

## The flaws and failures of utilitarian facts and principles in Charles Dickens's *Hard Times*

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### Abstract

Dickens criticized those who followed utilitarianism in many of his works. In *Hard Times*, he presented a detailed satire, starting the story in a classroom with a chapter called "Murdering the Innocents." This allowed him to address not just economic ideas but also the psychological and educational beliefs behind utilitarianism. Through his characters, Dickens shares his thoughts on two main issues: first, how the educational system focuses too much on cold, hard facts, cutting off imagination; and second, how machines dehumanize and degrade people. He highlights the problems of labourer and management mainly through the characters Stephen and Bounderby. Given the changes brought by the Industrial Revolution, Dickens believed, as Sleary says, that people should make the best of life, not the worst. Bentham was one of several English thinkers who tried to explain human nature and experiences. The idea of "the greatest happiness for the greatest number" was supported by borrowed ideas about the human mind. Because of this, utilitarians often ignored important concepts like conscience, love, and morality, viewing them as unnecessary. This can simplify complex ideas but can also lead to a dangerous blind spot. In *Hard Times*, the utilitarian philosophy negatively affects all the characters. Louisa's marriage fails, Tom turns to gambling and theft, Bitzer lacks feelings and is cruel to his mother, and the factory workers suffer. Bounderby and Gradgrind also face failure because their strict adherence to facts and utilitarian beliefs leads to disaster. There are many real-life people like Bounderby and Gradgrind who harm future generations.

**Keywords:** Utilitarianism, philosophy, facts, principles, revolution

### Introduction

Jeremy Bentham is the founder of Utilitarianism. Bentham had the belief that the aim of life is happiness. This philosophy of happiness was formulated by the men who gave immense importance to the material goods and entirely ignored the moral or spiritual requirements of human beings. This kind of philosophy is known as common sense. It came to be called Utilitarian because it lays great stress and emphasis on material goods and is entirely regardless of spiritual demands and happiness. This philosophy says if the lot of happiness is equal, then gambling is as good as poetry. According to this philosophy the happiness of an utterly selfish life was equal to, or greater than the happiness of an unselfish life. This philosophy, was in English, led by Herbert Spenser and others like Russell. Dickens has masterly shown in the fiction how it was concerned with industrial pattern of the day and the way it could be expected to influence people who tried to live by its principles.

In Dickens's early life we see a stern but unrecognized preparation for the work that he was to do. Never was there a better illustration of the fact that a boy's early hardship and suffering are sometimes only divine messengers disguised, and that circumstances which seem only evil are often the source of a man's strength and of the influence which he is to wield in the world. He was the second of eight poor children, and was born at Landport in 1812. His father, who is supposed to be the original of Mr. Micawber, was a clerk in a navy office. He could never make both ends meet, and after struggling with debts in his native town for many years, moved to London when Dickens was nine years old. At eleven years of age the boy was taken out of school and went in the cellar of a blacking factory. At this time he was, in his own words, a "queer small boy," who suffered as he worked; and we can appreciate the boy and the suffering

more when we find both reflected in the character of David Copperfield. It is a heart-rending picture, this sensitive child working from dawn till dark for a few pennies, and associating with toughs and waifs in his brief intervals of labour; but we can see in it the sources of that intimate knowledge of the hearts of the poor and outcast which was soon to be reflected in literature and to startle all England by its appeal for sympathy. A small legacy ended this wretchedness, bringing the father from the prison and sending the boy to Wellington House Academy, a worthless and brutal school, evidently, whose head master was, in Dickens's words, a most ignorant fellow and a tyrant. He learned little at this place, being interested chiefly in stories, and in acting out the heroic parts which appealed to his imagination; but again his personal experience was of immense value, and resulted in his famous picture of Dotheboys Hall, in *Nicholas Nickleby*, which helped largely to mitigate the evils of private schools in England. Wherever he went, Dickens was a marvellously keen observer, with an active imagination which made stories out of incidents and characters that ordinary men would have hardly noticed. Moreover he was a born actor, and was at one time the leading spirit of a band of amateurs who gave entertainments for charity all over England. These three things, his keen observation, his active imagination, and the actor's spirit which animated him, furnish a key to his life and writings.

### Literature review

Charles Dickens's *Hard Times* criticizes utilitarianism. This philosophy focuses only on facts and the greatest happiness for the most people. Scholars have found serious flaws in this approach, especially through the character of Thomas Gradgrind.

Kate Flint explains that Gradgrind's strict focus on "facts" causes emotional problems for his children, especially Louisa. This shows how harmful utilitarianism can be. John O. Jordan adds that Gradgrind's teaching methods prevent real emotional and moral growth. This emphasizes Dickens's belief that utilitarianism ignores important parts of life (Jordan 380).

In contrast, characters like Sissy Jupe represent kindness and imagination. Ruth F. Ewan highlights how Sissy helps create emotional connections. She suggests that Dickens promotes a view of happiness that values feelings over cold logic.

Joseph M. Kauffman examines how industrialization in the novel shows the negative effects of applying utilitarian ideas to society. This leads to dehumanization and isolation. Overall, the literature shows that Dickens criticizes utilitarianism. He argues for the importance of emotional depth and ethical values in relationships.

