

## A VICTORIAN UTILITARIAN EDUCATION IN HARD TIMES

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### *Abstract*

*My paper aims to analyse the consequences of an exclusively utilitarian education taught by Mr. Gradgrind in Charles Dickens's novel Hard Times. At the same time this paper will bring forth Dickens's solution to ameliorate the effects of utilitarian education: the attempt to unify the "wisdom of the head" with the "wisdom of the heart", in order to attain a powerful bond between mind and feelings. Therefore, a better future of the education provided in Victorian schools lies in the hope of softening the hearts of the learned ones.*

**Keywords:** utilitarian education, wisdom, heart, knowledge, bond.

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### *1 Introduction*

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Romanticism was neglected by a large number of people when multifarious changes took place in a fast pace. The advent of mechanisation forced the Victorians to be overactive. Moreover, they often forgot to have a rest to enjoy the small pleasures of life. Fortunately, Dickens wasn't one of them, he was a "great romanticist" and a "great realist" (Chesterton, 1913: 87). Chesterton stated that Dickens was an illustrious Victorian writer who "had nothing except realities out of which to make a romance" (1913: 87). Indeed, only a "man who really felt" (1913: 85) could create a positive character like Cecilia Jupe, fill Mr. Gradgrind's soul with remorse and make Tom admit his mistakes. In 2012 Charles Dickens's 200<sup>th</sup> birthday was celebrated around the world by the ones who love his characters and stories. Leadbeater proudly said that the 7<sup>th</sup> of February 2012 marked "the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the arrival on the planet of a certain Charles John Huffam Dickens – otherwise known as (arguably) the greatest ever novelist to emerge in the British Isles" (Leadbeater, 2012).

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### *2. Utilitarian Education*

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This paper focuses on *Hard Times*, a didactic novel which highlights the importance of a complete education delivered in Victorian schools. I think Sontag is right when she asserts that there are valuable writers who produce literary works

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which refine our imagination and cultivate our mind, Charles Dickens being one of them:

*Serious fiction writers think about moral problems practically. They tell stories. They narrate. They evoke our common humanity in narratives with which we can identify, even though the lives lived may be remote from our own. They stimulate our imagination. The stories they tell enlarge and complicate – and, therefore, improve – our sympathies. They educate our capacity for moral judgement.* (Sontag, 2007: 214)

When teaching literature at all levels, primary, secondary and tertiary (higher), it is essential to teach students not only to read carefully but also to read critically and imaginatively, states Schwarz (Schwarz, 2008: 127). This way the students are encouraged to put forward their own way of thinking when the teacher hands them a piece of writing. The role of the sciences is to inform us. Nevertheless, imaginative literature contributes to the understanding of the inner self and of the surrounding world, in order to help us build a better life, adds Schwarz (2008: 112, 38). Inspector James Hughes states in the preface of his book *Dickens as an Educator*, that Dickens is “one of the world's greatest educators” (Hughes, 1902: ix) and “one of the first great advocates of a national system of schools” (1902: ix). He asserts that his written interventions which uncovered “the ignorance and the intellectual and spiritual destitution of the children” of the lower classes helped to the foundation of free schools in Victorian England (1902: ix).

*Hard Times* is a novel which reflects Victorian utilitarian education as Dickens describes it. The paper aims to analyse the consequences of an exclusively utilitarian education taught by Mr. Gradgrind in his school. In Mr. Gradgrind's mind there isn't any room for imagination, only reason resides in his thoughts. Mr. Gradgrind is an intelligent wealthy gentleman with his own viewpoint: he thinks that facts represent the best ideology taught in schools. Nobody can change his opinion about the education received by him when he was a child, thus he tries to offer it to his own children and to the pupils studying in his school. In his naïveté, Mr Gradgrind thinks that the education provided by him is the best:

*Now, what I want is Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and rout out everything else. ...This is the principle on which I bring up my own children, and this is the principle on which I bring up these children.* (Dickens, 1854: 13)

Within a single paragraph Dickens succeeds in sketching the portrait of a Victorian utilitarian schoolmaster who delivers a speech about the importance of facts to his pupils: “In this life, we want nothing but Facts, Sir: nothing but Facts!” The little pupils were “arranged in order, ready to have imperial gallons of facts poured into them until they were full to the brim” (1854: 13). This phrase is typical to Dickens's irony which reflects the character's exaggerated wish of inoculating his pupils with facts. Dickens uses many times the word “square” in portraying Mr. Gradgrind:

