

CHARLES DICKENS “HARD TIMES”: KEY ISSUES OF SOCIAL PROTEST NOVEL VIA STYLISTIC ANALYSIS

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The present article attempts to reveal key issues in Victorian literature satire by means of stylistic analysis. “Hard Times” is considered to be one of the most important novels in the 19th century that shaped the literary landscape of social protest novel.

Keywords: Victorian society, social protest, satire, stylistic analysis.

Charles John Huffam Dickens is an English writer and social critic. He is the author of some of the world’s best-known fictional characters and is regarded by many as the greatest novelist of the Victorian era. It witnessed resistance against

the rationalism that was a distinctive feature of the Georgian period. Also, this period was marked by the increase of romanticism and mysticism with respect to religion, art as well as social value. His literary heritage comprises 15 novels, 5 novellas, hundreds of short stories and non-fiction articles.

“Hard Times” is a social protest novel of nineteenth-century England. The title of the book is highly metaphorical and implies the activity of not only the working class, known as the “Hands”, which has a “hard time” in this novel; other social strata are considered as well. Dickens divided the novel into three separate books, two of which, “Sowing” and “Reaping”, illustrate the biblical concept of “whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap”, a biblical allusion about the cause and effect, the inevitable award for whatever you’ve done [3].

“My satire is against those who see figures and averages, and nothing else”, proclaimed Charles Dickens in explaining the theme of this classic novel. Published in 1854, the story concerns one Thomas Gradgrind, a “fanatic of the demonstrable fact,” who raises his children, Tom and Louisa, in a stifling and barren atmosphere of harsh practicality. Lacking the system of moral values that can guide them, the children sink into lives of desperation and despair, typical of gloomy background of Coketown, a wretched community shadowed by an industrial giant. Louisa falls into a loveless marriage with Josiah Bounderby, a vulgar banker, while the unscrupulous Tom, totally lacking in principle, becomes a thief who frames an innocent man for his crime. Witnessing the degradation and downfall of his children, Gradgrind realizes that his own imprudent principles have ruined their lives [2].

Considered Dickens' harshest reflection of mid-19th-century industrial practices and their dehumanizing effects, this novel shows a fascinating picture of Victorian life, filled with the richness of detail, brilliant characterization, and passionate social concern that symbolize the novelist's finest creations. Of Dickens' work, the eminent Victorian critic John Ruskin had this to say: “He is entirely right in his main drift and purpose in every book he has written; and all of them, but especially *Hard Times*, should be studied with close and earnest care by persons interested in social questions” [1].

Dickens dwells upon some more pivotal points of society, i.e. declares his hatred towards the divorce law which remains in the hand of rich people. Stephen Blackpool cannot divorce his drunk and brutal wife because of his poor financial conditions. Also, the oppression of poor working class by the rich industrialist is criticized by Dickens. The workers are called “Hands” without showing any emotions. Dickens criticizes the class distinction between rich and poor people where the rich are extremely rich and the poor are miserably deprived. The workers are always oppressed by law, trade union as well as their employers. The workers in the industries get insufficient wage in which it does not enable them to run their life easily.

Dickens shows his anger towards the Utilitarian of the Victorian age in which emotions and feelings are not counted, but only facts, number and calculations acquire additional importance. For example, Gradgrind considers love as a misplaced expression. The children of Gradgrind are not given even a chance to imagine or to ask questions related to emotions.

The educational system is also criticized by Dickens. The curriculum, the school environment and teachers are deeply influenced by the Utilitarian values. The students are taught to follow what the teachers tell them. They have no chance to think or wonder. For example, Tom faces a problem and he is not able to deal with the situation, although he is highly educated. Also, Louisa cannot understand her emotions as she has a poor education.

Charles Dickens uses the story of *Hard Times* to deliver a message to the reader related to the new class distinction to emphasize how horrible and mechanized the factory's workers life becomes during the industrial era. Also, he wants to convey the reader about the educational system during the Victorian age where children are taught only facts and nothing else.

