

Utilitarian principle in Charles Dickens' *Hard Times*

[People](#), [Charles Dickens](#)



Introduction

Utilitarianism is the assumption that human beings act in a way that highlights their own self interest. It is based on factuality and leaves little room for imagination. Utilitarianism dominated as the form of government in England's Victorian age of eighteenth century. Utilitarianism, as rightly claimed by Dickens, robbed the people of their individuality and joy; deprived the children of their special period of their lives, 'Childhood' and deprived women of their inherent right of equality.

The theme of utilitarianism, along with industrialization and education is explored by Charles Dickens, in his novel *Hard Times*. *Hard Times* written in those times intended to explore its negativisms. Utilitarianism as a government was propounded as a value of system which evaluated its productivity by its overall utility. It substantiated the idea of "highest level of happiness for the highest numbers of people". Since the overall happiness of the nation depended on the overall productivity, industrialism became the walk of everyday life.

Moreover, since Utilitarianism assumes that what is good for majority is good for everyone, individual preferences are ignored. The majority answers are always right. Minorities are subjugated and oppressed, instead of being asked for their opinions. Their feelings are ignored and society becomes increasingly practical, and driven by economics. The theory fails to acknowledge any individual rights that could not be violated for the sake of the greater good. *Hard Times* was in fact an attack on the Manchester School

of economics, which supported laissez-faire and promoted a distorted view of Bentham's ethics.

The novel has been criticised for not offering specific remedies for the Condition-of-England problems it addresses. It is debatable whether solutions to social problems are to be sought in fiction, but nevertheless, Dickens's novel anticipated the future debates concerning anti-pollution legislation, intelligent town-planning, health and safety measures in factories and a humane education system. The school teachers are compared to a gun loaded to its muzzle by facts ready to be exploded to the children. The children in schools don't have names and are called by numbers.

There is no room for imaginative answers. When the teacher asks to answer what 'horse' is, a student named Bitzer gives a factual answer, "quadruped" having this-many teeth etc, but by no means the 'qualities' of the horse is exemplified and considered. The influence of utilitarianism is shown particularly by two characters in the novel, Gradgrind and Bounderby. Both are money-oriented, have materialistic outlook and give importance to 'facts'. People in insane productivity. Dickens provides three vivid examples of this utilitarian logic in *Hard Times*. The first; Mr.

Thomas Gradgrind, one of the main characters in the book, was the principal of a school in Coketown. He was a firm believer in utilitarianism and instilled this philosophy into the students at the school from a very young age, as well as his own children. Mr. Josiah Bounderby was also a practitioner of utilitarianism, but was more interested in the profit that stemmed from it. At the other end of the perspective, a group of circus members, who are the

total opposite of utilitarians, are added by Dickens to provide a sharp contrast from the ideas of Mr. Bounderby and Mr. Gradgrind.

Thomas Gradgrind Sr. , a father of five children, has lived his life by the book and never strayed from his philosophy that life is nothing more than facts and statistics. . Thomas Gradgrind in particular always gives importance to facts and raises his children to be hard, machine-like and epitomes of facts and they lack any emotions. Even while justifying Louisa's marriage to 'old' Bounderby, he does so by some mathematical calculations and logic.. He has successfully incorporated this belief into the school system of Coketown, and has tried his best to do so with his own children.

They did not consider, however, the children's need for fiction, poetry, and other fine arts that are used to expand children's minds, all of which are essential today in order to produce well-rounded human beings through the educational process. One has to wonder how different the story would be if Gradgrind did not run the school. How can you give a utilitarian man such as Gradgrind such power over a town? I do like how Dickens structures the book to make one ask obvious questions such as these.

Dickens does not tell us much about the success of the other students of the school besides Bitzer, who is fairly successful on paper, but does not have the capacity as a person to deal with life's everyday struggles. Gradgrind's two oldest children, Tom and Louisa, are examples of how this utilitarian method failed miserably. These children were never given the opportunity to think for themselves, experience fun things in life, or even use their imaginations. True, they are smart people in the factual sense but do not have the street smarts to survive.

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Tom is a young man who, so fed up with his father's strictness and repetition, revolts against him and leaves home to work in Mr. Bounderby's bank. Tom, now out from under his father's wing, he begins to drink and gamble heavily. Eventually, to get out of a deep gambling debt, he robs a bank and is forced to flee the area. When Bitzer realizes that Tom has robbed the bank and catches him, Mr. Gradgrind begs him to let Tom go, reminding him of all of the hard work that was put on him while at the school.

Ironically Bitzer, using the tools of factuality that he had learned in Gradgrind's school, replies that the school was paid for, but it is now over and he owes nothing more. I think this is extremely funny how, at a time of need, Gradgrind's educational theory has backfired in his face. I think Dickens put this irony in as a comical device but also to show how ineffective the utilitarian method of teaching is. Louisa, unlike Tom, does get along with her father. She even agrees to marry Mr. Bounderby, even though she does not love him, in order to please her father.

