded organization and discipline. As Ozutku, Tekinkaya, and Vural observed, "a spirit of innovation led to inventions, inventions led to factories, and factories led to a need for direction and organization." (841). Consequently, strict organization and control systems were also introduced by factories.

Factories did more than produce goods: they also shaped social behaviour. Dickens's depiction of disciplined factory life reflects this dual function. Technology and human behaviour were both influenced by industrialization, demonstrating how machines also influence society. Abdulqader S. Mejbel highlighted that the shift from "hand-made goods" to "factory goods" caused unemployment, as machines were seen as more efficient and less time-consuming (156). He also adds that people were used as cheap labour, leading to repetitive, mechanical lives (157). In short, economic gains were not shared equally: owners grew richer while workers faced long hours, low pay, and unsafe conditions.

1.2.2 Urbanization and the Rise of Factory Towns

Industrialization also transformed Britain's geography. Many rural people moved to towns like Manchester and Birmingham, causing rapid urban growth (Nuri 189). As Mejbél stated, this urbanization often produced overcrowded and unsanitary conditions, with air pollution and inadequate housing creating "disgraceful living conditions" for workers (Mejbél 156). Factory towns, thus, came to represent both industrial success and human hardship, where efficiency and productivity were prioritised over well-being. Workers were frequently treated as mere instruments of labour. To demonstrate, Dickens describes them as "hands" whose value is measured solely by their output (Mejbél 156–157). These realities are vividly depicted in Dickens' fictional *Coketown*, where monotonous streets, relentless smoke, and repetitive factory work dramatise the human cost of industrial efficiency. Many critics and scholars believe that such exaggeration allows readers to face the social consequences of industrial advancement, making abstract social problems tangible and emotionally relatable.

Factory towns, such as the fictional *Coketown* in Charles Dickens' *Hard Times*, showcase the urbanization process and its impact on Victorian society. Dickens described these towns as dominated by "factories, machinery, and ceaseless smokestacks," representing the industrial landscape of 19th-century England (Chauhan 307). Dickens's *Coketown* exaggerates these features to highlight the ethical questions of industrialization. His critique is not simply about smoke and monotony. It is about the human cost of a society obsessed with profit.

In *Hard Times*, Dickens presents *Coketown* as a heavily industrialised city. Its factories, smoke, and endless machinery turn daily life into a regimented and impersonal one. The people living there are stuck in routines that leave little space for personal expression or imagination. Aspects such as these reflect a society obsessed with productivity and efficiency

rather than human needs (Chauhan 307). Through characters like Stephen Blackpool, who struggles under harsh working conditions, and Louisa Gradgrind, who suffers from emotional repression, Dickens highlights how the growth of factory towns shaped both social structures and individual lives. The novel critiques an economic system that treats workers as tools for production rather than as full human beings, showing the consequences of valuing profit over well-being. Urbanization in this context is not just a physical change. It also symbolises the moral and social challenges created by industrial progress (Chauhan 311). Urbanization, in this sense, becomes both a literal and symbolic landscape of the Industrial Revolution's triumphs and failures.

The concentration of industry made the divide between wealthy industrialists and the working class clearer. Social life and culture changed as class divisions grew stronger (Mutlu). Dickens portrays industrial cities as moral landscapes where everyday life was marked by inequality, monotony, and neglect. In this way, the Industrial Revolution affected not only work but also how people experienced life itself.

1.3. Social Consequences of Industrialization

The rise of factory towns brought a profound social change, including class division and labour exploitation. As much as industrialization changed the economy, it also transformed society. Factories and machines were meant to make work more efficient, but they also changed daily life and society. Wealth stayed mostly with the factory owners, while a new working class appeared, relying on wages to survive. In *Coketown*, residents' value is determined mainly by how much work they produce, and their personal identities are largely ignored. Dickens illustrates how industrial life can dehumanise workers, treating them as mere components of the machinery, which is symbolised by the way they are simply called "Hands" (Chauhan 308).

1.3.1 Class Division and the Industrial Working Class

With the rise of the Industrial Revolution in 1837, industries grew too fast and unevenly. It mainly helped the upper class, while other groups saw little benefit. Hence, the dominant social class imposed its values on the working class, treating labourers primarily as a source of profit. As a result, workers in the Victorian era experienced “a monotonous life,” in other words, a repetitive and restrictive life through which they gradually became mechanised in both their routines and behaviour (Mejbel 156–157). Moreover, as Ozutku, Tekinkaya, and Vural observed, “... The expanded market called for more workers, more machines and a larger production scale on a regular basis” (841). In other words, factory owners, driven by profit and productivity, often regarded their labourers as disposable tools rather than human beings. Consequently, this attitude highlighted the social divisions created by industrial progress.

In fact, Dickens feared that utilitarian philosophies, which focused only on facts and efficiency, would strip society of compassion and imagination, reducing workers to “objects without emotions” (Mejbel 156). This sharp split between owners and employees was a clear product of industrial towns. Workers faced dangerous conditions, long hours, and low pay while owners prospered. Productivity often determined human worth.

Rural displacement made these problems worse. Many people were forced to move to industrial towns because of enclosure laws and changes in agriculture. There, overcrowding and poor sanitation increased social exclusion (Khudhur 211–212). Entire communities were impacted by industrialization, which changed daily life, neighbourhoods, and family structures. Dickens's *Coketown* uses regimented factories and dirty streets to dramatise these effects. Throughout his novel, Dickens criticises social structures that normalise injustice as well as economic exploitation.

