

Dickens's critique of utilitarianism in *Hard Times*

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I

Hard Times, written in the later stage of Dickens's life, successfully reveals the dark side of materialism that produced a cold-hearted capitalism and the selfishness of the bourgeoisie. Although this novel is regarded as Dickens's most dazzling political satire, its reception by the general public has been relatively unenthusiastic. Unlike Dickens's earlier works, the characters depicted in *Hard Times* are conspicuously colder, more uncomfortable and lacking in innocent jollity, sentimentality, wit and good humor. This work, however, contains clear social aspects of darkness in the Victorian age, dealing deeply with the theme of labour and utilitarian ideology. It is encouraging that Dickens's attempt at social reform within the utilitarian thinking of his time has been recently reevaluated by many critics.

Utilitarianism, the most liberal idea of the Victorian age, fostered a strict philosophy of mechanical value, which cares only for hard facts and reason. The author harshly condemns the distorted view of humanity and the heartlessness of Utilitarian thinking. By creating Thomas Gradgrind and Josiah Bounderby, Dickens not only symbolizes the sterile thinking of utilitarian reformers, but also criticizes the governmental system that gave rise to the torturing of the working class.

Dickens clearly demonstrates that the inhumanity provoked by nineteenth century utilitarianism can only be dealt with by changing man's inward values. He sought to develop this vision by appealing to human feelings, solidarity and spirituality, which are demonstrated by Sissy and the circus troupe. The qualities of innocence and spontaneity which Sissy shared with the circus

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people served to provide convincing evidence for Dickens's human reform. This kind of belief is deployed through these characters to evoke and sustain the animating quality of human life in *Hard Times*.

The next chapter explores the symbolic patterns and unique conditions of Dickens's intended reforms, which are substantially embodied in characters such as Thomas Gradgrind and Sissy Jupe. I will examine what happens to the characters who have experienced the degradation and repression of misguided utilitarian beliefs, and how this in turn influenced their morality and social consciousness.

II

The most important point that has been dealt with about *Hard Times* is the characterization of Thomas Gradgrind and Josiah Bounderby, which is used to attack the utilitarianism of the day. Gradgrind's system of fact and Bounderby's business greed equally check the constructive human flow in *Hard Times*. The two men, however, are somewhat different and stand for different things. Gradgrind, symbolized as a character without imagination and who succeeds as a satiric figure is a real and, in some sense, sympathetic human being. He works by methods and is constantly blamed for his reckless confirmation of his fact-based ideology. The absolute power of his distorted thinking become clear if we analyze the passage stated below.

Fact, fact, fact, everywhere in the material aspect of the town; fact, fact, fact, everywhere in the immaterial. The M'Choakumchild school was all fact, and the school of design all fact, and the relations between master and man were all fact, and everything was fact between the lying-in hospital and the cemetery, and what you couldn't state in figures, or show to be purchaseable in the cheapest market was not, and never should be, world without end.(6)

This fact-obsessed philosophy never allows people even to talk about spiritual and creative thinking. It is quite frustrating that this idea was also extended to the area of education, where it ended up devastating people's mind. The schoolroom contrast of Sissy Jupe and Bitzer is a contrast between the

mechanical education which is gained by statistical value and the creative education which pursues the possibility of genuine living. Bitzer, one who is strictly educated by deeply rooted Gradgrindism, always outweighs the intelligence and academic ability of Sissy and gains public acceptance for his talent. He had a "genius for coming up to the scratch, wherever and whatever it was, and would go in and damage any subject whatever with his right, follow up with his left, stop, exchange, counter, bore his opponent"(4). On the other hand, Sissy Jupe, who is constantly discouraged by the persistent pressure of fact-philosophy, appears to have no way out from a desperate life battered by absolute principles. When she was asked if she would paper a room with flowers and said she'd love to do it, Gradgrind says "you are never to fancy! Fact, fact, fact! and only fact, fact, fact!"(6). When Bitzer was grown up, despite his outstanding brilliance and intelligence, he had become a heartless egoist who didn't even care about earnest solicitation from Gradgrind, who was once his teacher.

