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Dickens' Position in *Hard Times*

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To locate Dickens' position in the right perspective is not an easy job. In *Hard Times*, his position is very ambiguous and, at places, even controversial. The fact is that he came to acquire a multi-facet personality "He has been described as theatrical, poetic, analytic, journalistic, symbolist, explicit, realist, surrealist, Marxist, Christian and Existentialist" (Hardy, "The Complexity" 29). It is because of Dickens' multi-faceted personality that one tends to fail in identifying the "real" Dickens – the creative artist and the man who lived the life he wrote about.

The main controversy regarding *Hard Times* exists between two schools of critics[1]. The school of Conservative Victorian critics holds that "Dickens wilfully exaggerated the evils of industrialism and 'practical' education," and that he misunderstood the principle of laissez faire economy. On the contrary, the other School of modern Social and Marxist critics expect of Dickens much more than he says in *Hard Times*.

In the Victorian Society, *Hard Times* could not enjoy much public reading and appreciation; it remained simply a propaganda-piece. The credit is due to F.R. Leavis who created interest in the novel which had earlier been regarded as "a very minor thing, too slight and insignificant." For him, *Hard Times* is a "masterpiece" and "a completely serious work of art" (Leavis 185). Leavis includes it among the novels of the "great tradition." In this paper I would try to discuss Dickens' seriousness against his comedy and prove that the "real" Dickens is the serious one and not simply the comic one. In *Hard Times*, Dickens has a very serious constructive purpose and in this sense, his comedy is just a means to his end. In the novel, Dickens strives to make life better and worth living. Perhaps this was the reason why he dedicated the novel to Carlyle, a moralist and prophet, who flavoured all literature to be didactic.

Dickens, who writes with a serious moral purpose, seems to be aware of all such problems and that he is very skilful in realising his purpose. He puts on a comic mask and says things which are otherwise very serious. This is his method to "teach and delight," and teach only through delight and entertainment. Walter Allen remarks that "comedy is the main instrument by which Dickens inflicts the 'deeper scar," and that "to grasp Dickens' meaning wholly, critics must grasp the meaning of his humour" (5). He makes use of wit, irony, humour, and lively satire. He first makes the reader laugh for he knows that laughter leads to thinking and thinking is followed by good resolves, which, sometimes if not always are carried out. In *Hard Times* his constant blending of the comic and the serious, humour and pathos, serve an identical purpose – it draws the reader's attention on the various evils of the day.

[1] Paul Edward Gray analyses this controversy between the two schools headed by the conservative Victorian critics and the modern Social and Marxist Critics. Dickens's "middle-of-the-road" position could satisfy neither of the schools: "If conservative critics argued that Dickens went too far in *Hard Times*, commentators in the twentieth century have usually insisted that he did not go far enough" (6).

Dickens is an advocate of the cause of the sufferer. In fact, he had himself gone through all suffering and was acutely aware of the lot of an ordinary person in the society. Thus, in Dickens, the man and the artist merge together, for the man has suffered and the artist has given a form to his suffering .In *Hard Times*, he attacks the utilitarians like Mr. Gradgrind, industrialists like Mr. Bounderby, the inadequacies and the inherent weaknesses of the education system and the law, the increasing gap between the capitalists and the workers, and the empty slogans of the trade-union leaders in such a way so as to arouse the readers' sympathy for the sufferer. Therefore, Dickens' use of wit, irony, humour, and lively satire is certainly directed towards a serious moral purpose. The fact is that Dickens writes not merely for the sake of entertainment, but for making amendments in the society and the society-people. He happened to write at a time when people had reached their most degraded state and the need of the day was not simply to entertain them, but to correct them, uplift them, and generate certain human values in them. Dickens attacked "all kinds of social abuses which he thought ran counter to human life and happiness because they were framed according to supposed 'facts' while they ignored obvious human needs" (Fielding 161). Edgar H. Johnson points out that *Hard Times* brings to a culmination an orderly development of social analysis that extends in Dickens' work from *Dombey and Son* through *Bleak House* (47).

