

# The significance of "coketown" essay sample

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## **The Significance of “ Coketown” Essay Sample**

Coketown is an allegorical place through which Dickens presents his vision of Industrial England. It is a harsh and bitter reality that he intends to convey. In the wake of the Industrial Revolution, Britain witnessed the phenomenon of the Industrial town, a place devoted to manufactures by the way of enormous factories, and driven by a voracious profit motive of the capitalists who owned the factories. The ferocious ambition of the capitalists led to exploitation on an unprecedented scale. The land and resources were plundered, and the brunt of the exploitation fell on the lower strata of society, who were forced to abandon the countryside and to huddle in the city slums, because the factories offered the only means of subsistence for them. The harsh realities of Industrialism are what gave rise to Socialism from various learned and intellectual centers in Europe. This was a political philosophy that sympathized with the oppressed proletariat after positing a class struggle between the owners of capital and their workers.

Dickens, however was not a Socialist, and in fact came in for harsh criticism from Socialists and other learned visionaries, who lambasted his novel for being ignorant of the finer politics and sociology of the situation. Thomas Macaulay called it “ sullen Socialism” (qtd. in Chesterton 131). However the Socialist George Bernard Shaw was more accurate when he describes it as a “ passionate revolt against the whole industrial order of the modern world” (29). The criticism of Dickens was certainly not limited for the capitalists alone. He describes a confusion having taken over society, the focus of which he could not pinpoint, and so his was an undefined rage. ‘ Coketown’

is the expression of what Dickens felt about modernity. It is a vision of an artist and novelist, and must be read as free from the taint of politics and philosophy, and is unique and valuable for this very reason.

We are given a poignant description of Coketown in the beginning of the second part of the novel, when the focus has shifted to the exploits of Josiah Bounderby, the industrialist and banker. Dickens wants to show us how the industrial factories have blighted the cityscape, but there is more allegorical meaning packed in Dickens' description. For example it is described as a place that is "impervious to the sun's rays" (Dickens 87). It is referring to the haze of pollution that envelops the city and deflects the sun, but it also tells us that we should not expect the light of clarity in such a place. The description continues:

A blur of soot and smoke, now confusedly tending this way, now that way, now aspiring to the vault of Heaven, now murkily creeping along the earth, as the wind rose and fell, or changed its quarter: a dense formless jumble, with sheets of cross light in it, that showed nothing but masses of darkness—Coketown in the distance was suggestive of itself, though not a brick of it could be seen. (Ibid)

The overwhelming impression is of darkness and confusion. Coketown must be guessed from its outlines. We see nothing but an enormous mass of effluent, but the shape of this chaos bears the identity of the city too. It is a foreboding vision of civilization descending into chaos that Dickens presents to us. While many other scribes were pronouncing Industrialism as the beginning of proper civilization, Dickens saw it in a totally different light. He

does not join the scribes in offering a competing Utopia, but instead takes a step back to look at the landscape. He sees an ominous development, and that which escapes the vision of the learned wits because they are buried too deep in the haze itself.

The full force of Dickens' assault falls on the Victorian philosophy of Utilitarianism. But we must also take note that he does not offer an alternative philosophy, for example he does not enjoin Socialism. He is just as critical of trade unionism, which is the movement that gave rise to full blown Socialism in politics. Through the character of Slackbridge, Dickens tells us that Unionism is instigated by characters who are no less duplicitous and scheming than the capitalists that they oppose. They too are self-serving and just as coldly rational in their approach, which makes them no less "utilitarian" than the exploiting industrialists. Therefore it is a mistake to read Socialism in Dickens' message, as Macaulay does. When Dickens opposing Utilitarianism he is opposing the entire ethos of an age. He is critical of the times, and the times are hard, meaning rigid and unyielding, and therefore the title of the novel – *Hard Times, For Our Times* .