She stays in the marriage with Bounderby, and goes about life normally and factually, until she is faced with a dilemma and panics. Mr. James Harthouse, a young, good looking guy, is attracted to Louisa and deceptively draws her attraction to him. She does not know what to do since she has never had feelings of her own before. Her father never gave her the opportunity to think for herself, or even love someone. This is why Louisa goes frantic and ends up crying in her father's lap. She has always been told what to do and what is 'right', and now even her father is stumped.

For the first time in the whole novel, Mr. Gradgrind strays from the utilitarian philosophy and shows compassion for his daughter and her feelings. One

must think that he is beginning to doubt his philosophy after seeing it backfire in his face more than once. Josiah Bounderby is another prime example of utilitarianism. He is one of the wealthiest people in Coketown; owning a bank and a factory, but is not really a likable person. His utilitarian philosophy is similar to Gradgrinds in the sense that factuality is the single most important virtue that one could possess.

Mr. Bounderby maintained throughout the story his utilitarian views, which basically stated that nothing else is important besides profit. Being the owner of both a factory and a bank, Bounderby employs many workers, yet seems to offer them no respect at all. He refers to the factory workers as "Hands," because that is all they are to him. Bounderby often states that workers are all looking for "venison, turtle soup, and a golden spoon," while all they really want is decent working conditions and fair wage for their work.

He is not concerned about his employees as human beings, but how much their hands can produce during the workday, resulting with money in his pocket. When one of his workers, Stephen Blackpool came to Bounderby's house asking for advice about his bad marriage, he was treated as inferior just because of his social status. Dickens portrayed the scene as one in which Blackpool was on a level five steps below Bounderby and his associates because he was a lowly worker who was obviously much less educated than them.

It almost seemed like they would not even take him seriously because he was such. Blackpool was told that he could not divorce his wife because it would be against the laws of England. Later in the book, Bounderby divorces his wife. This shows that wealth played a large role in determining the social

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classes that people were in and the privileges they had. This was definitely unfair but the social classes were structured in a way which allowed those who had money to look down upon those who were less fortunate.

Generally, those who were not well-educated did not have any money, while the well-educated ones such as Bounderby and Gradgrind were wealthy. The people who knew the factual information, (utilitarians) were successful, while those who did not were reduced to working in the factories of the utilitarians. Dickens paints a vivid picture of this inequality between social classes and shows he does not care much for it. It is fairly easy to see that Dickens holds a contempt for Bounderby and the utilitarian philosophy he carries.

The book details the philosophy, then shows how miserably it failed. How much different would their lives be if the town was not run by utilitarians. Dickens cleverly added in circus people as a contrast to the utilitarian approach to life. The circus people could be called the total opposite of utilitarianism. If one element of the book stands out in my mind, it would be this one. The circus people are simple, open-minded human beings whose goal in life is to make people laugh.

Dickens portrays them as a step up from the "Hands" but still close to the bottom in the social structure. These people are hated by Gradgrind, Bounderby and other utilitarians because they represent everything that is shunned in utilitarianism such as love, imagination, and humor. Sissy Jupe, the daughter of a circus man, was taken in by the Gradgrinds to live in their home. She is representative of the circus people with her innocence and free-will, qualities which are lacking in the lives of the people around her.

Just by her presence, her goodness rubs off on the people around her, although it is too late for most of them. Even after numerous attempts to force utilitarianism into her by Mr. Gradgrind and his school, she is still the fun-loving girl that she always was because she grew up living with “normal” people who thought for themselves and loved each other. She influenced these qualities on the youngest Gradgrind daughter Jane, who led a much more enjoyable and fulfilling life than her older sister Louisa because of those influences.

Jane is not spoken of much until the end of the book but I like the way Dickens showed the effects of the utilitarian lifestyle as opposed to the non-utilitarian lifestyle. The utilitarians ultimately ended with a great downfall because their narrow-minds could not endure the pressures that life can impose on oneself. The people that did not fall victim to the utilitarian trap were able to live their lives happily and freely, able to love, laugh, and use their imagination; which is the way life ought to be lived.

Dickens obviously had a definitive opinion of the way life should be lived and did an excellent job of depicting it. His method was somewhat indirect in the sense that he worked backwards to get his point across, but turned out to be very effective as the story progressed. Most of the story revolved around utilitarianism and the study of cold hard facts, but when the character flaws began to surface as a result of this philosophy, Dickens is quick to emphasize them. One actually sees the main character of the book and firm supporter of utilitarianism, Mr.

