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Hard Times

**Introduction**

“Hard Times – For these times” is a work of fiction penned down by Charles Dickens during the era of 1845 to 1850. It is the tenth novel in the fiction list written by Charles Dickens and was first published in 1854, in his Weekly Periodical, Household Wars. Unlike his other novels, the story has not been set in the city of London but in a fictitious location named as a Victorian industrial estate, Coketown. Coketown is Northern English Milltown, just like Manchester, but much smaller than that. The whole novel has been divided into three books; the 1st book is entitled “Sowing”, Book II has been named “Reaping” and the third book, Book III carries the title of "Garnering.”

The novel received mixed responses from the critics. George Bernard Shaw and Thomas Macaulay considered that Dickens’ thinking is very negative and commented that Charles Dickens had a pessimistic approach towards the capitalist mill owners and the workers working in the corporate sector during the Victorian Era. These critics state that Dickens has greatly undervalued the trade unions and not rationalized the post-industrial Revolution. F.R. Leavis, on the other hand, admired the book and added it as a reference to his “Great Tradition of English Novels”.

**Discussion**

The novel “Hard Times”, as evident by the name, revolves around the tough times prevailing in the English society at that time. The book provides a deep outlook over the social and economic conditions in England during nineteenth century.

Plot

The story of “Hard Times” revolves around the Gradgrinds, a rich and wealthy family which is headed by Mr. Thomas Gradgrind. He is a wealthy, retired merchant, who devotes his life to rationalism. He does not give much importance to imagination and feelings and only counts facts and numbers. He raises his children Louisa and Tom over his hard and cruel principles, which makes them dissipated, self-interested depressed beings who have no opinion of their own.

Louisa marries Josiah Bounderby, who is his father’s friends and much elder than her. They never develop feelings of love or compassion for each other and the marriage fails. Bounderby is also an extremely self-centered industrialist who owns a bank as well. He keeps boasting about how he became wealthy and powerful with his own strengths and never relied on anyone.

In the meantime, James Harthouse, a young and energetic arrives in Coketown from London. He immediately falls in love with Louisa and tries to seduce her. Louisa however, initially, does not pay attention to his feelings but eventually falls for him. But she does not still gives her feelings to him and comes back to his father’s home only to tell him that how wrong his concepts had been all his life and how they have left a deep gap in the upbringing of his children.

Theme

“Hard Times” is Dickens’ hard take over the cruel financial system of Utilitarianism. The goal of Utilitarianism was to facilitate the rich only. It least considered the happiness and the prosperity of the poor. The philosophy of Utilitarianism entirely ignores the concepts of individualism and imagination.

The factor of Utilitarianism is very well-presented in “Hard Times” as the leading character, Thomas Grandgrind raises his children on the principles of this philosophy. He prefers facts over imagination and function over feelings.

Characters

The novel, “Hard Times” is a story consisting of the following major characters:

Mr. Grandgrind

The leading character of this story, Mr. Thomas Grandgrind, is an infamous school superintendent who only thinks about making more and more money. He is so ill-reputed that people use him as an example of greed and being materialistic.

Mr. Bounderby

Mr. Josiah Bounderby is a business associate of Mr. Grandgrind. He is a callous and extremely self-centered man, who works on lies and fraud. He claims to be a self-made person, but in reality, he isn’t. He is married to Mr. Gradgrind’s daughter, who is almost 30 years younger than him, and it turns out to be a loveless marriage.

Louisa Grandgrind

Louisa Gradgrind, or nicknamed as Loo, is the eldest daughter of Thomas Gradgrind. She is a very suppressed person, since her childhood, and his family, especially his father, does not give much attention to what she feels. She is forced to marry his father friend Josiah Bounderby, but it turns out to be a failed marriage and she returns back to her father’s house.

Sissy Jupe

Cecilia Jupe, commonly known as Sissy, is a student of Gradgrind. She is also known as the circus girl, as she works at the Sleary's circus. She has a completely different school of thought from Thomas Gradgrind, which is why she is not much liked in the Gradgrind family. At the end of the story, when Gradgrind finally realizes that his outlook towards the world is faulty, Sissy is the character who teaches him how to live.

Setting

The novel has been set up in the mid-19th century – the same time it was written – in England. During that time, England was under the rule of Queen Victoria that is why that period is also known as the Victorian Period. The country was going through a number of radical changes at that time.

