

# Charles Dickens: A Marxist Reading of *Hard Times*

Paper Submission: 15/01/2021, Date of Acceptance: 29/01/2021, Date of Publication: 30/01/2021

## Abstract

The Marxist theory argues that economic activity, society's Base, is the primary factor in determining its superstructure - culture. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels mention that in industrialized societies, political power rest with individuals or a group of individuals, and they control the means of production and exploit the poor. In such societies, 'class' is the crucial element. The upper classes (landlords, factory owners) control the working classes like serfs and factory workers. Moreover, the working class is convinced that their social condition is natural and beneficial to them. Their identities, ideas and aspirations are shaped by the social conditions in which they live. A gap is seen between the two classes and we know that such a division of society leads to a battle of classes. Like other novelists of the period, Charles Dickens perfectly handles the issue of class division in his novel *Hard Times*. A Marxist reading of *Hard Times* will help in studying the complex ways in which Dickens reacts to the social, political and economic issues of Victorian England. In *Hard Times*, Dickens presents an authentic picture of the Victorian world and performs the role of a social commentator and criticizes the industrialization of England. He also reveals the most urgent issues - the mechanization of human beings, social inequality, and extinction of fancy due to industrialization. He depicts a time suffused with advancement and change in every aspect of life and exposes the negative aspects of such a prosperous era. In *Hard Times*, Dickens by means of juxtaposing his upper and working-class characters unveils its disadvantages. He desires to stop the extinction of fancy and urges his fellowmen to hold on to their humanity.

**Keywords:** Marxist, Economic, Industrialized, Social, Political, Inequality, Mechanization, Extinction, Complex.

## Introduction

Literature serves as a window into the re-created realities of a writer's world. All the genres of literature deal with human experiences, but the relationship between the individual and society is best depicted in fiction. For better understanding, many perspectives and approaches can be applied to a literary text. The Marxist approach is one of the most popular and reliable methods to study a text. Marxists claim that a literary work is a reflection of the institutions from which it originates. "Marxist criticism sees how a text belongs to a certain period, and expresses how people at that time organized and made sense of their world" (John Peck, 2002) A Marxist reading of *Hard Times* is the best way to know the hidden aspects of the Victorian society and Charles Dickens reaction to the harsh realities of the industrialized world. Charles Dickens' (1812-1870) *Hard Times* excellently exemplifies Britain's rise during the 19th century, and it represents a vivid picture of the Victorian society. *Hard Times* is set in the 1840s in the Northern part of England. It's set at a time when Britain was changing dramatically because of the Industrial Revolution, and it was affecting this part of Britain. "The growth of London and of other major cities in Great Britain marked a final stage in the change from a way of life based on the land to a modern urban economy based on manufacturing, international trade and financial institutions" (Ronald Carter, 2001). The industrial revolution forced the working class to move from villages to towns and cities in search of work. As a result of this mass movement, many small clusters of houses emerged around the factories. The rich people owned factories and wealth whereas the poor had to work in their factories. It created a vast gulf between the rich and the poor as the wealthy class exploited the working class. Due to this change, new social classes



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emerged and “Charles Dickens’s *Hard Times* (1854) is a representation of the different social classes in the Victorian society” (Ingham, 1996). Dickens portrays inequalities between characters that belong to the working, middle, and upper classes in Coketown. *Hard Times*’ setting also represents an Industrial town during the Victorian era

#### **Aim of the Study**

The present study is an attempt to show how a specific literary text gives the reader a clear image of the society at a particular period of time. The research work would try to find out the social division in Dickens’ *Hard Times* by applying Marxist literary theory. A Marxist approach seeks to expose the dominant class and highlights those elements of society most affected by such oppression. Such an analysis might lead to action, social change, revolution, and the rise of socialism. Analyzing Dickens’ novel *Hard Times* from a Marxist perspective will give a clear image of England’s different social classes during the nineteenth century and its inequalities. This research work aims at answering the following questions:

1. What are the social classes differences described by Charles Dickens in his novel *Hard Times*?
2. Do the social classes’ differences in Dickens’ *Hard Times* reflect a social reality of the Victorian society?