Overall, social hierarchies hardened, and class divisions only continued to grow (Mutlu). Literature revealed moral and social issues in addition to providing descriptions. Dickens not only revealed the realities of systemic oppression but also shaped public attitudes by highlighting the shortcomings of modern institutions and stirring compassion across social classes. His writing demonstrates how literature can function as social critique, actively engaging readers with societal issues instead of merely depicting them (Prasasti, Widyawati, & Suryadi). Hence, through urbanization, economic expansion, and technological advancements, the Industrial Revolution changed nineteenth-century Britain. However, increasing wealth and production, mechanization led to inequality, unfavourable working conditions, and dehumanised labour.

1.3.2 Dehumanization, Poverty, and Labour Exploitation

From a Marxist perspective, industrial labour strips workers of their human nature by turning work into something done only to survive. In *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Karl Marx explains that under capitalism, the worker becomes alienated from his labour because it no longer reflects who he is or belongs to him (Marx). For this reason, work loses its meaning and becomes repetitive and physically demanding rather than fulfilling.

This idea is clearly reflected in Charles Dickens's *Hard Times*. The industrial town is organised around productivity instead of human needs, and workers are often referred to simply as "Hands," a term that represents them as tools of labour rather than individuals (Dickens). Stephen Blackpool's long working hours leave him exhausted and isolated, and there is little indication that his labour offers him any sense of purpose or improvement in his life.

Dickens's portrayal closely resembles the conditions described by Friedrich Engels in *The Condition of the Working Class in England*. Engels documents how industrial labour harms workers' health and their living circumstances, arguing that such environments "destroy both health and humanity" (Engels). This comparison makes it clear that the suffering shown in *Hard Times* was not exaggerated fiction but a reality experienced by many workers during the Industrial Revolution.

From a Marxist point of view, these conditions are not accidental. They are produced by an economic system that values profit over human well-being. The comfort and wealth of factory owners depend on the continued suffering of workers. By focusing on Stephen Blackpool, Dickens turns abstract economic ideas into a personal experience, allowing readers to understand the real human cost of industrial capitalism.

1.4 Victorian Ideology: Progress, Utilitarianism, and Social Control

The Victorian era brought major social, political, and philosophical changes. Ideas about progress, order, and measuring human behaviour influenced education, industry, and politics. Among these ideas, utilitarianism became very influential. It shaped how society measured success, which was through facts, efficiency, and clear results.

1.4.1. Jeremy Bentham's Utilitarian Philosophy

In the middle of the Victorian period, utilitarianism, largely associated with Jeremy Bentham, became a leading philosophy. Bentham argued that actions should be judged by their consequences, aiming for "the greatest happiness for the greatest number" (Bentham). This approach prioritised efficiency and measurable outcomes, often at the expense of individual feelings or moral complexity. In *Hard Times*, Dickens critiques this ideology through the character of Mr. Gradgrind, whose school focuses exclusively on facts and

measurable knowledge. Students are taught to value information over imagination or empathy, and Dickens highlights the limitations of such an approach. For example, he presents Louisa Gradgrind, who grows up emotionally suppressed, as a direct consequence of her father's rigid adherence to facts and utility (Dickens). Through Gradgrind's system, Dickens questions the human cost of utilitarian philosophy, showing that a focus solely on measurable outcomes can neglect essential emotional and social development.

1.4.2 The Cult of Efficiency and Statistics

Victorian Britain trusted numbers, measurements, and the idea of "improvement." Progress was often equated with efficiency, productivity, and statistical control. In *Hard Times*, Dickens satirises this by depicting a "deadly statistical recorder" that counts time and events without feeling, showing how focusing only on measurement can dehumanise life (Dickens 67). The machine-like precision of numbers and statistics is presented as cold and unfeeling, emphasising the ways in which industrial and bureaucratic systems value output over human well-being.

Factory owners often spoke of "progress" as a sign of modernity and success, but Dickens shows that these claims are misleading. While factories may appear efficient and productive, they often strip work of social and emotional value. Workers are treated as extensions of the machinery, and human warmth and care are largely absent. Dickens writes that in such environments, "the human being is almost reduced to a number, and the soul is left untouched" (Dickens 68). Through these descriptions, Dickens satirises the Victorian belief that numerical measurement and statistical oversight are inherently virtuous or sufficient for social improvement.

1.5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the Industrial Revolution deeply transformed Victorian society by changing the way people understood work, progress, and social order. Industrial labour, utilitarian thinking, and the growing faith in efficiency and statistics encouraged systems that valued productivity more than human experience. As Marxist theory suggests, and as Dickens also shows in his writing, these ideas often caused emotional emptiness, a loss of individuality, and the reduction of human beings to parts of a larger economic machine. Although industrial progress was widely praised, its effects reveal a more troubling reality, where human relationships, daily life, and even the natural environment were often ignored or badly damaged. These concerns make it necessary to look more closely at how industrial society actually appears in literature. This is why the next chapter turns to **Hard Times** itself, especially to Coketown and Gradgrind's education system. By examining these elements, we can see how Dickens turns the reality of industrial England into a powerful critique of its social and moral values.

Chapter Two:

Industrial England in *Hard Times*

Chapter Two: Industrial England in *Hard Times*

2.1 Introduction

The Industrial Revolution reshaped Victorian society, transforming not only work and social order but also people's values and ways of life. In *Hard Times*, Dickens demonstrates these newfound values and lifestyle, turning abstract ideas into vivid symbols and philosophies. To illustrate, Coketown is represented as a symbol of this new industrial world. It is dominated by machines, smoke, and hard labour and routine, and all of these obscure individuality and emotional experience. Moreover, Dickens critiques how Thomas Gradgrind's philosophy of "facts" shapes his approach to education, showing how utilitarian ideals suppress imagination, empathy, and moral reflection (Bansal 282–283).