The story has been set up in a fictional town of Coketown, which is a stand-in for real-life industrial mill towns like Manchester and Preston. The writer portrays the town as a boring and hellish place, as every building looks like every other building. There is no discrimination between the structure of a bank or a school or a library. The city has been planned to be as economically logical as possible, so the builders think that there needs to be no creativity in the architecture.

To add to the city’s grimness, there are some buildings that are covered with black soot, due to the constant emission of smoke from them. The blackness of these buildings does not seem to bother the rich at all, as they think that this black color represents the productivity and power of the city, whereas it poses a threat for the poor. The black color of soot on the walls of the buildings sets a gloomy and depressing tone.

Language

Charles Dickens is a versatile writer; his writing style is very diverse and he knows how to capture the attention of the reader. Not only he is a master in capturing the reader’s attention, but he also knows very well how to keep his fans engaged and keep them stick to the book. Same trick is being used by him in the current book “Hard Times”, in which although he uses simple and understandable language, but a point or concept is repeated again and again, to lay an emphasis its importance.

Imagery

In the novel, “Hard Times”, Dickens’ makes intelligent use of metaphors, repetitions, and juxtapositions along with the utilization of literary elements and many other figures of speech. The whole story has been heavily laden with different sorts of metaphors and imagery and alliterations, which adds to the beauty and themes of the story.

*“Serpents of smoke…clattering of clogs….Rapid ringing…Melancholy mad elephants….Serpents of Smoke, submissive…” (71)* (Dickens)*.* In these lines, the writer compares the smoke being emitted from the factory chimneys as serpents. With these lines, Dickens wants to draw the attention of the reader to two aspects; first is the clear and evident one, which shows that the city of Coketown is filled with pollution, the air is full of smoke or smog being thrown out of the chimneys of the factories, the second one is a bit deep and somewhat dangerous aspect, which implies that the smoke, coming out of the factories is like a serpent, which means that it is a killer. The author has imagined the smoke of the factories wrapping itself around the necks of the poor workers who work inside these factories and slightly pushing them towards death. The smoke not only represents the poor air quality of the city of Coketown but also the poor quality of life of majority of the people living in this city.

In the same way, the author uses fancy terms like “*fairy places”* and *"fairyland"* for the factories in the city, where *“elephants”* live. The usage of these terms depicts the sarcastic side of the author’s imagination as he uses them as black sarcasm and conceals the hard facts and painful truths behind these fancy, sarcastic terms. The use of this kind of imagery sets a stage for the story and makes it more convenient for the reader to make a clear picture in his or her mind. This style of writing arouses curiosity in the reader and makes the work of fiction more interesting.

Analysis

As the novel took a long time to be written, it was very much evident that it was written after a careful analysis and observation of society. The author, Charles Dickens takes a satirical approach towards the social and economic conditions prevailing in the country of England in the 19th century.

As far as the title is concerned, there is no hidden agenda behind the title, but it has been chosen from the viewpoint of the poor people of England. In fact the title of each book follows a pattern according to Galatians 6:7, which states "For whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap."

The story of “Hard Times” sets a sad and gloomy tone for the readers as it tells the story of poor people working in factories in shifts, under strict bosses and in inflexible timings. They used to get paid very less and made to work very hard. So seems like they were literally very hard times, but only for the poor.

One of the major aspects or the change that has been highlighted in the story is the immediate shift of the financial system from old, conventional communism to modern industrial capitalism, which meant that the industries were now owned by hundreds of stakeholders. This resulted in an increase of the rich people but also the exploitation of the poor class at a great level.

Dickens has a very versatile style of writing, through which he places intentional emphasis over his ideas and illustrates the big divide between the rich and poor class of the Coketown. The immense difference between the factory owners and industrial workers has been intelligently portrayed through diverse settings and brilliant use of metaphors and juxtapositions.

**Conclusion**

In a nutshell, it can be seen that Charles Dickens has brilliantly portrayed the misery and pain of the poor, in his novel “Hard Times”. He has made excessive use of metaphors, alliterations, and juxtapositions to clarify the creek between the rich, industrialist class and the poor, working class. Moreover, with this novel, he has taken a hard toll at the cruel financial system that only results in the exploitation of the poor, It is an excellent piece of fiction and a must read for everyone.

Works Cited

Dickens, Charles. *Hard times*. Broadview Press, 1996.

Available at: *http://www.pdfbooksworld.com/hard-times-pdf*