"I really wonder, Sir," rejoined the old pupil in an argumentative manner, "to find you taking a position so untenable. My schooling was paid for; it was a bargain; and when I came away, the bargain ended."(258)

Wisely enough, Dickens had a keen sense of acknowledgement as to relate this misguided belief closely with industrial capitalism of mechanical value, which caused him to create Bounderby and the dark city named Coketown. Bounderby, another villain in *Hard Times*, is the embodiment of the aggressive money-making and power-seeking ideal which was a driving force of the Industrial Revolution and utilitarianism. Having created a Bounderby that mirrors industrial deadness and its self centered harshness, Dickens presented an in-depth analysis of governing society that tried to achieve a strategic joint with laissez-faire economic doctrine, only to give the world for which time no longer offers the possibility of growth and change.

Some critics, however, are in favor of utilitarianism, saying that it, as a solid philosophy of its era, substantially contributed to the sound function of government and legislative development, which in fact promoted a large measure of social and industrial reform. George Gissing(31), in this regard, pointed out that Dickens has never shown any ability to pierce the depths of

social life, or to fathom the wells of social action. Moreover, other critics have often noted how dreadful family relations are in *Hard Times*, as they rarely are in Dickens's works. In this case, however, they are missing Dickens's deep purpose of his unique characterization of representative figures. As stated earlier, instead of condemning Thomas Gradgrind and the other representative figures aimlessly, the author was focusing on intellectuals such as Gradgrind who tried to treat important social matters only with superficial desk theory rather than with active participation to deal with it. We, therefore, realize that his target was not against utilitarianism itself, which in fact nourished the community, but against irresponsible reformers who only saw figures and averages and nothing else. As a result, Dickens was able to attack its main spirit and inherent dangers (Gold, 198) and show a comprehensive vision, one in which the inhumanities of Victorian civilization are seen as fostered and sanctioned by a hard philosophy, the aggressive formulation of an inhumane spirit (Leavis, 259).

The nonhuman elements in Coketown whose factories and machines continually diminish the power of spiritual life are isolated from external forces. Threatened by the natural forces of life, Coketown assures itself of survival by moving toward a deadly fortress. Its success is almost complete, but the city still finds antagonists armed with the power of the human spirit, represented by Sissy Jupe and the circus troupe. As the story continues, their humanistic influence spreads throughout society.

For Dickens, social reform is not against selfish exploitation or the industrialized system created by utilitarianism. His optimistic vision does not lie in systematic social improvement, but rather in what he sees as the elements of human nature; personal kindness, sympathy, and forbearance. Dickens chooses to keep the circus, the work's symbol of life, outside of Coketown's environment. John Holloway has noted that "Dickens's alternative to Coketown was something which lay altogether outside the major realities of the social situation" with which he dealt and see this as evidence, in part, that "Hard Times operated at a relatively shallow level of consciousness" (159). Moral value imbued with innocence, spiritual life, and mutual interdependence of virtuous people in the circus troupe is a reflection of Dickens himself as an advocate of common folks and their lives. R. Williams has described the

impression of circus people like this:

These are not the morality figures of an age of common belief, but the dramatic figures of an age in which individuality and growth are paradoxical and in which as an emphasis and an intervention, the simplest human qualities of love and kindness must be deliberately sustained. It is a structure of feeling, in its strengths and weaknesses, which he shares with the popular culture of his time.(54-55)

Gradgrind, who had been resistant to Dickens's intended reform, finally acknowledged his wrong doing and made a confession. His penitential tears cause internal change in many people, violating his usual expectations of how people should act, and then carrying us to the truths that lie beneath the life of the circus troupe. Without a question, their dramatic changes of character were gradually strengthened by the power of Sissy, which enabled her to be a part of the poetically-creative operation of Dickens's genius in *Hard Times*(Leavis, 262). As time goes by, her influence increases and, in the end, grows enough to reform almost all the major characters. This implies one of the most meaningful values of Dickens's faith that the betterment of society can never be achieved with political radicalism or a superficially attempted system change. That it was the little girl Sissy who eventually drew a constructive transformation of all the characters implies that humanity is the most essential element in triumphing over hard utilitarian thinking. Sissy's warm-hearted kindness always cherishes people who suffer from depression, agony and alienation. She is not afraid of doing the right thing in front of socially powerful men; on the contrary, she strongly acted on this inclination. When confronting Harthouse, one who almost destroyed the life of Louisa Gradgrind, Sissy condemned harshly him and urged him to leave immediately. Harthouse describes her as follows.