The adjective "utilitarian" can refer to others than those who espouse a philosophy called Utilitarianism. If we take the term to mean 'self-serving and exploiting', then there are many others in society who come under this heading. Dickens intends to show us that these are the characters who are encouraged and assisted by those who merely espouse the philosophy. Thomas Gradgrind is the philosopher and disciplinarian at the center of the plot who guides his life and that of his family by the dictates of Utilitarianism.

He is one taken in by the philosophy alone, and is naïve of the possible implications in reality. This reality appears to him as the novel unfolds. He witnesses the devastating effect that it has on his children, who have been raised strictly by the guidelines of his philosophy. It is a philosophy that he succinctly conveys in the following address, delivered to the teachers in the school which is founded upon it

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. You can only form the mind of reasoning animals upon Facts: nothing else will ever be of any service to them. (Ibid 3)

The inhumanity of this philosophy comes across poignantly in the phrase “reasoning animal” which he uses to describe the human being, which as once reduces man to a mere machine. It is as if man, instead of operating the machine, wants to conform to it, and to become one. It is obviously a philosophy bred of Industrial Revolution, which speaks of the success of the machine, in terms of delivering material prosperity. Such a philosophy is also a spur to the more uncouth industrialist, which we discuss later on. But the immediate object of Gradgrind is to spread the philosophy by schooling the young, and especially his own children. The practical effect is that it stifles the imagination, and this leads to serious dysfunction in his children as they grow up. Tom, his eldest son, grows up to become a self-centered hedonist, miscreant and gambler. Louisa, his eldest daughter, becomes withdrawn and unable to connect with people. These flaws lead to serious implications for

them, and Gradgrind discovers the error of his ways when he realizes that his philosophy of “ facts, facts, facts” is responsible.

Whether Gradgrind realizes it or not, the philosophy which he espouses nurtures many other unsavory elements in society, and those that are not redeemed by education and refinement. Of a very different nature is his best friend Josiah Bounderby. He is coarse and dissipated, just as his friend is upright and principled. If philosophy and disciplinarianism suits Thomas Gradgrind, then subterfuge and hypocrisy is the wont of Josiah Bounderby. Yet they both declare the same philosophy of Utilitarianism, and they are both sticklers for ‘ facts’. He projects himself as a self made man, and therefore as an advertisement for capitalism, which is said to promote social mobility, in other words that material success is open to all who are prepared to put in the hard work that is necessary.

Dickens suggests that social mobility under capitalism is a myth, when it is exposed in the end that Bounderby is not self made after all, and that he had been brought up with every privilege of gentility. He may also be suggesting that the capitalist is wont to weave myths around himself, that his success is result of diligence and industry alone. The myth serves to hide the base nature of the typical capitalist, as well as the misdeeds that are committed on the way to material prosperity. Bounderby is just as fanatic about facts as Gradgrind is, but it is a monetary rather than philosophical concept of “ fact” that he has in mind. He brings his tyranny of facts to bear on the factory floor, so that only the profitable is factual, and everything else is not. It is the menial factory “ Hands” that bear the brunt of this particular tyranny.

But Dickens does not cave into Socialism by sympathizing entirely with the factory "Hands". Stephen Blackpool is from the rank of the Hands, and is the most sympathetic character in the novel. But it is also true that he does not identify himself with the larger body of workers. He is the only one to resist the advances of the Union, and is not taken in by the provocative message of Socialism that they spew. He believes that unionism is poisonous to industrial relations, but such an attitude does not endear him to his capitalist employer either. When he refuses to act as a spy, in order to sabotage Union initiatives, Bounderby fires him immediately, feeling fearful that he has a free radical on his hands. Rachel, another hardworking and kindred spirit in the factory, sums up this impossible situation when she describes Steven as having his "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" (Ibid 197).