“the speaker’s square forefinger”, “the speaker’s square of a forehead”, “the speaker’s obstinate carriage, square coat, square legs” and “square shoulders” (1854: 13). The schoolmaster is a distinguished well-educated gentleman. He is imposing and commanding, “a man of realities”, “a man of facts and calculations”, “a man who proceeds upon the principle that two and two are four, and nothing over” (1854: 14). When he sees little Cecilia Jupe for the first time, he doesn’t call her by her name, and not necessarily because he doesn’t know her name, but because a number is more important to him: “Girl number twenty,” says Mr. Gradgrind, squarely pointing with his square pointfinger, “I don’t know that girl. Who is that girl?” (1854: 14). The conditions in Mr. Gradgrind’s schoolroom are precarious, the author revealing the real conditions of the Victorian schooltime where many of the existing schools for the education of the masses were improvised small places with a great number of children trying to learn the basics – reading, writing and arithmetic. *“The scene was a plain, bare, monotonous vault of a schoolroom, and the speaker’s forefinger emphasized his observations by underscoring every sentence with a line on the schoolmaster’s sleeve”* (1854: 14).

Mr. Gradgrind wants his school to be a “model”, and “every child in it to be a model”. His own children are “models” for his “perfect” school where they “had never learnt the silly jingle, Twinkle, twinkle, little star; how I wonder what you are” (1854: 20). What is childhood without nursery rhymes? How can anyone ever think that children can live a happy childhood without jolly songs and poems to brighten their life, to make them laugh? How wrong he is! A mother knows that, but Mrs. Gradgrind’s place had been overshadowed by an authoritarian father who had taken over the maternal responsibilities. My opinion is that even if Mrs. Gradgrind had tried to behave like an ideal mother, Mr. Gradgrind would not have permitted her, because his soul had been imbued with old patriarchal beliefs like stains on a white shirt. Childhood innocence does not soften the man, husband and father of a large family: Mr. Gradgrind has five children. However, in the light of the late unfortunate events in the lives of his children, Tom and Louisa, the stains of his imperfect beliefs have been removed, so that the shirt is once again immaculate like a pure soul. Nevertheless, everything has changed for those around him. Whereas life goes on, Mr. Gradgrind ends up living with the remembrance of the past events, being merely a spectator of the present ones.

At first Mr. Gradgrind thinks that if his teaching is hard and based on facts, then his education will help his pupils and his own children become intelligent people like Mr. M’Choakumchild, a teacher who knows more than it is expected of him:

*He ... had answered volumes of head-breaking questions. Orthography, etymology, syntax, and prosody, biography, astronomy, geography, and general cosmography, the sciences of compound proportion, algebra, land-surveying and leveling, vocal music, and drawing from models... the higher branches of mathematics and physical science, French, German, Latin and Greek. He knew all about the Water Sheds of all the world (whatever they are), and all the stories of all the peoples, and all the names of all the rivers and mountains, and all the productions,*

*manners, and customs of all the countries, and all their boundaries and bearings on the two-and-thirty points of the compass.* (1854: 19)

“If he had only learnt a little less, how infinitely better he might have taught more!”(1854: 19) adds Dickens at the end of this long phrase. Victorian teachers needed to improve their pedagogical skills, just like Mr. M’Choakumchild. Over the course of time, a series of improvements have been made in teacher training; accordingly, contemporary teachers possess a wide range of learning and master pedagogical knowledge for an effective educational process.