This chapter, therefore, focuses on two central aspects of Dickens's critique. First, it examines Coketown as a representation of industrial society, exploring mechanization, monotony, environmental decay, and the resulting loss of individuality and imagination. Second, it examines Gradgrind's utilitarian education system, which strictly enforces both intellectual and emotional discipline, highlighting how these practices reveal the human costs of industrialization. This chapter will explore how Dickens's novel emerges not just as a depiction of industrial England but as a critique of the social and moral pressures that shaped Victorian life.

2.2.Coketown as a Symbol of Industrial Society

In *Hard Times*, Charles Dickens presents Coketown as a symbol of the industrial world, where rapid mechanization and the constant pursuit of productivity shape both the environment and the lives of its residents. The city represents the monotony, environmental decay, and dehumanising effects of industrialization, reflecting a society that

prioritises efficiency and facts over individuality and imagination. Through Coketown, Dickens critiques not only the physical consequences of industrial growth but also its profound social and psychological impacts.

2.2.1. Mechanization, Monotony, and Environmental Decay

In *Hard Times*, Coketown is more than just a setting; it represents the industrial society of Victorian England. Dickens describes streets crowded with factories, smoke filling the skyline, and buildings arranged in strict, monotonous patterns. This physical organization mirrors the town's social structure, where workers are treated as parts of a machine rather than as individuals. Through Coketown, Dickens illustrates how industrial capitalism alienates people, leaving little room for personal freedom or individuality. He writes of the town:

“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... and to whom every day was the same as yesterday and tomorrow...” (Hard Times).

In the same vein, Brantlinger draws attention to Dickens's portrayal of workers as “Hands,” a term that reduces individuals to mere instruments of labour and reflects the dehumanising nature of industrial work within a mechanised system (284).

The monotony does not simply seep into the buildings but also into everyday life. The endless turning of machines, the repetition of tasks, and the uniformity of clothing and behavior create the impression that workers themselves are nearly mechanical. There is no personal importance for the laborer, only their labor, as they are cogs in a machine that beats a ceaseless rhythm. Through this portrayal, Dickens transforms the abstract concept of labour

alienation into a lived experience. As Eagleton notes in *Marxism and Literary Criticism*, industrial capitalism separates workers from the products of their labour, from one another, and from their own creativity and emotions (Eagleton). In Coketown, this alienation is evident in the way citizens' lives revolve entirely around efficiency, leaving little room for imagination or moral reflection. Consequently, by repeating images of uniform streets and mechanical routines, Dickens conveys how industrial life produces emotional exhaustion and a sense of imprisonment among workers.

Environmental decay is another key element of Coketown's symbolism. Dickens presents a landscape dominated by smoke, suffocating air, and overcrowded housing, where industrial activity pushes all traces of nature away. He describes the town as a place "where Nature was as strongly bricked out as killing airs and gases were bricked in," emphasizing how the industrial environment actively excludes nature while enclosing pollution and decay (*Hard Times*). The chaotic structure of the city, with its "narrow courts upon courts, and close streets upon streets," further reflects the disorderly and oppressive conditions in which the working class is forced to live. In this setting, human life becomes inseparable from industrial production, and inhabitants are referred to as "the Hands." Dickens suggests that industrialization not only transforms the physical environment but also creates a society in which both nature and human well-being are sacrificed for the sake of production and profit.

The smoke and soot of Coketown carry symbolic weight beyond physical pollution. Rizwan and Khatoon argue that Dickens's industrial landscapes reveal "the bleak underside of progress, where pollution and monotony dominate human existence." Here, the smoke functions as a metaphor for the oppressive atmosphere of industrial society. It clouds not only the air but also human lives, creativity, and hope. By linking environmental damage with social damage, Dickens warns that industrial "progress" comes with a serious human cost.

Ultimately, Coketown is not a celebration of industry but a critique. Through its factories, smoke, and rigid routines, Dickens exposes how the sacrifices of both human and environmental life paved the way for industrial efficiency. At the same time, he highlights how material advancement can suffocate individuality, imagination, and moral life.

2.2.2. The Loss of Individuality and Imagination

Dickens's portrayal of Coketown goes beyond its physical and environmental degradation. He also shows how industrial capitalism suppresses individuality and imagination. The town's sameness reflects the dehumanizing conditions imposed on workers, who are pushed into repetitive routines and stripped of personal identity. This representation aligns with Marxist concerns about alienation, as individuals become disconnected from both their labour and their sense of self. In this context, Chauta emphasizes that Dickens presents workers as functioning "like machines" within a system driven by profit and productivity (Chauta 324–25). Moreover, the absence of imagination in such an environment reveals the broader cultural cost of industrialization. As Chauta further observes, Dickens exposes "the flattening effect of industrialization on both the physical environment and the human spirit" (Chauta 326), highlighting how industrial uniformity weakens human vitality and reinforces class oppression.

Dickens further highlights the difference between this environment and the lives of Louisa Gradgrind and Stephen Blackpool, showing the tension between a rigid, emotionless system and individual suffering. Through Louisa's emotional silence and Stephen's social hardship, he illustrates how industrial society damages both personal identity and human dignity. These aspects will be examined in greater detail in the following chapter.

Accordingly, Coketown is both literal and symbolic. It is not only a physical town dominated by industry but also a representation of the mechanization of thought, behaviour, and emotion. Hence, Dickens critiques not only the material conditions of this harsh industrial life but also its deeper social and moral consequences, making the realities of industrialization appear more visceral and concrete, which in turn becomes more relatable for the reader.

