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The Price of Education in Charles Dickens's *Hard Times*

Sweeping his gaze across the neatly aligned desks, each one enclosing a malleable young student, the teacher assesses the plain, bare school room and calls on an individual pupil to answer the question. Though he singles out the trembling child from her peers, he in fact desires nothing more than conformity from his students. Should a precise, textbook-style response not be immediately retorted, he moves on to the next youngster and prods for the desired reply. All fanciful conversation of imagination or creativity proves intolerable in the stifling environment, and students are encouraged to engage only in exact and scientific discussion. This educational system, described in Charles Dickens's *Hard Times*, values conformity and manipulation over individuality and character and serves to benefit only a select group of upper class people. The industrial and utilitarian society present during the nineteenth century creates a broad divide between the wealthy and the poor, and Dickens's novel exposes the flaws and corruption necessary for such a community to exist.

Cloaked in gloom and dismal plainness, the scene in the schoolhouse hardly appears to be a stimulating environment ideal for cultivating new ideas and educating the youth of Coketown. In fact, the room exudes a presence best described as a "plain, bare, monotonous vault" (11) and the proprietor, Mr. Thomas Gradgrind, seems a "kind of cannon loaded to the muzzle with facts, ... prepared to blow them clean out of the regions of childhood at one discharge" and ready to "storm away" the "tender young

imagination” of his pupils (13). It becomes evident that the goal of the school is to cram as many facts into the heads of the students as possible, and as Gradgrind bluntly puts it, “in this life, we want nothing but Facts, sir; nothing but Facts!” (12). This educational system strives for conformity among its students and Gradgrind’s children, Louisa and Thomas, seem to exhibit the resulting success; “lectured at from their tenderest years,” “coursed, like little hares,” and “models every one,” they know nothing but fact (18). In stark contrast sits Sissy Jupe, who is born into the lower class and emerges as “extremely deficient in [her] facts” (97). Her failure to conform to the standards of the Gradgrinds and the influence from her “early life were too unfavourable to the development of [her] reasoning powers” (97). In this society, it is advantageous to comply with the social norms and give up individuality for rank. Gradgrind’s school proves essential in molding the next generation to better serve the utilitarian factory community of Coketown.

Spewing winding curls of smog continuously upwards, the factories of Coketown chug on relentlessly. The town exists as one of “machinery and tall chimneys, out of which interminable serpents of smoke trail... themselves forever and ever, and never [get] uncoiled” (30). Nothing in Coketown fails to serve a purpose and everything proves “severely workful;” there is “fact, everywhere in the material aspect of town... [and] fact, everywhere in the immaterial” (31). Mr. Josiah Bounderby, the factory owner, takes advantage of this quality of Coketown and uses it to serve his own purposes. Because the factory community survives due to the similarity and conformity within the Hands, or workers, Bounderby easily sets himself apart by claiming a position of power. The Hands have been brainwashed into thinking and acting alike, and Bounderby reaps the benefits. The strong focus within the school on uniformity and factual approaches to education

transfers to encompass the attitude of the entire city. The town “contain[s] several large streets all very like one another... [and] inhabited by people equally like one another” (31). In Coketown, encouraging homogeneity allows those in power to drive a strong utilitarian force and create a great profit. The educational system that Dickens so vividly describes serves to symbolize the practical and industrial nature of Coketown and all factory towns of the nineteenth century.

Alone and rejected, individuals such as Stephen Blackpool find themselves cast off by society when they try to stand up to conformity. Stephen presents himself as an honest and hardworking Hand and he possesses the reputation of “a good power-loom weaver, and a man of perfect integrity” (71). When his fellow Hands form a union, however, and propose new regulations in the factories, Stephen stands before them and publicly refuses to comply, stating that he would prefer them to “hearn the truth concernin’ [himself] fro [his] lips than fro onny other man’s” (144). He believes that their requests will “do [them] hurt” (144) and his strong opinions are met with “some crying of Shame upon the man” and a general “shunn[ing] by aw owd friends” (145). Later, after being summoned and reprimanded by his supervisor, Bounderby, Stephen finds himself outcast by all groups in society and banished from Coketown. A realization dawns on Louisa, who wonders aloud: “Then, by the prejudices of his own class, and by the prejudices of the other, he is sacrificed alike? Are the two so deeply separated in this town that there is no place whatever for an honest workman between them?” (161). Later on, through accidental circumstances, Stephen befalls an untimely death. He claims to “find the God of the poor” (269) and thus becomes separated from the upper class even in death. Dickens’s descriptions of Stephen, who is presented to the reader as a completely

honest and overall good man, provide evidence that his downfall can be blamed completely upon the corruption of the utilitarian-based society of Coketown.

Glimpses at factory life in Coketown and its constricting educational system allow Dickens to prove that a utilitarian society is not necessarily the best one. In fact, he argues that a creative and egalitarian culture would be fairer and more beneficial to those who establish themselves as deserving. Dickens declares that an over-abundance of facts can hinder a child's education, stating of the schoolteacher that "if [Mr. McChoakumchild] had only learnt a little less, how infinitely better he might have taught much more!" (17). In other words, allowing creativity and free-thought rather than forcing the memorization of facts would permit a more absolute education. Sissy, for example, never fully grasps the concept of hard facts. She instead holds onto her more inspired and imaginative beliefs, and her "fantastic hope could take as strong a hold as Fact" (69). Sissy refuses to ever let the greedy, practical ways of Coketown consume her, and in the long run her kindness pays off. She ends up "happy" with "happy children loving her" and "thinking no innocent and pretty fancy ever to be despised" (292). Sissy finds all the fulfillment and success that she needs simply through her experiences and relationships, despite her lack of achievement in the school setting.

The selfish, profit-driven educated men of Coketown, however, receive punishment for their flawed and corrupt ways. Young Tom Gradgrind, who seeks only money, finds himself a "lonely brother, many thousands of miles away" from home. The wealthy and self-made Bounderby eventually dies of "a fit in the Coketown street" and leaves a legacy of "quibble, plunder, false pretences, vile example, little service and much law" (291). Those that live completely utilitarian lives, devoid of emotion and love,

are unable to live content lives. Dickens's novel verifies the benefits of a free and egalitarian society, while condemning the corruption linked with an industrial and entirely practical one.

Steeped in corruption and manipulation, many communities in the nineteenth century were intent on being wholly utilitarian and industrial. For them, making a profit and using all the available resources for achieving success was the most important thing. The school system in Coketown perfectly embodies this idea; the children are taught to memorize facts in the most practical and efficient way possible, rather than take the time to understand and discover information for themselves. The driving principles in Coketown serve to unjustly discard honest people and benefit only the greedy money-makers. Dickens offers an alternative to this type of society, however, in showing examples of sincere individuals who achieve successful and happy lives and selfish ones who languish and suffer. Through the rows upon rows of Dickens's uniform, machine-like factory workers, a single person breaks through the homogeneity and offers a flash of hope for the future of Coketown and its inhabitants.

Works Cited

Dickens, Charles. *Hard Times*. New York, NY: Signet, 1980.