

Methods of social criticism in dickens' hard times



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Ideas of social change and progressive ideals are prominent in many nineteenth century works of literature. Charles Dickens' *Hard Times* is a prime example of a social criticism novel, putting prominent ideas of the time period, such as utilitarianism and social class, to the test. Dickens uses specific literary techniques that are highly effective in shocking the reader into understanding Dickens' views. Dickens uses symbolism, satire, and synecdoche, among other literary techniques, to emphasize his argument.

Perhaps the most effective technique is symbolism. Dickens uses it to exaggerate some ideas that may otherwise be overlooked in the overall complexity of the novel. A symbolic motif running throughout the novel is that of the farming cycle, and the idea of reaping what is sown. In the first chapters of the novel, Gradgrind, Bounderby and McChoakumchild "sow the seeds" of Fact into the young, fertile minds of children. The only seeds planted are those of Fact, and fancy and feeling are discouraged and tamped down by adults. In the second part of the book, the characters begin to "reap" what they "sowed" in the children at the beginning of the novel. The doctrine of fact alone begins to create problems as characters such as Louisa and Tom find themselves unable to make any right decisions, or feel any emotions at all. In part three of the novel, the harvest is "garnered", or stored, and the reader is hit with the true inadequacy of the seeds sown so long ago. Disasters such as Louisa's ruined marriage, Stephen's death, and Tom's undoing occur, and the characters who originally planted the seeds are left with nothing to sustain them. This use of obscure symbolism sharply and sometimes cruelly highlights Dickens' disgust with the utilitarian doctrines of fact, and the reader is unable to ignore his disdain. By using this

symbolism, Dickens not only expresses his disgust and disagreement with many facets of utilitarianism, but also backs up his hatred with predictions of what will happen to the people if an entire society were based solely on fact.

Dickens also uses satire to incite the reader's vehemence for social change. In discussing many of the characters', and, indeed, Coketown's, love of fact, he adopts an almost religiously reverent view. He discusses the fact that most of the churches are unattended by the working masses: "A town so sacred in fact, and so triumphant in its assertion, of course it got on well? Why no...who belonged to the eighteen (religious) denominations? Because, whoever did, the laboring people did not..." (Book the first: Ch. V; pg. 38). He continually reinforces the ideas preached by Gradgrind and Bounderby, that Facts are the one scripture needful above every other facet of life, including religion itself. For Gradgrind, science and fact utterly consume him, leaving him no time to pay attention to the human need for comfort and peace that is often exemplified by religion. Gradgrind even goes so far as to replace the word "God" with the word "Fact" in the statement "God forbid", often exclaiming "Fact forbid!" when faced with something fanciful, such as the circus. All of these facets combine to create a highly satirical view of Coketown as a place where the religion is not one of God but one of fact. Dickens backs this up further by continually inserting religious allusions and fragments of prayers into descriptions of Coketown or passages that talk about fact. This satirical view of a much darker reality causes the reader to pause and forces thought on the twisted reality of a world where fact and science, both subject to human fallacy, have replaced a higher power.

Dickens utilizes synecdoche in order to exaggerate and bring across the true mechanization of the masses so prevalent in the industrial age. He often refers to the Coketown workers as “ the masses” and his characters often generalizes them as “ the hands”, all wanting the same things, all doing the same things, and all part of nothing but the overall working machine of the town. In general, the individual is not spoken of; instead the whole represents the individual. This is a useful viewpoint for those such as Gradgrind and Bounderby to take because it is the view that creates the most profit. However, through his extensive use of this synecdoche, Dickens shows that it creates a vicious cycle, where the town can be ruined if only one small part of the working whole begins questioning, and where the people trapped in the cycle become less than human.

Dickens questions the greater ideas driving industrial age itself, the ideas of individuality as opposed to profit and output, and he causes readers to also question these ideas as they see the ruin of the people of Coketown, both the workers and the leaders, such as Bounderby and Gradgrind.