

CHARLES DICKENS'S *HARD TIMES*

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**Abstract:**

*Charles Dickens was one of the most important Victorian novelists who shed light on social problems and evils prevalent in England. He wrote novels on child labor, social and economic condition of England. His suggestions were accepted by the then government of England to bring improvement in society and government. Besides novels he attempted hands at writing short stories, essays, articles and other miscellaneous works. His contribution to British novels lies in his genuine depiction of Victorian society. He attacked follies in society and interested in bringing reformation in the society. The present article attempts to study his novel Hard Times.*

**Key Words:** Social Problems, child labor, social and economic condition.

Charles Dickens, our beloved writer of 'David Copperfield,' is one of the best novelists of the world. He is the greatest English novelist. He lived in Victorian England. He represented England of his times, including its dark aspects very faithfully. Charles Dickens was born on 7<sup>th</sup> Feb 1812, as one of the eight children of his father, a derailed clerk, often in debt and prison. His formal education was scanty, and he listened to oral literature abundantly. Dickens's reading included works by Daniel Defoe, Samuel Richardson, Henry Fielding, Oliver Goldsmith, and Tobias Smollett all outstanding English novelists. Too young Dickens frequently attended and enjoyed the theater with his uncle.

The young boy Charles had poor background. His father John Dickens was often in debt. Because of that the family suffered heavily. Because of that Charles could not get proper education. Then he began working in a blackening warehouse. The job was drudgery. The Dickens lived in Marshalsea. At times, the family's life in prison was degrading.

Charles Dickens did work for an attorney later. He studied shorthand and became a court reporter. Later he began to work for the *Morning Chronicle*. His *Sketches by Boz* (1834-36), which appeared in the *Chronicle*, brought him fame. From this beginning he wrote many books, all of which utilized as characters his own family and people he met. He used for his themes and plots both the working conditions and the social conditions of his time. His Christmas stories, of which *A Christmas Carol* (1843) is most famous, were the only ones which did not describe the plight of his contemporaries. In 1867 he achieved the standard of living which he had set out to attain: he received one hundred thousand dollars for a lecture tour in America. After his return to England in 1870, he died suddenly at the dinner table. Medical men attributed his death to overexertion. Leaving behind a family of four children and a wife to mourn him, Charles Dickens blackening house apprentice and poor lower middle-class boy was buried in Westminster Abbey beside other great figures of English literature.

Dickens has written dozens of much enduring novels, and they are *Oliver Twist* (1839), *The Old Curiosity shop* (1841), *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1844), *Dombey and Son* (1848), *David Copperfield* (1850), *Bleak House* (1853), *Hard Times* (1854), *Little Dorrit* (1857), *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), *Great Expectations* (1861), and several books of short stories, dramatic scenes and pieces of non-fictional prose. Josephine Curton observes:

In all of his novels those that appeared as serials in newspapers or magazines and those that were first printed as whole books Dickens reveals his keen observation, his great understanding of human nature, and his varied techniques of style. True, his characters are sometimes exaggerated; however, the very exaggeration adds vitality and humor to the stories. As a novelist and a social critic, Dickens was a giant of his era; later generations have turned to his works for both amusement and instruction (Curton 7).

Historians have called Charles Dickens the greatest of the Victorian novelists. His creative genius was surpassed only by that of Shakespeare. Many later novelists were to feel the influence of this writer, whose voice became the trumpet of protest against economic conditions of the age. George Bernard Shaw once said that *Little Dorrit* was as seditious a book as *Das Kapital*. Thus, according to critics, Dickens' *Hard Times* is a relentless indictment of the callous greed of the Victorian industrial society and its misapplied utilitarian philosophy.

Dickens's friend Forster offers us this about Dickens's ideology in writing *Hard Times* as a critic of industrial England of Victorian times. So far as the purpose of *Hard Times* involves the direct raising of any question of political economy, we cannot understand it. In a story, full of incident and living interest, it is difficult to find room for a sufficiently full expression of opinion upon details, in the working of a given principle. The principle emphatically laid down by Dickens in the story is one to which every sound heart responds.

Lord Macaulay's comment is well-known: "One excessively touching, heart-breaking passage, and the rest sullen socialism. The evils which he attacks he caricatures grossly, and with little humor." The 'excessively touching' passage was doubtless concerned with Stephen and Rachel. The pathos centering on them was much admired, even by critics who came to react strongly against the little Nell aspect of Dickens. Dickens's fable traces the life of the warmhearted Sissy Jupe, a circus child deserted by her ailing father and adopted into the household of the fact-ridden retired hardware merchant Gradgrind, whose children Tom and Louisa are reared in ignorance of love and affection. The consequences of lovelessness are devastating for them all. Louisa is driven to a miserable marriage with the boastful and wealthy Bounderby and then almost to an affair with the dandified Harthouse. Tom descends to thieving, and is saved only through the circus folk. Of comparable significance is the story of Blackpool, the honest worker in Bounderby's mill, who is burdened with a drunken wife and loved by the factory hand Rachel. Ostracized by his fellow workmen, Stephen is driven out of the community and suspected in his absence of Tom Gradgrind's crime. He is exonerated only after death.

Dickens's *Hard Times* depends on the opposition between Fact, Dickens's name for the cold and loveless attitude to life he associated with Utilitarianism, and Fancy, which represents all the warmth of the imagination—a contrast which gives it both tension and unity. *Hard Times* presents several memorable minor characters. They include the fact-crammed Bitzer, ideal product of M'Choakumchild's school; the snobbish Mrs. Sparsit, Bounderby's housekeeper; the windy trade union organizer Slackbridge; and the kindly members of Sleary's circus. Philip Hobsbaum adds:

*Hard Times* succeeded in its immediate task. Through the course of its serialization *Household Words* doubled. Trebled and even, towards the end, quadrupled its circulation. The novel was radical in a way intelligent enough to ruffle Macaulay and delight Ruskin who, long before Shaw and Leavis, proclaimed it as Dickens's greatest work. But the obvious influence in the book is Carlyle, to whom it is dedicated. (Hobsbaum 121)

Charles Dickens, required to write *Hard Times* in twenty sections to be published over a period of five months, filled the novel with his own philosophy and symbolism. Dickens expounds his philosophy in two ways: through straight third-person exposition and through the voices of his characters. His approach