The child-like ingenuousness with which his visitor spoke, her modest fearlessness, her truthfulness which put all artifice aside, her entire forgetfulness of herself in her earnest quiet holding to the object with which she had come; all this, together with her reliance on his easily given promise presented something in which he was so inexperienced, and against which he knew any of his usual weapons would fall so powerless.(207)



Armed with feelings of love and compassion, Sissy represents social justice and morals against an inhumane cruelty. Dickens's bonds with nineteenth century humanism embodied through Sissy is now strengthened to such an extent that major characters sought to request help from her. Heavily injured by the tragedy of her marriage, Tom's degradation and her illicit love with James Harthouse, Louisa was in a desperate situation and finally expressed her mind to Sissy.

She fell upon her knees, and clinging to this stroller's child looked up at her almost with veneration.

"Forgive me, pity me, help me! Have compassion on my great need, and let me lay this head of mine upon a loving heart!"

"O lay it here!" cried Sissy. "Lay it here, my dear."(202)

Despite Sissy's vigorous attempt to punish social evils and normalize the relations between utilitarian ideology and love and spirituality, one important question still remains unanswered. We know that there is the circus and there is Coketown; how does one reconcile the two? Did she finally make it? Looking carefully at the conclusion of *Hard Times*, we can see, I think, that Dickens seeks such a reconciliation, but does not ultimately achieve it. The circus still remains on the town's perimeter, and although the author sent emissaries(Sissy) to Coketown, its success is still questionable because it apparently does not conclude with a dramatic happy ending. Only Sissy Jupe, of all the work's major characters, seems to survive intact, probably because she is more in the world of Coketown than of it.

Dickens viewed the idealistic world as being specifically expressed with the life of the circus in the sense that they assert themselves against an outside world that is dominated by reason and the reality principle. A genuinely humane civilization can never be achieved by assembling these systematically reversed items. The way to reach the humane world Dickens has chosen is not to go with Coketown's world but to maintain vision, hope, beauty and a demand for the freedom and virtue of proletarian life.

In light of this, George Orwell observes that "even if Dickens was a bourgeois, he was certainly a subversive writer, a radical," not in his advocacy of change in the social structure, but in his advocacy of change of spirit. His radicalism, therefore, is of the vaguest kind, and yet one always knows that it

is there...(4) We now see Dickens hoping to humanize an inhumane system without changing the system itself. Orwell has further pointed out that this is often the direction in which Dickens looks;

In every attack against utilitarianism Dickens makes upon society he is always pointing to a change of spirit rather than a change of structure... Useless to change institutions without a "change of heart" - that, essentially, is what he is always saying.

Some of the humanistic values discussed in *Hard Times* clearly provide meaningful suggestions regarding social ills and the alienation of industrial workers under a falsely oriented ideology. Dickens was absolutely certain that the crisis of society lay in a fact-obsessed utilitarianism that lacked imaginative life and active morality. Dickens then sought to find a more profound way to bring about reform through a deep understanding of human nature. Pope-Hennessy sums up such an attempt below.

If Dickens's intention in this book was to make readers understand that the tendency of industrialism was to kill the imagination, suppress all spontaneous life, and force men and women to lead utilitarian existences in 'Hell-hole' surroundings, *Hard Times* may have fulfilled its purpose.(487)

Therefore, Dickens was able to succeed in revealing a thorough-going and creative examination of the dominant philosophy of utilitarianism as well as mechanized industrialism.

