

Utilitarianism, Capitalism, and Exploitation:
Grappling with Morality in *Hard Times*

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Charles Dickens' literary classic, *Hard Times*, first published in 1854, expertly exhibits the conflicting ideologies and class struggles that defined nineteenth-century England. The novel itself is a satirical commentary on the inherent immorality of the wealthy, but the implications of its analysis of English society are far broader. Dickens candidly describes in his novel the burgeoning liberal philosophies of utilitarianism and laissez faire capitalism as they clashed with the economic philosophies of the industrial proletariat. *Hard Times* is more than a work of fiction; the novel provides an accurate, contemporary, in-depth view of Dickens' England that modern historians continue to reference and analyze today. Its frank and forthright portrayals of both the working and upper classes allow *Hard Times* to transcend the world of literature and lastingly influence historical perceptions of the politics, economics, and morality of nineteenth-century England.

In *Hard Times*, Dickens stereotypes the upper echelon of English society and examines the hardships faced by the oppressed working class. Two of the novel's most prominent characters, Thomas Gradgrind and Josiah Bounderby, are mere caricatures of Dickens' contemporaries. Gradgrind is presented as a harsh and uncaring utilitarian, strictly adhering to a modified Enlightenment ideology emphasizing reason above all else. *Hard Times* opens with a line from Gradgrind, whose job as a school superintendent is influenced by his utilitarian thought. "Now, what I want is Facts," he says. "Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else" (Dickens, 7). This statement wholly characterizes Gradgrind, whose rigorous, statistical view of life allows for the moral bankruptcy that typifies Dickens' view of high society. However, Gradgrind's moral

bankruptcy is not the problem, according to Dickens; rather, Gradgrind is symptomatic of England's greater moral struggle. In reality, men like Bounderby are the problem.

Much like Gradgrind, Bounderby is portrayed as immoral. However, unlike Gradgrind, Bounderby's immorality is wicked and deep-seated. Bounderby is a wealthy capitalist banker and businessman who exploits women and working-class persons alike. He is crude, cold, and calculating in ways Gradgrind is incapable. One of the major themes Dickens explores in *Hard Times* is the ideological divide between the rich and poor, a theme expounded through his characterizations of both Gradgrind and Bounderby. Whereas the former acts with little regard for emotion and relies solely on facts and reason, accidentally excluding the poor from his worldview, the latter acts cruelly and intentionally, as did most robber-barons of the nineteenth-century business world, according to Dickens. Utilitarianism, as an ideology, is flawed, in Dickens' view; thus, Gradgrind is flawed. Bounderby, however, is deliberately exploitative and thus innately corrupt. In the eleventh chapter of the first book of *Hard Times*, Bounderby scolds one of his workers, Stephen Blackpool, for questioning how the English Parliament works for lowly folk like himself. "Don't you talk nonsense . . . about things you don't understand," the banker reprimands his young worker. "The institutions of your country are not your piece-work, and the only thing you have got to do, is, to mind your piece-work" (Dickens, 66). Bounderby relies upon and financially benefits from his workers' ignorant subjugation.

The secondary characters of *Hard Times* are Gradgrind's young children and pupils and the industrial factory workers of Coketown, to whom Dickens attributes morality as inherent. Their lowly statuses in English society prevent them from exploiting others; however, their ignorance makes them easy targets for men like Bounderby. Sentences uttered by working-class characters like Stephen and Cecilia "Sissy" Jupe are most often broken and grammatically

incorrect, which is intentional and illustrative of their station in society. In an anonymous letter to the editor of *The Times*, published on October 8, 1853, a union worker states that “meetings were called, at which some half-dozen ‘speakers’ and ‘grand movers’ used all their eloquence to prove employers tyrants and workmen slaves” (*Workman*, 314). Dickens highlights this disconnect between the educated rich and illiterate poor through the character of Stephen in an effort to expose the wealthy for their duplicity and depravity. Though well-intentioned, even when revealing to his factory owner boss that he has decided to join a union and attempting to leave his unloving wife, Stephen is nevertheless held back in society by his oblivious, unwillful ignorance.

Dickens wrote *Hard Times* in the aftermath of the Preston Strike of 1853, a pivotal moment in the English labour movement’s fight for better working conditions in mines and factories. Though pessimistic at times, Dickens exhibits the fighting spirit of the working class throughout *Hard Times*, even if “[h]is descriptions of Coketown lack the intimacy of someone who had lived in industrial Lancaster rather than merely visited it” (Butterworth, 339). The Preston Strike protesters’ radical idealism is absent in many of Dickens’ characters, however, as their lives are plagued by capitalist forces beyond their control. Although the discontent of working-class laborers is omnipresent throughout his novel, Dickens’ characters are fairly meek and acquiescent in comparison to the Preston Strike protestors, but Dickens is able to capture the spirit of the age by vindicating the poor and challenging the supremacy of an uncaring upper class.

Though fictional, Charles Dickens’ candid account of English society offers historians an extraordinary glimpse into nineteenth-century England. Through *Hard Times*, Dickens is able to succinctly describe the plight of the English working class in a way they never could. By

satirizing the exclusionary and immoral philosophies of utilitarianism and capitalism through characters Gradgrind and Bounderby, Dickens manages to condense the complex class struggles of the nineteenth century into a single volume. For too long, working-class laborers were excluded from and underrepresented in the annals of English history; Dickens' novel changes that. *Hard Times* is more history than it is fiction, still referenced today not simply for its caricatures of apathetic businessmen but for its apt descriptions of nineteenth-century life and the inherent morality of the industrial poor.

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