

Humour as a Social Critique in Charles Dickens's *Hardtimes*

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Abstract

This present paper attempts to justify the significance of humour that elucidates the social issues prevalent in Charles Dickens's Industrial novel *Hard Times* and the use of satire to ridicule and criticize these situations which in turn heighten the humour. *Hard Times* is a clear depiction of English society during the Industrial Revolution. This Victorian novel is purely not intended to be read as mere fiction but rather exposes the most crucial scenario of the social and economic condition under the pressure of the Industrial revolution. Charles Dickens is addressed as a satirist in reference to this novel where he intentionally uses humour to achieve this status. The language used, the characters, the settings and the mood of the novel is flared with humour and aid the satire. This study focus on the theatrical use of humour and satire in literature, mainly the Victorian novels and the motive behind the use of humour in Dickens's *Hard Times*. Humour is studied and analyzed at different level i.e the humour found in the choice of words and language in the novel *Hard Times* and humour as a prime element in Dickens's style. The creation of the characters both in the physical and emotional level is done with the same purpose. The use of satire to reinforce the sense of humour to criticize the hard truth of industrialization and the human mentality with the reference to the novel *Hard Times* is also been investigated in this paper.

Keywords: Humour, satire, Industrial revolution, Victorian era

A literature is considered as a reflection of reality and sometimes acts as a medium to express the good and expose the lack in society in a very creative and imaginative manner. Stories and fiction are likely used as the best mode to depict the plight of the society in its raw form. The writer attains this mainly through the story and the language used will be intended to support his purpose. It is the literary language that acts as the technique of defamiliarization that distinguishes itself from ordinary and mundane language. The style and technique implemented by the writer heighten the motive behind his fiction. Literary works are merely not meant for a fictional reading. The work can also be looked beyond its content and can be focused on the style and form of the writing that best convey the message.

Humour and Satire are two likely related techniques in literature with their differences. "In normal sense, the term "humour" refers to what is purely comic: it evokes, as it is sometimes said, sympathetic laughter, or else laughter which is an end in itself" (Abrams 418). Humour is a literary device that evokes laughter and induces amusement among readers.

Satire, on the other hand, is a literary form of rhetoric that implements various devices to criticize, expose and ridicule the society. "Satire can be described as the literary art of diminishing or derogating a subject by making it ridiculous and evoking toward its attitudes of amusement, contempt, scorn, or indignation" (Abrams 352). Satire incorporates sarcasm, strong irony, exaggeration, burlesque and juxtapositions to create a sense of humour that makes the criticism much more understanding and acceptance. Satire has its roots in all the form of arts, especially in literature.

Even though humour and satire are interrelated, they come with their differences. Humour is a simple concept used to make a point through laughter or simply to entertain. Satire, though appeared to be humorous are not always intended for a joke. Humour when used as a social critique, it becomes a satire. Satire, on the other hand, uses irony to create humour. Satire and humour often coexist in their use.

Humour and Satire had its prominence in literature from its very beginning but had gathered its momentum likely in the 17th and 18th century. The beginning of the 19th century offers a portrait of England which is chaotic, disturbed and unsettled. The Industrial Revolution under the reign of Queen Victoria had led to noticeable exploitation and manipulation of the working class which had left an undeniable impression on their contemporary literature. The purpose of humour was to unveil the disturbing truth and present it in convincing attire.

Many Victorian novelists such as George Eliot, Charles Dickens, Oscar Wilde, and William Thackeray emphasized on educating the commoners and encouraged independent thoughts and opinions. The preference of scientific pursuit that started to develop in the Pre-Victorian era gradually left behind the necessity of Literature, philosophy, poetry, and drama from their culture. Literature that stood as the epitome of humanity was replaced by the importance of scientific knowledge Thomas Love Peacock, British novelist and a close companion of the Revolutionary poet P.B Shelley, had revealed his concern over the general attitude toward education during the 19th century. Education was sorely subsided to objective and figurative subjects and students exhibited an extreme lack of interest in learning. He encouraged the students to take pleasure in acquiring the knowledge and choose the content accordingly

Victorian novelists preferred the use of formal language to ridicule the drawbacks of their society, keeping the heterogeneous gathering in mind. The use of humour was strictly restricted to the conventional standards so that it could transcend the time and place of their origin and can be read, accepted and enjoyed by the later generations. Despite all other reasons, the universality and the human interest of their content kept their works canonical and thoroughly enjoyed worldwide. On the other hand, the formal language and standard use

of literary techniques they implemented hindered the publicity of their novels to the educated class.

19th century has given birth to several canonical masterpieces that depicted the social plight of the working class with contemporary relevance. Dickens's literary success began with his work *Pickwick Paper*. It is primarily a serious novel, put forth in terms of humour. *Pickwick Paper* glorify the paramount exhilaration of adventure, the delight of indulging in food and beverage, the camaraderie of men and the blend of benevolence and romance. He tried to bring out the morals by presenting it against the unpleasant reality. The success of his first novel soon paved his way into an international literary figure, known for his humour and satire. His popular novels such as *David Copperfield*, *Oliver Twist*, *The Great expectation* frequently use and evoke the image of early Victorian London. Dickens gave importance to the psyche of his characters and made sure, to be honest with their feelings and mannerism. Picaresque tradition, melodrama and the novel of sensibility had highly influenced his style of writing.