Thomas Gradgrind, experience the faults of his practice and begin to stray from it. Now, after watching his life fall apart, maybe he wishes he were in <https://assignbuster.com/utilitarian-principle-in-charles-dickens-hard-times/>

the circus. . . The working and living conditions were often atrocious. Working days were long, and wages low, as employers often exploited their workers and increased their profits by lowering the cost of production by paying meagre wages and neglecting pollution control. Safety measures were often ignored and workers were put out of jobs by the introduction of machines that created a surplus of labour.

The rate of accidents was very high. A handicapped worker was doomed to extreme poverty, as there were no social security or insurance payments. The New Poor Law of 1834 was based on the "principle of less eligibility," which stipulated that the condition of the "able-bodied pauper" on relief (it did not apply to the sick, aged, or children) be less "eligible" that is, less desirable, less favorable than the condition of the independent laborer. This reasoning was absolutely correct from the scientific and the Utilitarian point of view, but it rejected any emotional considerations.

There was no consciousness of class beyond a recognition that the 'masters' constituted a different order of society into which they would never penetrate. Their aspirations were modest: to be respected by their fellows ; to see their families growing up and making their way in the world, and to die without debt and without sin. Trade unions did appear to introduce and protect workers rights, but in the initial stages of industrialisation, the workers were not protected. Purely theoretically, it can be proven that Utilitarianism poses a threat to humanity.

For example, if one person must suffer to make other people happy, then in the Utilitarian terms it is acceptable to make that person suffer. One of the Hands in *Bleaker's* factory, Stephen lives a life of drudgery and poverty.

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In spite of the hardships of his daily toil, Stephen strives to maintain his honesty, integrity, faith, and compassion. Stephen is an important character not only because his poverty and virtue contrast with Bounderby's wealth and self-interest, but also because he finds himself in the midst of a labor dispute that illustrates the strained relations between rich and poor.

Stephen is the only Hand who refuses to join a workers' union: he believes that striking is not the best way to improve relations between factory owners and employees, and he also wants to earn an honest living. As a result, he is cast out of the workers' group. However, he also refuses to spy on his fellow workers for Bounderby, who consequently sends him away. Both groups, rich and poor, respond in the same self-interested, backstabbing way.

As Rachael explains, Stephen ends up with the "masters against him on one hand, the men against him on the other, he only wantin' to work hard in peace, and do what he felt right." Through Stephen, Dickens suggests that industrialization threatens to compromise both the employee's and employer's moral integrity, thereby creating a social muddle to which there is no easy solution. Through his efforts to resist the moral corruption on all sides, Stephen becomes a martyr, or Christ figure, ultimately dying for Tom's crime.

When he falls into a mine shaft on his way back to Coketown to clear his name of the charge of robbing Bounderby's bank, Stephen comforts himself by gazing at a particularly bright star that seems to shine on him in his "pain and trouble." This star not only represents the ideals of virtue for which Stephen strives, but also the happiness and tranquility that is lacking in his troubled life. Moreover, his ability to find comfort in the star illustrates the

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importance of imagination, which enables him to escape the cold, hard facts of his miserable existence.

In *Hard Times* human relationships are contaminated by economics. The principles of the 'dismal science' led to the formation of a selfish and atomistic society. The social commentary of *Hard Times* is quite clear. Dickens is concerned with the conditions of the urban labourers and the excesses of laissez-faire capitalism. He exposes the exploitation of the working class by unfeeling industrialists and the damaging consequences of propagating factual knowledge (statistics) at the expense of feeling and imagination.

However, although Dickens is critical about Utilitarianism, he cannot find a better way of safeguarding social justice than through ethical means. "In place of Utilitarianism, Dickens can offer only good-heartedness, individual charity, and Sleary's horse-riding; like other writers on the Condition of England Question, he was better equipped to examine the symptoms of the disease than to suggest a possible cure" (Wheeler, 81). *Hard Times* proves that fancy is essential for human happiness, and in this aspect it is one of the best morally uplifting novels.

Dickens avoided propagating employer paternalism in the manner of Disraeli, Charlotte Brontë and Gaskell, and strongly opposed commodification of labour in Victorian England. As John R. Harrison has pointed out: The target of Dickens's criticism, however, was not Bentham's Utilitarianism, nor Malthusian theories of population, nor Smith's free-market economics, but the crude utilitarianism derived from such ideas by

Benthamite Philosophical Radicals, which tended to dominate social, political, and economic thinking and policy at the time the novel was written.

The Gradgrind/Bounderby philosophy is that the Coketown “ Hands” are commodities, “ something” to be worked so much and paid so much, to be “ infallibly settled” by “ laws of supply and demand,” something that increased in number by a certain “ rate of percentage” with accompanying percentages of crime and pauperism; in fact, “ something wholesale, of which vast fortunes were made. ”

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