Dickens hates the combination of utilitarian education with political economy, and Cecilia is the character who proves that facts learned by rote aren’t as important as true life lived by the poor children working in factories. Cecilia is asked by Mr. M’Choakumchild to give the answer of a mathematics exercise using simple mathematical calculations. Cecilia’s answer does not satisfy her teacher’s expectations. She cannot help thinking about the real issues of the many children and people who live a hard life working in factories which are owned by a handful of wealthy gentlemen with higher education, but with no soul. Through Cecilia’s compassionate heart Dickens brings into discussion a kind of humanitarian benevolence. In Baker’s opinion humanists “believe that education is incomplete if limited to the accumulation of miscellaneous facts, to appease curiosity, or to master a skill which earns one's daily bread” (Baker, 1950: 128). According to them, “what gives true worth to education is a spiritually directed idea which inspires a search for perfection in all phases of human need: an attitude to which they give the name "culture"” (1950: 128). Baker argues that “education is the process in which culture motivates and shapes the unceasing adjustment of the whole state of individuals and of society” (1950: 128). John Morley, statesman son of Oxford, addressing an audience of labourers at a mechanics institute, states that the key to become a better person is to learn from life experiences and to be able to choose the best books:

*The great need in modern culture, which is scientific in method, rationalistic in spirit and utilitarian in purpose, is to find some effective agency for cherishing within us the ideal. Literature alone will not make us good citizens; it will not make us a good man... It is life that is the great educator. But the parcel of books, if they are well chosen, reconcile us to this discipline, they interpret this virtue and this justice; they awaken within us the diviner mind, and rouse us to a consciousness of what is best in others and ourselves.* (Morley qtd. in Baker, 1950:128)

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### ***3. “There is a wisdom of the head and ... a wisdom of the heart”***

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At the beginning of the novel and during the unfortunate events which take place in the lives of his children: Tom and Louisa, Mr Gradgrind is not aware that there are two kinds of wisdom, as he himself states: “Some persons hold, ... that there is a wisdom of the Head, and that there is a wisdom of the Heart. I have not supposed

so” (1854: 221). Mr. Gradgrind has “supposed the head to be all-sufficient” (1854: 221). After he teaches him the lesson of his life: the failure of utilitarian education given to his own children, the author decides that it is time to uncover Mr. Gradgrind’s feelings. He lets him realize that a wise man uses his head to gain knowledge and his heart to soften his soul. Therefore, Mr. Gradgrind comprehends, “still hesitating”, that there is a powerful bond between mind and feelings. But why is he “still hesitating”? Why can’t he trust the power of the Heart? Why is he still doubtful? We can only assume that it is very difficult to make changes, to transform a nation’s thinking without struggle, persuasion or loss. In the nineteenth century scholars, writers, educationalists and even commoners tried to make changes, and we can see the results of their efforts in the Acts, Laws, books, periodicals and magazines written in the history of English education. Due to his hesitation to “that other kind of wisdom” (1854: 221) which uses the power of the Heart, happiness doesn’t come into Mr. Gradgrind’s life. Young pointed out that utilitarian philosophers had “faith in reason” (Young, 1936: 12). Moreover, Paz asserted that “their main principle was utility” (Paz, 1980: 9). Consequently, Tom and Louisa have a utilitarian father who cannot trust the power of the Heart. Furthermore, he asks his daughter to help him understand what has happened to him:

*“Louisa, I have a misgiving that some change may have been slowly working about me in this house, by mere love and gratitude: that what the Head had left undone and could not do, the Heart may have been doing silently. Can it be so? Is it so, my dear?”* (Dickens, 1854: 222)

Louisa cannot answer her father’s question. And how could she? After being brought up in a world full of facts and incomes, she doesn’t know the answer to his question. Moreover, her present life is devoid of love and the fortune of her future husband won’t make her happy. After all, what is life without love? Money cannot compensate love, nothing can fill our hearts, only love can do that. Mr. Gradgrind’s question hasn’t got an answer because the question itself is more important than the answer. This is the beginning of a new Age, an Age full of new questions coming from increasingly more people. When the lower classes started to express their interest in education the Victorian nobility thought that education would make them powerful, and their first reaction was to ask themselves: Why do the lower classes want to be educated? To take over the control of their lives? To be aware of their power? It appears that while ignorance makes you vulnerable, knowledge can make you powerful. These questions were so important in the nineteenth century that the Victorians not only received answers but also modernisation: better and newer jobs, more schools, colleges and universities, new social classes, equal rights to everyone, an improvement in the quality of life, etc. Everything had been transformed by the end of the nineteenth century.