2.3 Utilitarian Education and Emotional Repression

If Coketown represents the industrial machine, Gradgrind represents its philosophy. His insistence on "facts" alone illustrates how utilitarian logic, when applied to education, strips children of creativity and emotional depth. As Dr. Leena Bansal argues, Dickens critiques a fact-based, utilitarian education system represented by Gradgrind's school, which "stifles imagination, emotion, and individuality by focusing solely on measurable 'facts' at the expense of creativity, moral development, and critical thinking" (Bansal 282). Dickens, hence, presents utilitarian education as part of the same industrial values he criticizes throughout the novel.

2.3.1. Thomas Gradgrind's Philosophy of "Facts"

While Coketown shows the harsh, mechanical side of industrialization, Gradgrind's school shows how these values affect people's minds. Critics such as Mahmood, Khalaf, and Bansal have noted that Gradgrind's philosophy, focused only on "facts," only values measurable knowledge, and controls emotions. In contrast, it goes to significant lengths to discourage imagination, as it fails to see the purpose in it. Dickens shows this clearly in the classroom: "You must not fancy anything, you know. Nothing is to be invented. Facts are the only things to be considered." (*Hard Times*).

Through Gradgrind, Dickens criticizes an education that ignores creativity and moral thinking. As Mahmood and Khalaf believe, Gradgrind “reject[s] fancy and imaginative stuff.” and treats “everything ... based on evidence and materials” without considering whether it is good or bad, showing how utilitarian thinking can stifle imagination, empathy, and ethical judgment (408). In effect, Gradgrind’s school is not a place of learning but a place that limits children’s emotional and moral growth. It prepares them for society, but it also limits their feelings and values.

Furthermore, to reflect the rigid industrial values, children are taught to memorize statistics, avoid fiction and poetry, and suppress curiosity or imaginative thought. Dickens emphasizes this when he writes, “Now, what I want is Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts” (*Hard Times*). This strict focus on facts mirrors the rigid, mechanical world of Coketown, showing a society that values efficiency and control over human creativity and feeling.

2.3.2 The Suppression of Fancy and Creativity

In a system obsessed with practicality, imagination or *fancy* is often neglected or seen as unnecessary. In *Hard Times*, Dickens shows this at the beginning of his novel through Mr. Gradgrind’s school, where only facts are valued, and any hint of creativity or daydreaming is discouraged. Dickens is adamant about using education as a backdrop of industrial life, enough that the very first lines of the novel reflect this. “Now, what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life” (*Hard Times* 1). This strict separation between fact and fancy mirrors a world that prioritizes control, order, and efficiency over feelings, individuality, and personal growth. Life becomes mechanical, predictable, and emotionally flat.

Sissy Jupe, who comes from the circus, offers a completely different perspective. She is full of imagination, empathy, and emotional qualities that clash with the rigid expectations of Gradgrind's education. In this respect, she represents a foil to characters like Louisa, who embody opposite beliefs or live opposite experiences. Even when Sissy struggles to adapt to the strict rules, she shows that fancy is not luxury but an essential part of understanding people, making choices, and finding joy in life. Louisa Gradgrind, by contrast, grows up in an environment that suppresses fancy, and this leaves her emotionally stunted. She struggles to understand her own feelings and often feels trapped in a world defined only by facts.

Through these characters, Dickens warns that the suppression of imagination is not just an educational flaw; it is part of a wider system that suppresses creativity, compassion, and the full development of human potential. Without fancy, life may run smoothly on paper, but it becomes cold, hollow, and disconnected from what truly makes us human.

2.4. Industrial Capitalism and Power Relations

In *Hard Times*, industrial capitalism is demonstrated not just as a system of production but as a structure of power that affects everyone involved. Factory owners like Bounderby hold significant control over their workers, who endure long hours, strict rules, and limited autonomy. While industrial growth and technological advancements suggest progress, Dickens suggests that this progress often comes at the expense of workers' physical and mental well-being. Moreover, those in positions of authority frequently fail to recognize or address the human costs associated with the system.

This section will tackle two main aspects: the relationship between factory owners and workers and how the apparent progress of industry conceals cruelty, injustice, and moral indifference.

2.4.1. Factory Owners Versus Workers

Hard Times presents class conflict through the contrast between factory owners and workers. On one side are wealthy industrialists such as Mr. Bounderby and Mr. Gradgrind, who represent authority, economic power, and social influence. For instance, Bounderby describes himself proudly as “*a self-made man*,” whose name subtly reflects his character, suggesting arrogance, which fits the way he keeps bragging about himself: “Pretty well this, for a self-made man!” (*Hard Times* 30). On the other side are workers like Stephen Blackpool and Rachel, whose lives are shaped by demanding labour, low wages, and limited opportunities, being reduced to what the novel repeatedly calls “*Hands*.” “*Among the multitude of Coketown, generically called 'the Hands,' a race who would have found more favour with some people, if Providence had seen fit to make them only hands, or, like the lower creatures of the seashore, only hands and stomachs, lived a certain Stephen Blackpool, forty years of age*” (*Hard Times* 71), a term that strips them of individuality.

The novel shows that workers have very little control over their situation. Social structures, workplace conditions, and economic pressures restrict their choices, making it difficult for them to improve their lives. Although laws and labor organizations exist, they provide limited support and often fail to protect individuals like Stephen. This highlights the imbalance of power between the two groups.

Through this contrast, Dickens suggests that industrial society is built in a way that helps the powerful while leaving workers vulnerable. The conflict between factory owners and workers is not only economic. It also raises deeper questions about fairness, dignity, and social inequality.

