THE INDUSTRIAL IMAGINARY IN MID-VICTORIAN LITERATURE: CHARLES DICKENS'S HARD TIMES

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Abstract: *In addition to the numerous beneficial effects they had on nineteenth-century English society, the mechanisms of the Industrial Revolution also permeated the literary activity of significant writers of the day. This article is intended to comment on the influence of industrialism on literature and, consequently, on the emergence of a more mechanical view of human nature in mid-Victorian literature by resorting to a novel written by the prototypical Victorian writer, Charles Dickens, i.e.* Hard Times. For These Times.

Keywords: *industrial revolution, machinery, facts, utilitarianism, fancy.*

1.1. General Remarks

There has always been a close connection between real facts and their representation in literature, as literature is preoccupied with fictionalizing the social concerns of the community, especially when confronted to unprecedented realities. The present study seeks to understand the way in which artistic minds captured and responded to the enormous changes experienced by nineteenth-century English society, whose existence was deeply marked by the results of the huge process of industrialization that had been under way since the eighteenth century. We are thus interested in the way in which a prototypical Victorian writer, Charles Dickens, used his novels as a means of responding to the new condition of the country, which had been produced by decades of technical innovations and progress. The main objective of this paper is to comment on the effects such an enormous change has on the lives of the individual, as perceived by the literary imagination of an artistic mind. The novel that has been selected as a case study here is one whose title is most representative for the theme approached, i.e. *Hard Times. For These Times* – the structure "hard times" suggests "a period, often a slump, when scanty food and low wages or unemployment bore particularly hard" (David 11). Much less often, "it could mean the more pervasive state in which people felt that the essential and permanent condition of their lives hemmed them in inflexibly" (David 11). Thus, the very title of the novel best renders the idea of challenged human life, i.e. of "men, women and children whose lives were being transformed by the Industrial Revolution" (David 11).

On the Industrial Revolution

A subject of vast debates over its origins, developments, growth and final results, the industrial revolution of the late 18th and early 19th centuries could be interpreted as a turning point in the history of humanity. The revolution basically implied "the substitution of man by the machine in the economic process and the mass production of consumption goods" (Cuțitaru 6), and, consequently, brought about industrial innovations that were to contribute to the industrial development of the world.

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The industrialising trend first occurred in Britain as the British economy was powerful – the country had capital to invest, and some of the people already had a high standard of living as compared to those living in Continental Europe. London was already a great commercial centre and, by 1780, England, with its huge naval power, its successive foreign expansions, and its developing and highly practical commercial class, was ready to revolutionize its means and modes of production to meet the greater demand for goods that was to come with expanded markets.

From the point of view of its economical status, Great Britain recorded a huge development as a consequence of industrialization. The basic economic effect was represented by *modern urban economy based on trade and manufacturing*. If the first decades of the nineteenth century saw the country developing new industries, the rest of the century witnessed its unprecedented development and growth, "unmatched at any other time in its history" (Delaney, Ward, Fiorina 124). Engines and machines, factories and railways, they all started to become constant elements of the new setting. However, the transition from manufacture to mass production also involved a very painful coordinate (painful in terms of human tragedy) (cf. Cuțitaru 8). In addition to the beneficial effects it had on society in general, industrialization also brought about an intensely felt social transformation. In other words, the development of the modern and urbanised society meant employment and financial welfare for some, yet unemployment for others – an eloquent example of this reality may be the replacement of rural handloom weavers by the new cotton-working utensils. Therefore, urbanization definitely implied a **human cost**: the early industrial city was far from being a paradise – in its rawest form, industrial production was carried on at great risk to the workers (men, women and children alike) and with serious damage to the quality of their lives. Wages were extremely low, working hours very long – 14 a day, or even more. Women and children were hired and paid even less than men. Families lived in horribly crowded, unsanitary housing. Outbreaks of typhus and cholera due to unsanitary water were a fact of life, even for those above the lowest levels of society, and the same was true of infant mortality.

1.2. The Industrial Revolution: from Fact to Fiction

The industrial revolution fuelled the imagination of nineteenth-century writers and spawned a whole new genre of novels, the so-called *industrial novels* – such novels are important in literary history in that they provide the reader with a distinctly personal voice that humanizes historical facts.

Born when the Industrial Revolution was well under way in Britain, Charles Dickens (1812-1870) came to be regarded a master of the industrial novel, as easily deducible from most of his literary productions. This theme particularly governs the content of the tenth novel published by Charles Dickens in 1854 and commonly known under the title *Hard Times*, a highly-valued novel in the context of nineteenth-century English literature for the stress it lays on the social and economic pressures of the times it was created in. In this novel, Dickens reproduces the image of life centred on the factory system and consequently shows his concern with the emergence of a more mechanical view of human nature as a result of industrialization. Its being an industrial novel turns it into a source of information about industrial conditions. In a word, "the industrial novel … provides invaluable depictions of a society in the process of unprecedented and disturbing alteration, and, for readers of the time, offered glimpses of unknown territory (David 6).

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As already mentioned, *Hard Times* is intended to address explicitly the impact of the industrialisation of Britain. Set within a definite time, the 1840s, *Hard Times* was written by Dickens as a direct attack on the way in which the accelerating pace of change had forced the British working classes into a state of semi-slavery in the factories and mills. In order to accumulate material for his endeavour, in January 1854 Dickens carried out research in the Northern English mill-town of Preston and much of what he witnessed there was included in the pages of *Hard Times*.