The story of *Hard Times* is set against "Coketown," the town of mills, monotony and misery, that serves as a background. This Coketown symbolises Manchester, but being a fictional town, it means much more. It successfully conveys a strong impression of the suffocating effect it causes on the lives of the human beings. This unhealthy atmosphere of Coketown, with the smoke trails in serpent-like circles, poses a "threat" which is symbolic of the whole human predicament and plight during the Industrial Revolution (Gray 14). For Paul Edward Gray, "Coketown" is a nightmare of threatening, inhuman force."

Dickens has very skilfully divided the story into three books with titles as "Sowing," "Reaping," and "Garnering."[2] This division makes Dickens' message of reward and punishment clearly pronounced. "Dickens could hardly be unaware of the implications of popular saying, such as 'as you sow, so you reap', or 'Sowing the wind, and reaping the whirlwind.' In either of the senses, facts or no facts, each may be regarded as "reaping what each has sown" (Dickens 48). Two antithetical worlds – the world of agricultural activity, a natural process, and the world of dusty and smoky industrialism are set jointly, and we begin to guess the disastrous consequences which are in store.

Very significantly, the novel opens in a schoolroom and at once picks the reader's attention who beholds before him Thomas Gradgrind, an educationist and theoretician, "a man of realities. A man of fact and calculations. A man who goes by the principle that two and two are four, and nothing over . . ." (Dyson 186)

> [a man] who with his "squire forefinger" is lecturing to a 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 (Dickens 49).

The situation is full of ironic laughter, while Dickens has said a great deal. His emphasis on fact and calculation points out, to the extent of ridiculing, the kind of education which was given to children. This education was totally based on dry and hard facts to the exclusion of fancy which helped children develop their heads at the cost of their hearts. Dyson aptly remarks that "*Hard Times* indeed

[2] N .K. Banerjee in "*Hard Times*: A note on the Descriptive Titles of its Books," appreciates the novel "keeping in view the structuring or the novel in terms of the agricultural operations of sowing, reaping and garnering" (28).

is a symbol of the world without creativity, where the 'robber Fancy' is left, depraved by neglect, to seek revenge" (186). This type of education is really "murdering the innocents."

The first phase of the agricultural activity starts. What Mr. Gradgrind sows is hard and dry facts in "the little pitchers before him, who were to be filled so full of facts" (Dickens 48). He gives a strong warning to his pupils: "Ay, ay, ay! But you mustn't fancy. That's it. You are never to fancy (52). Mr. Gradgrind brings up his children Louisa and Tom on his "System," so that they may become "models." In fact, as Dickens says with ironic pointedness, "He intended every child in it to be a model just as the young Gradgrinds were all models (53).

The sub-plot of *Hard Times* deals with the tragic story of Stephen Blackpool, a handloom weaver in Bounderby's industry. Through his story, Dickens shows the plight of a worker as if he has identified himself with him: "He was a good power-loom weaver and a man of perfect integrity," says Dickens about him (10). His domestic life is a tragedy because the woman he married, turned out a drunkard, almost mad. Stephen wants to divorce this woman and marry Rachael, his girl-friend, "Who loves him so much and that she is like an "Angel" to him. But he can't do that because the Law, which requires a "mint of money," cannot help him. Dickens felt it necessary to condemn such costly and corrupt legal systems. There is no solution to Stephen's problem who cries out helplessly, ". . . tis a muddle. 'tis just a muddle a' together, an the sooner I am dead, the better" (113).

"Strike" in Coketown constitutes one of the most important aspects of the novel. It shows Dickens's awareness of the problems and the miseries of the workers, but at the same time his contempt for the Union-leader who for their self-interest exploits the poor simple workers. Dickens caricatures Mr. Slackbridge, the spokesman of the United Aggregate Tribunal, and through him, Dickens attacks the excesses of such leaders: "In many great respects, he was essentially below-them. He was not so honest, he was not so good-humoured; he substituted cunning for their simplicity, and passion for their safe solid sense. An ill-made high-shouldered man . . ." (170). This type of contemptuous attitude is quite questionable. As F.R. Leavis points out that "Dickens has no glimpse of the part-played by Trade-Unionism bettering the conditions he deplores" (201). The fact is that Dickens did not really dislike them; he simply wanted to attack the excesses of such leaders.