2.4.2. The Illusion of Progress and Moral Blindness

Dickens shows that just because factories are running and people are making money, it doesn't mean everyone becomes better or more moral. Mr. Bounderby, for example, is very proud of running his factory and thinks being rich makes him a good person. But he treats his workers poorly. He keeps bragging about being a *self-made man*, yet Stephen Blackpool is trapped under his authority. Stephen even says, 'Sir, yo know weel,' said Stephen expressively, 'that if I canna get work wi' yo, I canna get it elsewheer.'" (*Hard Times* 173), which shows how this so-called "progress" doesn't really improve the lives of ordinary people.

Tom Gradgrind is another example. He's raised to care only about facts and ambition, and instead of helping anyone, he uses what he knows to improve his own status while making life harder for others. Through Tom and Bounderby, Dickens highlights the emptiness of this kind of progress, especially when people are blind to the suffering around them and lack emotional awareness or *fancy*. The narrator points out that there are people like Tom. "THOMAS GRADGRIND, sir. A man of realities. A man of facts and calculations." (*Hard Times* 2). This shows how education based on facts only can shape a person more for ambition than for kindness.

Louisa's life shows how being raised only on facts can hurt her feelings. She grows up in a world that values facts over feelings, and it affects her deeply. She tells her father, "What do I know, Father?" said Louisa in her quiet manner, "of tastes and fancies; of aspirations and affections..." (*Hard Times* 115), showing that she struggles to understand her own emotions because her education, based on facts only, never taught her how to feel.

Supporters of modernization theory may call this progress, but Dickens shows that it means little if it ignores human dignity. Through the struggles of his characters, he asks readers to sympathize with people like Stephen and Louisa, who live in a world that pretends

to be improving while remaining unfair. Dickens suggests that true progress needs moral awareness, empathy, and compassion, not just more machines or more money.

In *Hard Times*, Dickens uses Coketown and its institutions to show how industrial society can be harsh and unfair. The town, with its smoke, factories, and strict routines, makes people feel like machines instead of humans. Through the factories, he shows how economic "Progress" often comes at the expense of workers like Stephen Blackpool. The education system, shaped by Gradgrind's obsession with facts, produces children like Tom, who cares more about ambition than kindness, and Louisa, who struggles to understand her own feelings. Overall, Dickens shows that progress isn't just about money, rules, or machines. It only matters when people are treated with care, empathy, and *fancy*.

2.5. Conclusion

It would be reductive to state that Dickens simply attacks industrial life. He instead attempts to defend human values through sharp and complex characterization and astute worldbuilding. He shows that people like Stephen Blackpool and Rachel represent honesty, patience, and moral strength, even when they have little power. Their lives remind the reader that real worth cannot be measured by wealth or status. In the end, *Hard Times* argues that a fair society must protect both material needs and human feelings. Machines, money, and systems may be useful, but they should never come before imagination, compassion, and justice. Dickens's message remains important because it still warns against any society that values efficiency more than humanity.

The novel also shows that education can become harmful when it is built on facts alone. Thomas Gradgrind believes that children should learn only what can be measured, but this idea creates emotional emptiness instead of wisdom

Hard Times is a powerful criticism of industrial society and the values that support it. Through Coketown, Dickens shows a world where factories, smoke, and repetition control both the land and the people. The town is not only dirty and unpleasant; it also shows how a system based only on profit can damage human life. Workers are treated like parts of a machine, and the natural world is pushed aside. Dickens makes it clear that progress is not truly progress if it destroys people's dignity and weakens their sense of self.

However, these ideas are not only shown through setting and institutions. They are also deeply visible in the lives of the characters themselves. For this reason, the next chapter moves away from the town and its systems and focuses more closely on individuals. By examining characters like Stephen Blackpool and Louisa Gradgrind, it becomes possible to understand the personal and emotional cost of industrialism, and how these large social forces shape human lives in quiet but powerful ways.

Chapter Three:

Human Cost and Moral Critique of Industrialism

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3.1. Introduction

In *Hard Times*, Charles Dickens makes it clear that industrial progress is not only about machines, factories, or economic growth. It is about people and the quiet suffering they go through. Industrialization may look like a sign of progress, but Dickens asks readers to look at its darker side: the loss of dignity, the weakening of human relationships, and the suppression of feeling.

Charles Dickens explores these issues by showing how industrialism affects both the working class and the middle class. On one side, the novel presents the dehumanization of workers through Stephen Blackpool, who becomes a victim of industrial injustice. His silence, suffering, and social isolation reflect the harsh reality faced by many people in this system. On the other side, Dickens also shows how industrial values affect family life, especially through Louisa Gradgrind, whose emotional distance reveals the danger of a life based only on reason and facts. Her marriage also shows how relationships can be reduced to social and economic deals rather than real emotional bonds.

This chapter looks at three main parts of Dickens's critique of industrialism. It begins with the dehumanization of the working class, then examines the impact of industrial ideas on gender, family, and emotional life, and finally considers Dickens's vision of social reform, especially his emphasis on compassion, moral duty, and imagination.

3.2. The Dehumanization of the Working Class

To begin with, one of the most striking aspects of *Hard Times* is the way industrial society reduces human beings to mere components of a larger system. Workers are repeatedly referred to as "Hands," a term that deliberately strips them of individuality. By using this

word, Dickens also emphasizes that the workers are valued only for their physical labour, not for their thoughts, emotions or their personal identities.

This choice of language is not accidental. It reflects a wider reality where people are judged mainly by how much they produce. In such a system, individuality is not only ignored but also discouraged. Workers are expected to follow routines, obey authority, and do their jobs without questioning their role. As a result, dehumanization in *Hard Times* goes beyond difficult working conditions and leads to a deeper loss of identity and personal value.

This reality is powerfully embodied in the character of Stephen Blackpool, whose personal struggles and moral integrity expose the injustices of industrial society. Through his experience, Dickens illustrates how silence, suffering, and social exclusion become defining features of the worker's existence under industrial capitalism.