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#### ***4. Two Opposite Worlds***

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In *Hard Times* Charles Dickens successfully contrasts two opposite worlds: the life and work in a factory with the life and work in a circus. Dickens suggests that entertainment, the circus in this novel, is indispensable for human happiness, and I agree with him. Laughter and joy are trying to find their place in the newly mechanised society. Unfortunately, when the two Gradgrind children escape from home to go to the circus with the sole purpose of seeing its wonders, they are found and sent back to their normal dull life. Also, after having arrived in a utilitarian house, Cecilia Jupe, a little girl raised in a circus where imagination and humour are of great importance, is forbidden to ever return to the circus. Dickens's concern in this novel is towards an education in which imagination plays two important roles: first it has the power to bring the children closer to their family and second it helps them express their feelings. Cecilia's father loves her dearly, he is a man of the circus, a joyful person who wants a better life and a good education for his daughter. This is the reason why Cecilia accepts Mr. Grandgrand's harsh terms. Thus, her connections with her joyful childhood are cut off for good, although she never forgets the education received from her late kind-hearted father.

Humans can express their sorrow and their joy and they should use their hearts more often. They shouldn't hide their feelings or neutralise them. By the end of the novel Mr. Gradgrind not only expresses his feelings, but also asks his former pupil Bitzer to use his heart to help his son. However, Bitzer's answer is plain and merciless: "I have a heart" which "is accessible to Reason, Sir", "and to nothing else" (1854: 280). Amazingly, the one who offers to help young Tom is Mr. Sleary, a man of the circus, who many years ago had been a dear friend of Cecilia's father. I believe the author is trying to teach us a valuable lesson about the immense Heart of a poor circus entertainer who hadn't been raised in the spirit of utilitarian education. He helps a person in need without asking for a material reward in return. Mr. Gradgrind tries to offer his gratitude in money, but Mr. Sleary refuses him. All he wants from this wealthy gentleman is kindness and benevolence for him and his circus every time they come into town. Thus, via a good deed, from now on the circus is permitted to enter the Hearts of the people of Coketown. In an emerging mechanised society there were increasingly more factory owners focused on producing goods and earnings, using their mind only to get richer and richer day by day, leaving behind their feelings and affection for their family. Therefore, towards the middle of the Victorian Age an ardent desire to revive a long forgotten morality touched writers and educationalists.

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#### ***5. Conclusions***

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*Hard Times* is a Dickensian didactic novel intended to teach us that it is never too late to change a person's behaviour. It was published in 1854, after Dickens had witnessed a series of Factory Acts which aimed at sending the working-class

children to school. In the Victorian Age a lot of children had an unhappy childhood due to the process of mechanisation. Thus, the author's intention is to show us that when adults forget their childhood, like Mr. Gradgrind, or when they don't have a real childhood, like Louisa and Tom, they become incomplete individuals. Without recollections of childhood activities: playing games, listening to stories, laughing for no significant reason, using his/her imagination to describe things or places, that person will undoubtedly be unhappy, serious, or simply heartless. The economic interest comes first in Mr. Gradgrind's life. However, he understands that he cannot be happy if his children aren't happy. There is no such thing as incomplete happiness, all the family must be happy. Secondly, we can assume that deep in his heart Mr. Gradgrind is a good man because he opens a school to educate the working-class children. Furthermore, he educates his own children in the same manner as the lower-class girl Cecilia, although Tom and Louisa belong to a higher class. Though it is hard to believe, he is a changed man at the end of the novel. He is convinced that there is a powerful bond between reason and feelings. Therefore, he should have used his head together with his heart when he was teaching in his school. In Jordan's eyes Dickens is a sentimental writer who successfully brought to life heartening stories for the vulnerable, the powerless and the impoverished (Jordan, 2001: 4). Thereby, when Dickens allowed Cecilia, the lower-class girl, to be happy at the end of the novel, he showed us a glimpse of a better future of the Victorian lower classes. She is the only character who uses her Heart for education and tries to instill her goodness into Mr. Gradgrind's home. We should all keep our hope as Cecilia kept hers, because we shall be rewarded the way Cecilia was rewarded with love and happiness at the end of the novel. Although *Hard Times* was written a long time ago, it has contemporary relevance since in today's world there is an increasing concern for facts and earnings. Yet literature should have an important role in our lives. Charles Dickens's novels are taught in schools, high schools and universities because they make us understand human nature and the issues of an entire society.

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