Dickens was aware of the increasing gap between the rich and the poor, between the capitalists and the workers, and thus gives a strong warning to the great masters to make them realise their excesses and misdoings:

> Utilitarians, economists, skeletons of school-masters, Commissioners of Fact – the poor you will have always with you. Cultivate in them, while there is yet time, the utmost graces of the fancies and affections to adorn their lives so much in need of ornament; or, in the day of your triumph when romance is utterly driven out of their souls, and they and a bare existence stand face to face. Reality will take a wolfish turn, and make an end of you! (192)

Here, one can hear the echoes or revolution, though Dickens did never wish that there should be a political revolution. Actually he wants the great masters to be considerate of the poor and regard them as human beings, lest there be destruction and ruin. As Earle Davis remarks:

> He [Dickens] is arguing for what he conceives to be justice to both capital and labor; he is arguing for co-operation he is saying that Victorian Society does not award justice to labor; he is saying that something drastic needs to be done, or revolution will erupt and ruin all. (77)

Raymond Williams is of the view that Dickens was certainly propagating idea in his fiction and that he believed in the philosophy of "social liberalism" in which the general human condition will be

generally transformed by the action of the interested, the innocent and the human" (97). Here, Raymond Williams holds that "Dickens did not put much faith in alternative institutions."

The fact is that the evils Dickens exposes are deeply rooted in conduct and not in the institutions themselves, his idea is that if people change their conduct, the institutions which are the sum-total of their aspirations and conduct will automatically improve. "Dickens at any rate never imagined that you can cure pimples by cutting them off" (Orwell 110). He strongly believed that "if men would behave decently, the world would be decent" (111). Joseph Gold holds that when the "moralist" and the "reformer" meet in Dickens, as meet they must, they produce a visionary who sees that society is after all the product of our perception of it: "Enlighten our perception, free our imagination, and the society we know must disappear, dissolve and be replaced by a world of grace" (9-10). Silvere Monod defines such an attitude "as a kind of sentimentalsocialism" (185).

Dickens was also a "thorough Christian" (Forster 422) and in his works, he upholds the Christian values which he believed "were still widely enough accepted to against those of material success" (Fielding 171). Human beings, he seems to say, must adhere to simple homely virtues and good conduct. Moreover, he wants a change in the heart and spirit of the people.

In *Hard Times*, Dickens advocates a victory of the heart over the head. In this sense, "the crucial importance of Mr. Sleary and the circus is obvious. The circus is at the beginning and at the end" (Cockshut 66). The world of the Sleary circus, the non-profit world, is the antithesis of the Gradgrind world in which everything is "paid for," and in which there are no human feelings. In the beginning, the circus is looked down upon by Mr. Gradgrind with contemptuous eyes. Dickens' irony is very powerful and perhaps complete when towards the end, both the antithetical worlds are synthesised into one whole. Mr. Gradgrind leys his hands to the necessity of the opposite world, and changes himself accordingly making his "System" subservient to "Faith, Hope and Charity" (Dickens 31). Under Sissy's control, who symbolises vitality, goodness, human heart, and all homely virtues, Mr. Gradgrind undergoes a drastic change. Through Mr. Sleary, Dickens conveys his message in a comic lisp: "there is a love in the world, not all self interest after all" (30). Barbara Hardy believes that "moral conversion lies at the heart of many novels of Charles Dickens and this conversion is not "a religious conversion but a turning from self-regard to love and social responsibility" ("The Change" 49). She further writes, "The hero is changed by seeing his situation or his moral defect enacted for him in external coincidence . . . And he acts on this recognition and is irrevocably changed" (52).

To conclude, Dickens is a great humanist whose novel, I have dealt with, is not altogether without serious purpose. The theme of the novel is such that it is not very conducive to humour or mirth, and thus Dickens has consequently tried to put a check on his natural disposition for humorous characters and incidents. Even then the brilliant use of irony and lively satire throughout the novel make a profound impact and catch the reader by four locks. Besides these devices which Dickens uses as means to achieve his end, he also makes use of the method of caricature and the use of animal imagery, thereby showing people's degradation from human ideals.

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