### Problem statement and discussion

The novel *Hard Times* starts with the scene of a school classroom. Here children are made to stuff their minds with facts as many "little vessels ready to have imperial gallons of facts poured into them until they were full to the brim." Gradgrind is the steadfast believer of this philosophy in the novel. He is a retired manufacturer of hardware, the M.P. of Coketown, the owner of a school and the father of five children. Dickens is intended to expose the disaster that is expected to happen as the result of the steadfast implementation of this kind of philosophy. He says to schoolmaster: "Now, what I want is Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts nothing else will ever be of service to them. This is the principle on which I bring up my own children, and this is the principle upon which I bring up these children. Stick to Facts, sir!"

On the whole Victorian life was led by Benthamite utilitarianism. England was being swiftly industrialised, and machinery was coming on first place in the national life of England. The advancement of industry was causing discord, conflict, dissatisfaction and problems between capitalist and labourers, that is, between the employers and employees; and the trade union movement was in impetus. This was also a time when snobbery and hypocrisy were prevailing upon the minds of the upper class people. There are few other features of Victorian life that get forceful expression through the pen of Dickens in *Hard Times*. Though for apparent reasons Dickens highly inflates what seems to him the vice and abuse of Victorian mechanical and utilitarian life.

*Hard Times* makes us familiar with the educational theory of the Victorian age. This educational theory is chiefly based on facts, figures, calculations and statistics. In *Hard Times*, Thomas Gradgrind represents this particular educational theory. He is helped by the government inspector and the new schoolmaster who appears in chapter 2, Book 1. Gradgrind has established a model school to make all the boys and girls learn facts and facts only. According to him, facts alone are the need of life, the brains of reasoning animals should be filled with facts and facts only. Gradgrind is portrayed as "eminently practical" and a man of realities, facts and calculations. His mind is so

arithmetical that he believes, two and two will make four and nothing else. He calls one of the students of his school not by her full name or nick name but as "girl number twenty." (Actually the girl's name is Cecilia Jupe or Sissy). He does not need to listen the first-hand knowledge of horses through Sissy but admits the Bitzer's account of horse-"A Graminivorus. Quadruped with forty teeth and hard hoofs to be shod with iron." Both the government official and Gradgrind are utterly against the even negligible exercise of fancy. They are even against using wall-papers with the representations of horses on it; and carpet having the representation of flowers because these are opposed to their theory of facts. The new schoolmaster has studied all the important facts of etymology, syntax, prosody, astronomy, geography, vocal music, algebra etc. and they are on his tips of fingers. Dickens satirizes him by saying that if this man would have learnt a bit less he can teach the students better.

Gradgrind brings up his children strictly according to the particular educational theory. No child of Gradgrind has ever seen a single face in the moon; even they are not permitted to learn any silly jingle like, "Twinkle, twinkle, little star; How I wonder what you are!" They have their own cabinets in different departments of science. No one is allowed to wonder at anything, because there are facts which should gratify them. Gradgrind feels hopeless when two of his issues are gripped by him violating his theory of education. They were peeping through the hole of canvas wall due to their curiosity of know what is circus. His "metallurgical Louisa" and "mathematical Tom" are the guilty of feeling inquisitive. Mrs. Gradgrind is also the staunch believer in the theory of facts. She urges her children never to wonder but to go and be

"Something logical". In brief, the system of the education of Victorian age stresses the facts completely divorced off all the sentiments, affection, imagination and feeling. The education was one of the aspects that Utilitarianism has influenced.

Another branch of Utilitarianism is extended to the character of Bounderby, an industrialist and a banker. He is a very intimate friend of Gradgrind and he is also equally practical minded. But Bounderby is more utilitarian and selfish than Gradgrind. He remains untouched by humanity throughout the novel. Sometimes we do notice kindness in Gradgrind's behaviour but Bounderby is utterly callous. He is opposed to Gradgrind in providing protection to Sissy whose father has abandoned her. Gradgrind offers to give her protection in his house, but Bounderby seems to be heartless and opposed this decision of Gradgrind. Bounderby does not feel least sympathy for her. He is excessively ruthless to his factory workers also. He regards even the essential necessities of workers as demand for turtle soup and venison with gold spoon. When Stephen Blackpool refuses to act as an informer, giving to Bounderby the information about the activities of union workers, he is callously dismissed by Bounderby without thinking that he is putting him to starve. Thereafter, he suspects the innocent Stephen as a guilty of committing robbery at his bank. He does not believe in the account of Rachael that Louisa has visited Stephen's lodging with Tom. He seems a monster figure of utilitarian doctrine.

Bounderby's marriage with Louisa is another evidence of Bounderby's heartlessness. Both Mr. Gradgrind and Louisa's husband come out as utilitarians. Gradgrind has quoted

statistics to persuade Louisa to marry elderly Bounderby. The scene in which he succeeds in getting Louisa's approval on the marriage proposal of Bounderby is a victory of the "fact" over feeling emotion and imagination. Although the element of exaggeration is certainly used here, the projection of Victorian society is, no doubt, true to its essentials.