The narration technique that is used by Dickens is the third person and has a limited omniscience. He knows what is going to happen in all places and at all times. However; he can guess about what the characters may feel and think. He shows the reader that the characters are unable to communicate with each other. For example, Bounderby is always in a total refusal, whereas the others, like Louisa, are extremely engaged with their emotions to react in a proper way to anything. He uses a narrator who has the ability to explain to the readers what each character can feel regardless of whether he knows this information or not. He uses the third person narration to play up the weepy element particularly when the narrator describes some emotional moment like when Louisa is staring into the fire for hours and when Rachael and Stephan are walking together down the street.

The narrator's tone changes drastically, but it is often ironic, mocking and even satirical particularly when he describes Bounderby, Harthouse, and Mrs. Sparsit. When he describes Stephen and Rachael his tone turns into pathetic.

The linguistic choice of words by Dickens is mainly characterized by six features. These features are his unique name making, reference to religious texts, imitation of Shakespearean tragic drama, the use of local varieties of speech, fantasy language as well as his use of the American-English as a new form of speech.

The vocabulary in the novel has some difficulties in understanding since they are related with the Victorian age. Dickens uses some words in a technical way, for example, the word "quadruped" refers to the horse as having four legs. In addition, the word "punch" refers to the comic figure in a traditional puppet show in the Victorian society. Hence, Dickens attempts to present to the readers the Victorian culture.

Dickens uses different devices like metaphor, irony and symbols to criticize and satire the educational, social and industrial problems. He uses imagery metaphor of “Smoke and Elephant” to describe the situation of Coketown. He describes it as a town which is always covered by clouds of smoke. Here, Dickens wants to convey the reader that the industrial cities and towns are polluted. He uses the phrase “Serpent of smoke” to convey the reader that something evil whirls over Coketown. He uses another image to describe the steam engines’ pistons; they continuously go up and down “like the head of an elephant in a state of melancholy madness”. Here, he presents to the reader the amount of the energy and strength that works in meaningless repetitive activity which denotes the life of the factory.

He uses the image of fire which represents the creative imagination, or fancy. Fire is mainly associated with Louisa who always sits in the corner of the living room staring into the fire since fire can motivate and stimulate her thoughts and imagination. This image appears to the reader when Gradgrind tells Louisa about Bounderby’s marriage proposal. In this moment she makes unconscious gestures by closing her hands “as if upon a solid object, and slowly opened it as though she were releasing dust or ash”. She realizes that the fire of life can not burn brightly in this society.

Also, he uses irony to criticize and satirize the Victorian society. In the first chapter, he describes the character of Gradgrind clearly “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”. In this quotation we can notice that the principle of Gradgrind is feeding the children only with facts. In the extract “Plans nothing else, and root out everything else” here, we can see that Gradgrind feels that children are like machines and they should be provided by facts and nothing else like fancy or imagination. His philosophy is considered to be ironic because in the end he feels that his methods of teaching are wrong. He uses irony to describe to the readers the situation of the students who are considered to be only numbers in the Utilitarian system “Girl number twenty unable to define a horse” in this quotation Gradgrind calls Sissy to define a horse and she is unable to give an answer which proves the fail of the educational system in the Victorian age.

Moreover, he uses symbols to criticize the educational system “The girl was so dark and dark haired, that she seemed to receive a deeper and more lustrous colour from the sun when it shone upon her, the boy was so light eyed and light haired that the self-same rays appeared to draw out of him while little colour he over possessed”. In this quotation, Dickens shows his opinion about the Utilitarian system. Bitzer is the boy who gets education under the system of facts is described as colorless, whereas Sissy who is poor and uneducated girl is described as lustrous. Here, the colour represents the fancy, while the paleness symbolizes the fact. On the one hand, Dickens states that Bitzer is filled with facts which

drain all the fancy out of his mind. On the other hand, he states that Sissy is not educated and filled with facts therefore, she is described as dark and full of colour.