#### **Review of Literature**

1. McIlvain (2012) defines the Victorian period and the chief characteristics of literature associated with this period. Victorian era forms a transition in the history of literature between the romantic period literature and the very different literature of the 20th century. It produced great poets, and it was remarkable of its excellence prose. All the works of the great writers of the period share general characteristics. The major characteristic is that Victorian literature tends to come closer to the daily life which reflects the problems and interests exist in reality. It becomes a powerful mean for human progress, socially and economical.
2. Parmod K. Nayar (2010) argues that “Marxist criticism suggests that all cultural forms seek to ensure that the dominant classes in a society remain dominant. In order to do so , it must convince the working classes and the oppressed not to rebel or revolt.... One needs to think of the factory owners in Dicken’s fiction and the way a character like Stephen Blackpool (*Hard Times*) is is convinced (at least partly) of the naturalness of the industrial system.
3. ASCI, Y. (2019): “When analyzed in terms of Marxist views, it may be said that both Dickens’s novel *Hard Times* and Marx’s ideal notions requires revolution and sacrifice. In the novel, in the hands of capitalism the workers experiences inequality and oppression. Moreover, not only Dickens portraits the bad living conditions of workers but also the characters from the middle and upper classes in Industrial town. Thus, the author is successful in reflecting the problems and interests existing in real life in Victorian age.”

#### **Textual Analysis**

The textual analysis requires the analytic method to illustrate the target object of study. It requires an adaptation of a suitable literary theory which will be the Marxist literary criticism. “A Marxist critic typically undertakes to explain the literature in any historical era, not as works created in accordance with timeless artistic criteria, but as “products” of the economic and ideological determinants specific to that era.”(Abrams, 2009) As already stated, in *Hard Times*, Charles Dicken’s criticizes numerous social, economic, and moral aspects of Victorian society. The novel faithfully depicts Dickens’s perception of English society at a time of technological advancement and urbanization. In *Hard Times*, setting, characters, language, images and many other technical devices help us understand the social differences and economic and political conditions of the Victorian society.

#### **Coketown (A City of Facts): Portraying Society through Setting**

Dickens disdain for industrialization is visible in the creation of the soulless town of Coketown. This fictional industrial city is an example of the reign of callousness and exploitation. This imaginary town represented many industrial towns of England in the 19th century. Coketown lacks vitality, and the readers notice that the town’s pictorial details present a dark and gloomy look. The lines of text show that Coketown is a very dull place: “It was a town of red brick, or of brick that would have been red if the smoke and ashes had allowed it; but as matters stood, it was a town of unnatural red and black like the painted face of a savage. It was a town of machinery and tall chimneys, out of which interminable serpents of smoke trailed themselves forever and ever, and never got uncoiled. It had a black canal in it, and a river that ran purple with ill-smelling dye, and vast piles of building full of windows where there was a rattling and a trembling all day long, and where the piston of the steam-engine worked monotonously up and down, like the head of an elephant in a state of melancholy madness” ( 22).

In the above lines, Dickens uses similes and metaphors to evoke the feelings of fear in his readers. He compares the colour of the city to ‘the painted face of a savage.’ Then the movement of the machines is compared to a great ‘elephant in a state of melancholy madness.’ Here the novelist uses a metaphor of an elephant to describe how the factories and the machines work like a group of mad and sick animals who stops at nothing. Another use of metaphor is seen when he mentions that smoke turns into ‘interminable serpents’. All the town buildings have red bricks, and the city has lost its natural redness as it suffered because of the evolution of the industrial world. The bricks were no longer red under the influence of smoke:

“The jail might have been the infirmary, the infirmary might have been the jail, the town-hall might have been either, or both, or anything else, for anything that appeared to the contrary in the graces of their constructions”( 23).

This is an example of how every single thing in Coketown looks exactly the same. We see that no one but the rich are different, which means that the novelist has looked at Coketown from the workers' point of view, where everything and everybody is the same, but the people of working-class are different. Coketown is presented as a city of facts, a town whose dwellers are the products of a cold, materialistic world. Everything is monotonous with days passing by and each the same as the previous. The people are out of tune with nature and are stripped of their individuality:

"inhabited by people equally like one another, who all went in and out at the same hours, with the same sound upon the same pavements, to do the same work, and to whom every day was the same as yesterday and to-morrow, and every year the counterpart of the last and the next" ( 22).

The inhabitants are required to be devoid of feelings. There is no room for love, affection, amusement or imagination, whatsoever: "Fact, fact, fact, everywhere in the material aspect of the town; fact, fact, fact, everywhere in the immaterial" (23). The continuous use of machinery stops the development of real human relationships, which is precisely the reason why people behave as though they are machines, robots and not human beings: "Coketown, the city of Fact, foreshadows the emergence of a monstrous mass urban society based on rationalism, anonymity, dehumanisation" (Diniejko). Everything revolves around the manufacture and material things, ultimately causing its participants to become the victims of their own greed: "In *Hard Times*, human relationships are contaminated by economics." (Diniejko). Dickens points out that there is an inevitable connection between money and corruption. The more money one holds, the less humanity is left inside of him. As it is the case with manufacturers, who, instead of looking at and treating their employees as decent human beings, equate them with machinery. Moreover, they are of no value as individuals, only as a collective do they serve a purpose. Consequently, such a lifestyle forces the victims to lose their self-respect, identity and individuality. Furthermore, Dickens points out the impact of industrialization when talking about the human heart and soul. The basic human passions die in such circumstances. There is just a struggle for survival, and people no longer know of joy or normal interpersonal relations:

"That exactly in the ratio as they worked long and monotonously, the craving grew within them for some physical relief – some relaxation, encouraging good humour and good spirits, and giving them a vent" ( 24-25).