3.2.1. Stephen Blackpool as a Victim of Industrial Injustice

Firstly, Dickens presents Stephen Blackpool as a clear victim of industrial injustice. Stephen is an honest and morally steady man, yet his life is marked by limits, restrictions, and a constant lack of control. Dickens describes this life as a “muddle” (Dickens), a word that points not only to personal confusion but also to the unfair structure of his society. This “muddle” suggests that Stephen's suffering is not random; it comes from a system that offers no fairness, no clarity, and no real chance.

Throughout the novel, Stephen's life shows how different forms of unfairness overlap and strengthen one another. He is affected not only by harsh working conditions but also by social pressure and legal limits that restrict his choices. This is most clear when he cannot leave his unhappy marriage and divorce his drunken wife. When he asks for advice, he is told that “the law is agen me” (Dickens). Critics also argue that Stephen stands for the moral victim of industrial Victorian society, whose suffering comes not from personal failure but

from a system built on injustice (Al-Janabi 418). His unhappy marriage adds another layer of pressure, showing that even the law does not support him and instead deepens his suffering.

Furthermore, Stephen's situation becomes worse when he faces the question of the workers' union. When asked to join, he refuses, not because he is selfish, but because he wants to stay true to his beliefs. However, this decision leads to his rejection by the other workers. At the same time, the factory owners offer him no support, since they see him as easily replaceable. Stephen is caught between two sides, and neither one accepts him. This shows how rigid the industrial system is, leaving very little room for personal choice. To support this point, Dickens contrasts Stephen's honesty with Bounderby's arrogance, showing that moral integrity is often punished instead of rewarded in industrial capitalism (Chauhan 307-09).

Overall, this shows that Stephen is trapped not only economically, but also socially and legally. His life is limited by forces beyond his control, leaving him with no real chance to change his situation. In this way, Stephen becomes a strong symbol of systemic injustice. His personal tragedy reflects a wider reality in which people are denied not only economic stability but also dignity and independence.

3.2.2. Silence, Suffering, and Social Exclusion

Equally important, silence is one of the main themes surrounding Stephen's character. Unlike traditional literary heroes, Stephen does not openly rebel against the system. When he is pushed to betray others, he simply says, "I cannot and I will not" (Dickens). This short statement carries real weight. It shows moral strength, but it also marks the beginning of his exclusion.

Chauhan argues that Stephen's dismissal and later false accusation of robbery show how industrial society punishes honesty and rewards dishonesty. She explains that Stephen's

silence is not a weakness, but the result of a man whose voice has been taken away by both the law and society (309–310). That is to say, he does not openly protest or rebel against the system. It is not because he agrees with it, but because he lacks the power to fight it. This shows a deeper sense of oppression, where people have no agency and are denied not only their rights but also their ability to speak and be heard.

Consequently, Stephen is cut off from both the working and upper classes. His refusal to follow the union's expectations separates him from other workers, while his low social position stops him from being heard by those in power. Thus, he lives on the edge of society, belonging fully to neither group. This exclusion is made clearer by the union's decision to "send him to Coventry," meaning to completely ignore and reject him (*Hard Times*). All in all, Dickens presents Stephen as a man caught between two sides: industrial exploitation and collective worker support.

Ultimately, Stephen's death in the mine shaft becomes symbolic. Dickens turns his suffering into a strong moral message, making readers face the real human cost of industrial progress. As Al-Janabi explains, *Hard Times* strongly criticizes industrial capitalism, especially through characters like Stephen Blackpool, who represent working-class people exploited by an unfair system (417–418). Stephen's exclusion is not random. It is the result of a system that values profit more than human life. His death is both a tragedy and a moral warning, showing Dickens's idea that industrialism treats people as less than human. By doing so, Dickens suggests that industrial society creates people whose suffering is ignored or not recognized. Consequently, Stephen's quiet endurance becomes a strong criticism of a society that ignores those most in need of justice.

3.3. Gender, Family, and Emotional Disintegration

If Stephen's story shows the economic cost of industrialism, Louisa Gradgrind's life reveals its emotional and family damage. Dickens shows how utilitarian thinking, when used in education and home life, weakens affection and leaves people emotionally cut off from one another. Louisa's loneliness, her loveless marriage, and her inability to express desire all show the breakdown of family and gender roles in a society that values facts over feelings. In this context, Dickens presents the family not as a place of comfort but as another space shaped by industrial thinking. He also criticizes the patriarchal and utilitarian ideas that damage the human heart.

3.3.1. Louisa Gradgrind and Emotional Alienation

In contrast to Stephen, who represents economic suffering, Louisa Gradgrind stands for emotional lack. Raised under her father's strict belief in facts and reason, she grows up in an environment where imagination and emotion were pushed aside. Dickens describes her as carrying "a fire with which she had been born" (Dickens), a symbol of her inner emotional life, which still has warmth and potential. However, this "fire" slowly weakens under the pressure of her education and surroundings. As Meaghan Scott explains, Dickens creates a conflict between Louisa's natural ability to feel and the harsh system imposed on her. By denying her imagination, this system weakens her emotions and harms her relationships (3). In this sense, Louisa is not naturally cold or distant; she has been shaped into emotional emptiness by a system that values facts above imagination. Scott also suggests that Dickens sees imagination and emotion as necessary for human understanding and empathy, so their absence leads to emotional breakdown and isolation (3).