Steven does not have the philosophical equipment to explain his plight, and when he tries to, he ends up with a confused assortment of complaints and grudges. Nevertheless he is closer to the mark than anyone else in the novel, because he can say, "Who can look on't sir, and fairly tell a man 'tis not a muddle?" (Ibid 118). Confusion itself is the best explanation for what takes place in Coketown, and chimes with the bleak picture painted by Dickens at the beginning of the second part of the novel. Both employer and employee are engaged in an unwholesome game, where self-interest and manipulation has become the order of the game, and material prosperity the bait.

Utilitarianism becomes the philosophy of all those engaged in this game, and in order to cover the tracks of their baser instincts. For the finer natures it is

a philosophy of science, and for the coarser natures a philosophy of economics. Gradgrind is representative of the one, while Bounderby stands for the other. The honest natures, like Stephen, Rachel, or Sissy Jupe, struggle to find a berth in this society. Others like Louisa and Tom Gradgrind are victims of the confusion. Only to a base nature like Josiah Bounderby are all things clear. Even in the polluting streams of smoke he sees nothing but rivers of wealth coming his way.

The reason that chaos and confusion prevail in Coketown is that it is a place lacking in humanity. It is a place where “ the best lack conviction, while the worst are filled with passionate intensity”, to use the words of Yeats in a similar context (158). Stephen stumbles from one doubt to the next, unable to address the “ muddle” he find himself in. Rachel languishes unheard of in her workhouse. Mrs. Gradgrind is browbeaten by her fact-touting husband. Yet the likes of Bounderby, and the dissolute aristocrat James Harthouse, disport themselves with supreme confidence. Tom Gradgrind is bold enough to rob a bank, while Louisa Gradgrind finds it difficult to merely converse. We know that there is a robust humanity lurking within her, only that her austere upbringing at the hands of her father has left her alienated from herself. While her father reasons with her that she should marry Josiah Bounderby, she fails to register emotion at the enormity of the proposal, and simply stares out of the window at the billowing smoke from the factories. Lost in herself, she mutters, “ There seems to be nothing there but languid and monotonous smoke. Yet when the night comes, Fire bursts out” (Dickens 78). The comment is suggestive of a latent fire within her, wanting desperately to



emerge, but kept within by the cold climates of calculation and self centeredness.

Time is another dimension which Coketown has lost touch with. All those involved in the industrial process are ruled by the dictates of the mechanical clock, and Dickens points out that this is not resonant with natural time. "Time went on in Coketown like its own machine," says the narrator (Ibid 71). It is a time dictated by manufacturing schedules and profit goals. But true and natural time ignores the profit agenda, and is instead concerned with the fluctuations of the seasons, and with how human life keeps in step, and in touch, with the seasons.

The capitalist on the other hand is oblivious to the seasons, and is satisfied as long as his machines keep functioning all year round. Indeed, he is severed from the land by the brick walls he builds, and by the smoke that impedes his view of landscape. Having calculated time on the basis of profit, he is trapped in a cage of mechanical time. By following the routine of the machine he becomes a machine himself. But the seasons cannot be held back entirely, and therefore natural time yet leaves its mark. Dickens describes this mark as "the only stand that ever was made against [Coketown's] direful uniformity" (Ibid). To emphasize the predominance of natural time over mechanical time, Dickens divides the book according to the seasons, especially regarding the human interaction with the season, so that he has the three parts of the novel called "Sowing", "Reaping", and "Garnering" respectively. Coketown is under the tyranny of the mechanical

clock, which distorts and deludes. Yet in the larger picture it cannot escape the frame of natural time.

In conclusion, Dickens paints for us the picture of Coketown as an allegory of what was really taking place behind the veneer of material prosperity in the manufacturing towns of Industrial Britain. The bitter brunt of his attack falls on the ethos of Utilitarianism which characterized the Victorian epoch, and was widely hailed as the instrument of progress. He demonstrates how this philosophy becomes a smokescreen that hides the ambition of the baser elements of society and facilitates their rise to dominance. He wants to show that cold calculation and self interest do not make for an environment of healthy human interaction. Instead there is an abetment of the base instincts, which in turn gives rise to a social climate of confusion.

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