The town itself is like an inexorable machine. The town used to be colourful and attractive, but the ashes and smoke turned it into a kind of industrial hell. The harsh environment of Coketown reflects the oppression experienced by the working class of Coketown. The factory owners of the town assume that the workers have access to the best food and resources. However, its opposite is true because the workers have access to very little. In the end, the

story of Coketown gives us an excellent idea of what it was like to be 'a worker' in Victorian Age.

## **Social Inequality: Class Division in *Hard Times***

Marx definition of class as follows:

"Persons share important characteristics in the system of economic production. This condition depended on individual status with the economic process, whether owned and controlled the means of production or worked for someone else" (Kimball & Mack, 1965). Marx believed that all societies split into two groups- the capitalists, who owned the tools of production, and the proletariat, who worked. Later on, these two classes increased by assimilating new groups. The first one includes occupational leaders, professionals, managers, administrators, scientists, and engineers, and the second one includes teachers and nurses. These two sub-classes create the middle class, which is separated from the working class by their income and power over the other employees.

In *Hard Times*, Charles Dickens mirrors the true face of Victorian society. He presents a society in which people are not judged according to their personality, but rather by the number of their possessions. Throughout the novel, Dickens shows the most obvious examples of inequality in the social structure. Industrialization causes the emergence of class division in which the rich are becoming richer, and the poor keep getting poorer. Dickens, a devoted humanist, emphasizes the living situation of the lower class, intending to spread awareness within people in terms of injustice surrounding them: "He exposes the exploitation of the working class by unfeeling industrialists and the damaging consequences of propagating factual knowledge (statistics) at the expense of feeling and imagination" (Diniejko). In *Hard Times*, Charles Dickens through his characters presents an authentic picture of the different classes shaped by an industrial town. James Harthouse represents the upper class who visits to Coketown for a change because he feels bored with life. As an aristocratic member of society, he cannot afford to live a life of routine activities. Here we have an example of some of the extravagant escapades that Harthouse embarks on, yet still finds life tedious:

"Now, this gentleman had a younger brother of still better appearance than himself, who had tried life as a Coronet of Dragoons, and found it a bore; and had afterwards tried it in the train of an English minister abroad, and found it a bore; and had then strolled to Jerusalem, and got bored there; and had then gone yatching about the world, and got bored everywhere."(125)

Harthouse is careless in his thoughts and actions and represents the heartless aristocrats of the Victorian society. He is like a 'floating iceberg' that would 'wreck the ships.' His lack of concern for others, his absence of understanding of the consequences of his actions, leads him to 'artfully' manipulate the ignorant Tom and innocent Louisa.

Mr. Bounderby and Mr. Gradgrind represent the middle class of the industrial town of England. Dickens attacks their comfortable and extravagant lives. He exposes them by highlighting their irresponsible tea drinking. Dickens attacks the two

eminently practical gentlemen, Mr Bounderby and Mr Gradgrind:

“that they never knew what they wanted; that they lived upon the best, and bought fresh butter; and insisted on Mocha coffee, and rejected all but prime parts of meat, and yet were eternally dissatisfied and unmanageable” (24).

Thomas Gradgrind is one of the prominent figures of *Hard Times* through whom Dickens attacks the educational system, which was influenced by Industrialization. Gradgrind is a man of rational thinking and wants nothing but facts in life. He says: “In this life, we want nothing but facts, sir; nothing but facts.” (3) He thinks that completely rational rules can govern human nature. He has earned money as a hardware merchant. Then, he gets an opportunity to become a Member of Parliament. This position makes him to enjoy political power. Gradgrind is not a factory owner, but he evinces the Industrial Revolution’s spirit as he treats people like machines. Initially, the narrator’s tone towards him is mocking and ironic, but he earns our sympathy towards the end of the novel. Gradgrind begins to realize that his education system is not perfect because Louisa confesses that she feels that something important is missing in her life and that she is desperately unhappy with her marriage. This intuition is confirmed when he comes to know that Tom has robbed Bounderby’s bank. Faced with these hardships, Gradgrind admits, “The ground on which I stand has ceased to be solid under my feet”(222). His children’s failure in life teach him the importance of feelings in life and Gradgrind emerges as a wiser and humbler man. In *Hard Times*, Dickens attacks education system based on statistics, figures and facts. Dickens criticizes the Victorian educational system because it dehumanized the children, killed fancy, and destroyed the importance of emotions.