This emotional repression becomes especially clear in the way Louisa speaks and behaves. Suzan Makhloof's analysis of Louisa's speech and sentence patterns shows that her

hesitant, broken speech reflects how hard it is for her to express emotion. She compares Louisa to “a long-dormant volcano” whose feelings are slowly building and close to eruption (40). This means that Louisa’s emotions have not disappeared. Instead, they have been suppressed for so long that they remain under pressure, waiting to come out. In other words, her emotional life is still there, but it is tightly controlled by her upbringing. This is important because it shows that her silence is not natural and not a sign of personal weakness. It is the result of an education that taught her to hide feelings and rely on facts and logic.

This becomes clear in her marriage to Bounderby. Louisa agrees to marry him not because she loves him, but because it seems like the logical choice. When Mr. Gradgrind presents Mr. Bounderby’s proposal, Louisa shows almost no emotional reaction. He repeats the proposal twice before she answers, “I hear you, Father. I am attending, I assure you,” and he replies, “You are even more dispassionate than I expected” (Dickens). This moment should have been her first chance to speak for herself and make a life-changing choice, yet she does not use it to express her own wishes. In this case, marriage becomes less about emotional connection and more about social and economic concerns. This reflects the wider influence of industrial values, which place reason and usefulness above human feeling (Sohal 20).

Beyond Louisa’s personal experience, Dickens also questions the wider structure of family and gender roles. Women, in particular, are often kept in passive roles within the home. Parminder Sohal argues that this limits emotional growth because women are denied the freedom to express themselves fully (19). At the same time, Dickens introduces Sissy Jupe as a contrast to Louisa. Unlike Louisa, Sissy represents joy, empathy, imagination, and emotional openness (Sohal 20). Sissy offers another model of human connection, one that values feeling. Through this contrast, Dickens not only criticizes industrial society; he also

suggests a way forward. He argues that imagination and compassion are necessary if human life is to be balanced again.

Although Sissy Jupe stands in contrast to Louisa's emotional repression, her role goes further than that. Sohal explains that her presence breaks up the rigid and monotonous life of Coketown (20). In other words, her presence draws attention to what is missing in Louisa's life. As Louisa begins to question her choices and feel emotional conflict, Sissy's values become more important, showing the limits of a life based only on facts. In this way, Sissy's influence helps Louisa move toward emotional awareness rather than creating a sudden change.

3.3.2. Marriage as a Social and Economic Transaction

In *Hard Times*, Charles Dickens shows marriage as something that can lose its emotional meaning and become a social and economic deal. Louisa Gradgrind's marriage to Josiah Bounderby reflects this idea. Instead of being based on love, their relationship is shaped by money, status, and practicality. Louisa is influenced by her father's rigid education, which values facts over feelings and leaves her unable to fully understand or express emotion.

Before accepting the marriage, Louisa shows emotional restraint and very little understanding of her own feelings. This becomes clear when she tells her father, "You have been so careful of me that I never had a child's heart" (Dickens 116). This shows that the way she was raised did not allow her to develop an ordinary emotional life. Because of that, when she agrees to marry Bounderby, she does not see it as a choice based on love or personal desire but as something that is expected of her. Dickens uses this to show how a strict, fact-based education can leave someone unprepared for real feelings and real-life choices.

Bounderby, on the other hand, speaks about relationships in terms of value and worth. His constant pride in being a self-made man shows his belief that everything, including marriage,

can be measured through success and social status. The repeated idea of worth suggests that Louisa is treated almost like property in this arrangement, valued for what she represents rather than for who she is.

This reflects Karl Marx's argument that capitalism can turn even close human relationships into economic exchanges. In Louisa's case, love is replaced by calculation, and marriage becomes a transaction shaped by social advantage. Dickens reinforces this idea by presenting Louisa's life as controlled and emotionally restricted, almost like a system that counts everything while ignoring feelings.

Thereby, Dickens criticizes a society in which capitalist values reach into private life. Marriage is no longer based on affection or mutual understanding but on benefit and gain. Hence, Louisa is shown as deeply unhappy, which suggests that such a system not only affects people economically but also damages their emotional and personal lives.

3.4. Dickens's Vision of Social Reform.

In *Hard Times*, Charles Dickens criticizes industrial society, as well as suggests how it could be improved. He reveals that a system based only on facts, profit, and efficiency leads to emotional and social damage. Instead, Dickens promotes values such as sympathy, compassion, and imagination as necessary for a healthier and more balanced society.

3.4.1. Sympathy, Compassion, and Moral Responsibility

One of Dickens' main concerns in the novel is the lack of sympathy in industrial society. He suggests that real progress does not come from economic success alone but from human connection and compassion. This idea is shown most clearly through the contrast between Sissy Jupe and Thomas Gradgrind.

Sissy represents natural kindness and emotional intelligence. Even though she is not educated in the strict way Gradgrind prefers, she still understands people and their feelings better than many other characters. She comforts those around her, especially Louisa during her breakdown, and this supports Dickens's point that empathy is a strength, not a weakness. Through Sissy, he challenges the common belief that facts matter more than emotions.

Gradgrind, on the other hand, begins as the symbol of strict industrial thinking. He believes that everything should be measured and controlled through facts. But this way of thinking eventually breaks down when he sees the emotional damage it has caused in his own family. When Louisa breaks down, and he admits, "I never knew you were unhappy, my child" (Dickens 248), it marks a clear change in him. It shows that his system completely failed to take human feelings into account, especially within family life.

Dickens uses this change to stress that moral duty and emotion cannot be separated. Without sympathy, people become distant from one another, and society itself begins to feel cold and disconnected.

3.4.2. Imagination as a Remedy to Industrial Excess

Dickens also presents imagination as a possible answer to the harshness of industrial life. In Coketown, everything feels repetitive, mechanical, and lifeless. It shows a society that cares more about production than creativity, so there is very little room left for individuality or emotional expression.