The novel also consists in detailed pictures of the worse consequences of industrialism which was very swiftly raising its head in Victorian age. Coketown is presented as a town of machinery and chimneys filled with smokes rising upwards all the time. The town streets whether large or small are just like one another; the people look same; they all work in the same manner, with the same sound upon the same pavements to do the same work. Their life is full of monotony, boredom and it is without colour, zeal or enthusiasm. Their employers never realize that worker's condition of life is miserable, people's demand for any relaxation or physical relief is no business of the employers. In fact, these workmen are not living human beings but only "hands", "so many hundred horse steam power". They are not thought to possess any soul; they are just hands who have to exert upon "the crushing, smashing, tearing mechanisms, day in and day out." Time proceeds in this industrial town like its own machinery so much material used, so much fuel consumed, so much money earned. The man who earns money through the labour of these workers regards the smoke of the chimneys as meat and drink and the healthiest thing in the whole world. During his conversation with Harthouse, Bounderby calls this smoke as "the healthiest thing in the world in all respects, and particularly for the lungs." These capitalists feel least sympathy for the "hands" as "humberging sentiment". Bounderby is not at all ready to fulfil their essential demands. He regards them as demand for turtle soup and venison with a gold spoon. It is interesting to notice here that while dealing with the industrial ugliness, Dickens shows his consciousness to the romantic side of machinery. He calls the lighted mill in night as a "fairy palace" which suggests that factory has something more than filth squalid, monotony and exploitation.

The inflexibility of Divorce Laws Dickens has also described here the hardness of the divorce laws of the Victorian time. Stephen finds it not possible to get rid of his sinister drunken wife and to begin a fresh chapter of life with Rachael. Bounderby says that it is impossible for Stephen to divorce his wife because he would have to go to the Doctors' commons with a suit to the House of Lords; he would have to go for the Act of Parliament to marry again; and this all would cost a lot, around fifteen hundred pounds or more than that and it is too expensive for Stephen to afford. Stephen has rightly said that it is "all a muddle", "a muddle altogether." The vanity of both Bounderby and Mrs. Sparsit is expressed in their advice to Stephen not to divorce his wife because he has married her for good and for worse. She first pretends that she is shocked to hear the problem of Stephen. Mrs. Sparsit calls it the wickedness of the common people symbolised by Stephen who wants to get rid of his wife after being satisfied.

The worse consequences of Utilitarianism are to be observed in the case of Louisa's unfortunate married life and wreck of Tom's career. It is also represented through the helpless condition of Gradgrind on seeing Bitzer as a perfect model of his utilitarian educational theory. Harthouse is

another personification of utilitarianism. He is someone different from Bounderby, because he manages to achieve a place in Louisa's heart by his clever devices and shrewd activities. It is another matter, that at the eleventh hour she succeeds in restoring herself from going to elope with Bounderby. Her final failure of married life and her return to 'Stone Lodge' are the evidences of the bad features of Gradgrind's utilitarian philosophy. Tom also opts for evil ways and goes to the extent of committing robbery at Bounderby's bank and he has to leave his mother-land forced by the adverse circumstances. Bitzer says to Gradgrind that he is not feeling obliged for getting education in his model school because he has already paid in the form of fee for what he learnt.

Thus, we see that utilitarianism seems to influence all the fields of the life of Victorian people. The condition of the life of Victorian people in several aspects is revealed to the reader precisely and true to the fact in the novel *Hard Times*.

### Major Findings

- 1. Critique of Rigid Rationality:** Dickens critiques utilitarianism through Thomas Gradgrind, whose obsession with "facts" leads to emotional repression and stunted moral growth in his children, particularly Louisa, underscoring the dangers of prioritizing data over human emotions.
- 2. Compassion vs. Calculation:** Sissy Jupe contrasts Gradgrind's utilitarianism, embodying kindness and imagination. Dickens argues that true happiness stems from emotional connections and empathy, not mere logic.
- 3. Impact of Industrialization:** The industrial setting amplifies Dickens's critique, revealing how utilitarian policies can dehumanize individuals. Stephen Blackpool exemplifies the negative effects of a profit-driven society on personal dignity.
- 4. Universal Relevance:** The findings highlight the ongoing significance of Dickens's critique in modern discussions about utilitarianism and ethics, advocating for a balanced approach to moral and emotional considerations in society.

### Conclusion

In *Hard Times*, Charles Dickens clearly reveals the flaws of utilitarianism. Through the character of Thomas Gradgrind, he highlights how an exclusive focus on facts can lead to emotional emptiness and a lack of moral growth. In contrast, Sissy Jupe represents the importance of kindness and imagination, demonstrating that true happiness comes from emotional connections. The novel's industrial setting further emphasizes how utilitarian ideas can harm individuals and society. Dickens illustrates that a profit-driven world can result in dehumanization and suffering, stressing the need for ethical values that respect human dignity.

Overall, Dickens advocates for a balance between rational thinking and emotional depth. His critique remains relevant today, reminding us to reflect on the moral challenges we face in our own lives. *Hard Times* teaches us that empathy and humanity are essential for achieving true happiness and creating a better society.

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