Josiah Bounderby also represents the middle class of the industrial town of England. Mr. Gradgrind, as stated above, is interested in facts but his close associate Mr. Bounderby goes a step ahead in his motives. His only mission is to attain power and earn money. Charles Dickens gives a vivid description of his character in the following lines:

“A big, loud man, with a stare and a metallic laugh. A man made out of a coarse material, which seemed to have been stretched to make so much of him. A man with a great puffed head and forehead, swelled veins in his temples, and such as trained skin to his face that it seemed to hold his eyes open and lift his eyebrows up. A man with a pervading appearance on him of being inflated like a balloon, and ready to start. A man who could never sufficiently vaunt himself a self-made man. A man who was always proclaiming, through that brassy speaking-trumpet of a voice of his, his old ignorance and his old poverty. A man who was the Bully of humility”(15).

In fact, Bounderby is not a gentleman of Coketown but a man of shrewd nature and temperament. He creates a false story of his life to impress his listeners. The story is so designed that the people start believing that he suffered a lot in the early days of his life and then worked hard to earn money. The false statements of Bounderby helped

him to present himself as a self-made man of Coketown. Charles Dickens exposes the myth of self-made man to reveal the real character of Mr. Bounderby. His mother, Mrs. Pegler, makes it clear that she did not abandon her in his childhood. She also points out that Bounderby received good education and enjoyed all the pleasures of childhood. Here, we see the duality in the character of Bounderby. He is not what he pretends to be in the novel. Bounderby hypocrisy shows that he is an irresponsible fellow and uses his power and wealth to befool the innocent folk of the industrial town. The novelist shows that the industrialists see labourers as ‘hands’, not as fellow human beings. For Gradgrind and Bounderby, the working class is a means of achieving wealth and power. They are treated as objects and always get unfair treatment from the upper and middle classes.

Stephen Blackpool belongs to the next class, a representative of the poor or the underprivileged society of England. He allows Dickens to present the miserable condition of the poor and needy in an industrialist society. Physical features of Blackpool indicate that poverty is a curse. Dickens describes him thus:

“In the hardest working part of Coketown; in the innermost fortifications of that ugly citadel ... lived a certain Stephen Blackpool, forty years of age. Stephen looked older, but he had had a hard life....

He was usually called old Stephen, in a kind of rough homage to the fact” (62).

Blackpool faces problems at both the places, i.e. at home and his workplace. When he comes home, he has to face his alcoholic wife. The novelist highlights how unfair treatment and desperate living conditions make the labourers search for peace and comfort in wine. Stephen’s wife is presented as “A disabled, drunken creature.... A creature so foul to look at, in her tatters, stains and splashes, but so much fouler than that in her moral infamy, that it was a shameful thing even to see her” (66). For Stephen, life at the workplace is very challenging. A labour dispute occurs, and we find that Blackpool refuses to join the union of workers as he firmly believes that the strike cannot solve the problems of working class. The workers forced him to leave their group because they thought that Stephen belongs to the party of factory owners. On the other hand, he refuses to spy on workers for his employer Bounderby, who consequently feel agitated and abandons him. Stephen makes every possible effort to maintain honesty and integrity but fails miserably. The rich and the poor find him unfit for their groups, making him a pathetic figure in the novel. Thus, Stephen’s character allows Dickens to state that it was difficult to live a life of honesty and ideals in an industrialized society.

#### Conclusion

The Marxist approach, thus, helps us to understand the social class differences of the Victorian period. An analysis of *Hard Times*, using the Marxist literary theory, reveals that the setting, incidents, and characters of the novel are a true reflection of the contemporary society. Coketown epitomizes an industrial town, and the characters are

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representatives of social classes of the period under discussion. The events of the novel depict the *Hard Times* in British society after the Industrial Revolution. James Harthouse represents the upper class who visits Coketown for recreation and to get rid of his boring life. As an aristocratic member of society, he cannot afford to live a life of routine activities. Mr. Bounderby and Mr. Gradgrind represent the middle class of the industrial town of England. Mr. Bounderby makes everybody believe that he worked hard to attain wealth in life and is a self-made man. Bounderby's attitude represents the social changes created by industrialization and capitalism. Stephen Blackpool is a representative of the poor and underprivileged society of England. He allows Dickens' to present the miserable condition of the poor and needy in an industrialist society. Thus, the Marxist approach enables us to understand how Dickens' *Hard Times* reflects the social and political conditions of an industrialized society

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