Charles Dickens had been noted as a realist, humorist, satirist and even a feminist in reference to his novel *Hard Times*. He had criticized the contemporary philosophies using his satirical writing techniques and used dramatic ironies throughout the novel to attain meaningful humour. He had portrayed the restriction under which a woman is reduced to a mere entity and their social position under the dominant discourse. Dickens is a naturalistic writer because he had created the story and his characters in the most realistic sense and the novel were later celebrated by the Victorian commoners. He had incorporated an ample use of sarcasm to criticize the issues that prevailed in his imaginary Coketown. Despite being a serious novel, he made the work vibrant using imagism and figure of speech and writing style was strongly humorous

Dickens usually implemented humour in creating his characters i.e. the way they look and carry themselves. The humour in *Hard Times* comes with a motive and their purpose. It is intended for awareness rather than the sake of amusement. It is very evident in the physical and mental description of his characters

The scene was a plain, bare, monotonous vault of a school-room and the Speaker's square forefinger emphasized his observations by underscoring every sentence with a line on the schoolmaster's sleeve (*Hard Times* 3).

These lines from this novel are a director mockery on the system of education. Gradgrind is trying to inflict fear in his students rather than love towards learning. This was one of the main issues faced by the Victorian society. Dickens ridiculed this system through the weird mannerism of Mr. Gradgrind. "Plain, bare and monotonous" emphasized the general outlook that commoners developed toward schools and classrooms. The students belonging to the lower class of society was constantly been scorned by the authorities.

"'Girl number twenty,' said Mr. Gradgrind, squarely pointing with his square forefinger, 'I don't know that girl. What is that girl?'" (*Hard Times* 4). Sissy Jupe, who represents the lower class of the society was addressed by a number that stripped her from her own identity.

Dickens provided a grant sketch on the physical appearance of Mr. Gradgrind even counting on his minute features. Dickens described Mr. Gradgrind with a mouth that was wide, thin, and hard set, his voice inflexible, dry and dictatorial. His hair bristled on the skirt of his bald head. He wore a square coat, square legs, and square shoulders. Dickens used the technique of caricature, giving comic effect evoking light humour. He silently mocked at a certain way in which the socially dominant class carried themselves; the very same attire and they followed the very same routine. He lampoons the rigidity of their mentality through his character of Mr. Gradgrind. The lack of a sense of humour in his character, in turn, heightened the humour of his novel. The irony, pillar of satire is the main cause of humour in this novel. "Gradgrind was a man full of assurance and felt that everything he did was right" but toward the end, he realizes that he was all way wrong. Tom, his son, ended up being a thief and Louisa's failed marriage was caused by the arrogance fed by Mr. Gradgrind.

"He was a rich man: banker, merchant, manufacturer, and what not. Abig, loud man, with a stare, and a metallic laugh. A man made out of a coarse material" (*Hard Times* 17) This is the descriptive derision of Mr. Bounderby. Dickens created this character to show the Middle classes' urge to fit into the elite class society; their insatiable desire to be validated by the upper class.. He represented the growing middle class or the bourgeois. Mr. Bounderby's appearance, though evoked a sense of humour, was created in such a manner that he contradicted the character of Stephen Blackpool, the lower working class.

He had not much hair. One might have fancied he had talked it off; and that what was left, all standing up in disorder, was in that condition from being blown about by his windy boastfulness. (*Hard Times* 18).

Mr. Bounderby's physical appearance is associated with his character in this instance. He praises himself to be the man who builds himself without any other help and this statement made by Mr. Bounderby is repeated throughout the novel to intensify the later fall of the character. Toward the end, his real identity was revealed which made him the extreme of a hypocrite. Bounderby's boastful temperament and senseless bragging though appeared rude and senseless in turn produced humour. "Old Stephen might have passed for a particularly intelligent man in his condition" (*Hard Times* 71). This is where Dickens appreciates a man of no education and a lower class native to be intelligent. Indirect comparison is made between the class standard of the Victorian London. Lower class society was generally considered as fools who lacked common sense.

Mrs. Sparsit is described as "she was now, in her elderly days, with the Carolinian style of nose and the dense black eyebrows" (*Hard Times* 48). She is the righteous representation of the upper-class society. Despite losing all her elite class power and authority, she yet asserts the superiority of being upper-class. She is working for Mr. Bounderby and she addressed him as "sir". She overuses this addressal throughout the novel as a sign of mockery. Dickens made sure to make a contrast for all his characters for a thorough comparison and better understand the differences. Racheal, a gentle working-class woman is a contradiction made for Mrs. Sparsit.

Louisa, daughter of Mr. Gradgrind and an ideal Victorian woman gradually lost her ability to express herself due to the rigid upbringing of her father. Sissy, on the other hand, represented the lower-class had full of life and free will of thought. Louisa confessed to the end that the education had ruined her life. This is one of the major sarcasm in the novel.

It was not just the human species that lost their essence. "It had a black canal in it, and a river that ran purple with ill smelling dye" (*Hard Times* 25). This is a shooting image that directly points the finger at the destructive nature of industrialization. Along with the society it had taken a toll on nature. Machines started to overpower the life of the people; they started to lead a very mechanical life. They failed to notice the irreversible damage that machines cause on both humans and nature. Here is a parallel comparison that is made between men and nature. Machines had more or less replace the humanity that was left in the society. People eventually lost the meaning of their life and sense of thought.

It is very evident from this analysis that Charles Dickens's *Hard Times* is a clear Satire on the dark side of Industrialization. Humour was the path through which he succeeded in conveying his message. The humorous description and nature of his character acted as the main lead for his story. Satire and humour went hand in hand throughout the novel. Humour in the creation of the character was an indirect mockery on the reality and the Satire throughout evoked the humour.

He exposed the hypocrisy and exploitation that hovered in Victorian London with the help of humour and the technique of satire to denounce the drawbacks. He created an entirely imaginative town and characters in order to keep the fictional part alive. It is very difficult to separate these two techniques of humour and satire and they evidently coexist in the novel. Thus humour became the social critique in the Novel *Hard Times* written by Charles Dickens and proclaimed it prominent satire.

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