Gradgrind's ideas fit this environment. He completely rejects imagination and believes that only facts matter, as seen in his statement, "Facts alone are wanted in life" (Dickens 1). For him, anything that cannot be measured or proved has no real value.

But as the novel continues, Dickens shows the problem with this way of thinking. Louisa, who grew up under this strict system, struggles emotionally because she was never allowed to develop imagination or express her feelings properly. Her emotional emptiness is not random; it comes from being raised in a system that shuts down creativity and focuses only on control and logic.

On the other hand, Sissy Jupe represents something more balanced. Her love of stories and imagination helps her understand life more humanely. Dickens suggests that imagination is not useless or childish; it is important for emotional growth, empathy, and a meaningful life. Without it, life becomes rigid and empty, like the industrial world he presents.

3.5. Conclusion

Taken together, the ideas this chapter elucidates are that industrial society in *Hard Times* creates deep social and emotional problems. The working class is dehumanized and reduced to "hands," stripping individuals of their identity and dignity. Relationships are also damaged, as seen in Louisa's marriage, where family life becomes emotionally empty and driven by social and economic concerns. Finally, Dickens presents a vision of reform by stressing sympathy, moral responsibility, and imagination. Through these ideas, he suggests that real progress is not measured by wealth or industry, but by how much human feelings and relationships are valued.

General Conclusion

General Conclusion

This dissertation explores Charles Dickens's *Hard Times* as a deep critique of Victorian industrial society, highlighting how the Industrial Revolution created sharp class divisions. During this era, rapid urban growth led to a large, struggling working class living in poor conditions, while a wealthy new middle class took control of the capital. *Hard Times*, therefore, remains a powerful novel because it does more than tell a story about one Victorian town. It presents a criticism of the kind of society that prides itself on industry, profit, and cold logic, and it shows the human damage that follows when people are treated as numbers instead of living beings. The dissertation has shown that the novel brings together several connected issues: class division, industrial growth, utilitarian thinking, environmental harshness, worker exploitation, and the need for imagination and feeling. These ideas make *Hard Times* much more than a simple social novel. It becomes a warning about the kind of world that is created when efficiency is valued above humanity and when economic progress is allowed to suppress moral accountability.

One of the strongest findings of this dissertation is that Dickens uses the industrial setting to expose the gap between social classes. Coketown is a symbol of the new industrial landscape and the inequalities that come with it. The town is polluted and repetitive, and this atmosphere reflects the lives of the workers who live and suffer there. The novel shows a world where factory owners have comfort and power, while workers like Stephen Blackpool live with insecurity and little hope of justice. This contrast is central to Dickens's criticism.

At the same time, the novel attacks the popular Victorian ideology of utilitarianism, which focused purely on efficiency and measurable facts. Dickens uses the character of Mr. Gradgrind to make fun of this mindset, showing him as a cruel caricature who treats people

like numbers and ignores their feelings. Gradgrind's school teaches only strict facts and clear results, completely neglecting the emotional and social development of the children. This strict approach ultimately fails in the novel, proving that a society needs more than just logic and profit to survive. Yet Dickens stops short of a fully optimistic resolution: Stephen Blackpool dies without justice, and Louisa's future remains emotionally uncertain, complicating any simple narrative of triumph for those who embrace feeling over fact. Coketown itself acts as a powerful symbol of this emotional emptiness. Described as a "sulky blotch" covered in smoke and soot, the city reflects the moral decay and sterility of a society obsessed with progress. While rich men confidently walk its streets without a care, the polluted environment crushes the spirits of the working people, showing how a town built only for work cannot nurture human empathy. The human cost of this system is enormous, as seen through the severe exploitation and abuse of factory workers. It is not only the likes of Stephen Blackpool that are punished under this new industrial order, but even middle-class characters suffer deeply; raised only on facts, Louisa Gradgrind becomes emotionally isolated and trapped in an unhappy marriage to Bounderby.

To counter this cold reality, Dickens presents imagination and emotional connection as essential tools for survival. Sissy Jupe, a compassionate girl connected to the circus, brings "fancy" into the strict Gradgrind home, eventually helping Louisa reconnect with her own emotions. The novel argues that denying human creativity leaves people "half-human" and that true salvation lies in love, storytelling, and empathy.

Ultimately, what is unique about this dissertation is its attempt to mix the study of literature with real history. It places the fictional world of the novel within actual historical contexts, i.e., Victorian industrial society. This approach helps show that Dickens was responding to real social debates, not inventing his criticism in isolation. It also strengthens the reading of the novel as a social document, one that reflects the tensions of its time while

still speaking to later periods. The study is also useful because it connects class, gender, education, and emotion instead of treating them separately. In doing so, it gives a fuller picture of the novel's meaning and makes the argument more complete.

The implications of this research are still relevant today. In education, the novel reminds us that a system focused only on test scores, facts, and results can produce students who are technically prepared but emotionally limited. In labour and industry, it reminds us that profit should never matter more than human welfare. In city planning and environmental policy, it warns against development that destroys beauty, health, and dignity. Even in modern societies shaped by data, technology, and performance measures, Dickens's warning still applies: when human values are pushed aside, progress becomes empty. The dissertation also opens the door to future research, especially comparative studies with other industrial writers, studies of Victorian education, and modern comparisons with automation and digital labour. *Hard Times* still matters because the problems it raises have not disappeared. They have only taken new forms.

At the end, Dickens's novel leaves readers with a simple but serious message: a society cannot survive on facts alone. It needs compassion, imagination, justice, and moral awareness. That is the deepest value of *Hard Times*, and it is also the main conclusion of this dissertation. The novel shows the cost of forgetting this truth, but it also suggests that recovery is possible when people begin to see each other as human beings again.

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