Furthermore, Dickens uses irony as a mean to expose the hypocrisy of the Victorian society. For example, Mr. Bounderby mentions that he is a self-made man who builds himself by himself. He states that he was born and abandoned in a ditch by his mother and his grandmother took care of him and raised him up, but in fact he becomes rich by denying his mother. His mother does not abandon him rather than he abandons her. Here, we can notice the contrast between his appearance and reality. Tom is also hypocrite in which he is supposed to be the manager of the bank, but he robs the bank. He looks like a prestigious person, but in reality he is the robber of the bank. Here, we can see another contrast between appearance and reality. Another example of Hypocrisy is James Harthouse who looks good, educated and gentle, but in reality he plans to seduce Louisa which shows the contrast between his appearance and reality.

In addition, Dickens uses simile to describe the workers' situation in the factories, they are described as "Hands". Here, we can see that the workers in the Victorian age are like machines which demonstrate lack of emotions towards them. Besides, Dickens wants to highlight the bad situation of the workers in which they get very low wage insufficient to have a decent life. Hence, he criticizes the industrial system of the Victorian age.

Dickens uses alliteration in his novel to put emphasis on some phrases and groups of words by making them stand out from the rest of the text to produce a special impression and create a particular atmosphere. Some examples of alliteration include "Serpent of smoke", "Clattering of clogs", "Rapid ringing", "Melancholy-mad elephant".

Dickens uses repetition in his novel to emphasise the vivid nature of his characters. For example, Gradgrind says "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 any service to them....stick to *Facts*, sir!" In this quotation, Gradgrind repeats the word "Facts" in the classroom. He insists on teaching students only facts and nothing else. Here, Dickens wants to show the reader one of the major character's beliefs and philosophy. Another example of repetition is "The emphasis was helped by the speaker's mouth, which was wide, thin, and hardest. The emphasis was helped by the speaker's voice, which was inflexible, dry, and dictatorial. The emphasis was helped by the speaker's hair, which bristled on the skirts of his bald head, a plantation of fires to keep the wind from its shining surface, all covered with knobs, like the crust of a plum pie, as if the head had secretly warehouse-room for the hard facts stored inside. The speaker's obstinate carriage, square coat, square legs, square shoulders,-nay, his very neck cloth, trained to take him by

the throat with an unaccommodating grasp, like a stubborn fact, as it was, all helped the emphasis. In this quotation, Dickens repeats the words “square”, “emphasis”, and “head”. He wants to present the physical appearance of Gradgrind to the readers by describing his facial expression which is wide and hard mouth with inflexible voice which shows his way in delivering a speech.

In conclusion, it can be said that the whole text is a criticism of the Victorian age. Dickens states different problems during the Victorian age. The novel is about people who suffer different fates in a town called Coketown, where people are both rich and poor and Dickens tries to explore the lifestyle of people who live there. He gives a full description of the factories' workers in which they are described as “Hands” which shows the selfishness of the factories' owners at that time. Dickens through irony attempts to describe and criticize the educational system at that time in which students are not allowed to think or to imagine, but they should depend only on facts and calculations. He proves the failure of the Utilitarian system by describing Gradgrind as a balloon in which he is full of facts and pride, but in the end of the novel his pride blows up when he admits to Louisa that his way of raising her is wrong. Tom is another example of the failure of the Utilitarian system in which he is educated, but he robs the bank and blames the crime on another person. Dickens wants to convey the readers that money is not everything in life by showing the example of Mr. Bounderby, who is a rich man but he has no friends except Mr. Gradgrind. Despite, the fact that he is a rich man, he dies miserable and alone even his marriage with Louisa does not continue much time. Dickens wants to show the readers the problems of the society at that time by presenting the class distinction between people in which the rich is extremely rich and the poor is full of poverty. He wants to present the law divorce by giving the example of Blackpool who is unable to divorce his wife because of his poor financial condition, thus the law divorce is in the hand of rich people who are able to divorce easily. Dickens tries to show the readers the hypocrisy of the Victorian society by using irony to describe the appearance and reality of some characters.

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