III

Dickens's primary approach in *Hard Times* is humanistic rather than social, particularly in dealing with the matter of utilitarianism. The moral vision and artistic resolution, along with the exaggeration of traits of goodness and evil, are judged to be well structured and efficiently communicated to readers.

In many cases, however, it has been said that, Dickens is similar to his contemporaries in that he also is a bourgeois citizen who often understands the working classes and social ills with a fairly prejudiced middle-class eye. In light of this, *Hard Times* has sometimes been regarded as one of the stale

industrial novels that are superficial in their claim for social justice in the Victorian age. This is inevitable as long as we are always captivated with the old criticism without focusing on the more profound intention Dickens had in mind. John Ruskin, and Bernard Shaw after him, admired *Hard Times* as a testament to Dickens's conversion away from a commercialized and industrialized England and back towards a supposedly more righteous and humane society. Dickens's works, such as *Bleak House* and *Little Dorrit*, can be read in part as Dickens's attempt to define and hopefully to alleviate particular social ills; *Hard Times*, on the other hand, dramatizes these social failures more deeply.

Dickens firmly believed that the root cause of social evils was not in social systems or government regulations but in the lack of humane treatment people showed towards one another in society. *Hard Times* is aimed at the tendencies of utilitarianism repressing the free creative imagination of men and stifle their individuality. Therefore, Charles Dickens did not advocate any immediate political radicalism in this novel, but rather maintained hope and offered a new vision for a better life through highlighting the inward value of people.

As examined in an earlier part, most of the major characters who were victimized by the merciless ideology of utilitarianism finally find relief in their contrition. Gradgrind, Louisa, and other's internal reform was obviously stimulated by the imaginative and spiritual life of the circus people and the uncompromising morality symbolized by Sissy Jupe.

In *Hard Times* we realize that until men are reformed, no society can reform itself. *Hard Times* goes beyond social restructuring to the extent that it indicts not one particular society, but all societies. In doing so, it wisely relates to the fundamental question concerning the nature and the formation of the identity between the governing ideology and the people who live beneath. In spite of its vivid portrait of the horrors of the mechanized world, *Hard Times* gives us profound meaning that is essential for human happiness, making it one of the most uplifting of Dickens novels.

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■요 약

『어려운 시절』에 나타난 공리주의 비판
(디킨즈의 인간관을 중심으로)

김기목

본 연구는 19세기 영국 빅토리아시대의 사회적 병리현상을 다루고 있는 찰스 디킨즈의 소설 『어려운 시절』을 공리주의 비판과 휴머니즘 구현이란 주제로 분석해 본다. 디킨즈는 극단적 합리성과 비인간성을 조장하는 시대적 이념을 비판함과 동시에 산업자본주의의 이기적인 경제성과 연관지어 사회의 병폐상을 섬세하게 그려내었다. 작가는 그라드그라인드 가족의 도덕적 타락상을 통해 왜곡된 이념의 본질을 비증 있게 다루어 당시 사회제도와 지배구조에 대한 심층적 분석을 제공하였을 뿐만 아니라 교육과 같은 현실적 사안과 결부지어 본질적 관점에서의 사회문제를 조망하고 있다. 디킨즈는 사회의 가혹성과 비인간적 조건들을 사회의 제도적 속성의 원인으로만 보지 않고 인간의 내면적 인식변화가 이루어지지 않은 것으로 진단한다. 그는 작중인물들의 도덕적 각성을 통해 그의 내적 개혁의지를 구체화하고 있으며 그것은 생명력과 창조력을 대표하는 인물인 씨시의 상상과 감성, 그리고 곡마단의 공동체적 이미지를 통해 표면화된다. 작가는 급진적인 제도개혁보다 이들이 보인 인간다움의 가치를 통한 삶의 가능성을 희망하였으며 이후 작중인물들의 깊은 깨달음으로 마무리지음으로서 새로운 비전을 제시하고 있다. 그는 인간성이 피폐화되고 왜곡된 사상체계로 사회가 분열되는 어려운 시기에 인본적 가치를 통한 내적 개선의지를 구현하여 바람직한 사회통합의 길을 제시했다.