A brief presentation of the plot will contribute to gaining a deeper understanding of the issue at stake. The novel is divided into three sections: *Book the First. Sowing; Book the Second. Reaping*; and *Book the Third. Garnering*. The allusion to the Bible is obvious: what one sows, one reaps and then one harvests. *Hard Times* is about what one harvests when using only *facts*, as illustrated by the ideology of the main character, Thomas Gradgrind, whose discourse on *facts* opens the novel. A wealthy, retired merchant in the industrial city of Coketown, England, and a leading citizen in the community, Gradgrind is now a schoolmaster at his private school in Coketown. He is a believer in the philosophy of Utilitarianism - founded by Jeremy Bentham, *utilitarianism* basically stipulated that no human action is action unless it produces some *utility*. Every action must have some utility. The predilect area of manifestation was labour – maximum utility was to be obtained from the hard labour of the working classes. The former MP is a promoter of utilitarian views and thinks of himself in strictly rational terms:

> THOMAS GRADGRIND, sir. 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, and who is not to be talked into allowing for anything over. Thomas Gradgrind, sir – peremptorily Thomas – Thomas Gradgrind. With a rule and a pair of scales, and the multiplication table always in his pocket, sir, ready to weigh and measure any parcel of human nature, and tell you exactly what it comes to. It is a mere question of figures, a case of simple arithmetic. (*HT,* 48)

Gradgrind devotes his life to a philosophy of *facts* (rationalism) and believes that the human being should only centre on practical matters. In a "*dry and dictatorial*" voice, he addresses Mr. Choakumchild (a schoolteacher) and informs the latter that:

> 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 minds of reasoning animals upon Facts: nothing else will ever be of any service to them. This is the principle on which I bring up my own children, and this is the principle on which I bring up these children. Stick to Facts, sir! (*HT,* 47)

Mr. Gradgrind holds to his principles when dealing with his family as well, which makes Dickens refer to him on a number of occasions as the "*eminently practical father*" (*HT,* 66). His 5 children (two of which are in the spotlight here), Louisa, Tom, Althus, Adam Smith and Jane, "*were models every one. They had been lectured at, from their tenderest years; coursed, like little hares. Almost as soon as they could run alone, they had been made to run to the lecture-room*" (*HT,* 53-54). Gradgrind brings up his children in the spirit of facts and forces them to regard the use of imagination as a time-wasting distraction from the serious world of factual reality. Every sense of imagination

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and emotion had to be ignored and not cultivated in a young child's heart; moreover, he never allows them to get involved in imaginative pursuits. When his favourite daughter, Louisa, tells her brother that she "*wonders*", her father reacts immediately and interdicts them to use that word again.

As the story progresses, the utilitarian approach to life leads to disaster. The individuals who are trained to cultivate it eventually turn out to be emotional wrecks and make poor life decisions that result in catastrophes. Mr. Gradgrind's oldest child, Louisa, can't help thinking that there is something missing in their life: "*What do I know, father, ... of tastes and fancies; of aspirations and affections; of all that part of my nature in which such light things might have been nourished?*" (*HT*, 134) Louisa will reluctantly marry her father's friend, Josiah Bounderby - a "*self-made man*", a wealthy factory owner and banker more than twice her age. He, too, is a promoter of the ideology of the facts. Bounderby takes Tom, Louisa's brother, as an apprentice, but the latter's lack of moral structure turns him into a thief and a fugitive: he becomes a dissipated, self-interested hedonist who is forced to leave the country in disgrace after having robbed the local bank.

Louisa's marriage collapses after she meets James Harthouse, one of her husband's and father's business associates. The young man falls in love with her and tries to convince her to break her marriage vows. In desperation, Louisa flees to her father's house to ask for his help, but it was in fact her father the one who brought her in this position. Seeing her favourite child troubled by the philosophy he had been teaching her, Thomas Gradgrind begins to question its validity. He eventually concludes that facts by themselves are not enough and that there is a nondescript quality called "fancy" (imagination) that must enrich and add substance to human life.

The main narrative thread is punctuated with a number of subplots, also relevant for the social conditions of the day and illustrative of Dickens' awareness of them. The novelist also introduces the story of Sissy Jupe, a young girl who is raised by the Gradgrind family, or the story of an impoverished "Hand" – Dickens's term for the lowest labourers in Coketown's factories – named Stephen Blackpool, who struggles with his love for another fellow worker, Rachael, but who can't marry her because he is already married to a horrible, drunken woman who disappears for months and even years at a time. Stephen visits Bounderby to ask about a divorce but learns that only the wealthy can obtain them. He will eventually serve as Tom's scapegoat as he will be charged with the robbing of the bank. He leaves town and can't be found, which aggravates the suspicions for the bank robbery. He is found half-dead and testifies against Tom, who will live in exile.

Hard Times is filled with contrasts and is populated by a diverse cast of characters, coming mostly from the rural districts, but also from different intellectual backgrounds. The novel contrasts these different categories of people and illustrates how there is unequal distribution of power within each relationship. What brings them together is that they all live and work in the fictitious Victorian industrial Coketown, a generic Northern English mill-town (in fact, *Hard Times* is Dickens's only novel not to have scenes set in London). The town takes its name from 'Coke", or "a solid, grey substance that is burned as a fuel, left after coal is heated and the gas and tar removed" (*CED*), powering the factories and blackening the town's skies. Coketown is a town of industrial pollution and is described by Dickens in Book First:

> It was a town of red brick, or of brick that would have been red if the smoke and ashes had allowed it; but as matters stood, it was a town of

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> unnatural red and black like the painted face of a savage. It was a town of machinery and tall chimneys, out of which interminable serpents of smoke trailed themselves for ever and ever, and never got uncoiled. It had a black canal in it, and a river that ran purple with ill-smelling dye, and vast piles of building full of windows where there was a rattling and a trembling all day long, and where the piston of the steam-engine worked monotonously up and down, like the head of an elephant in a state of melancholy madness. *(HT,* 65*)*

The industrial image that haunts the novel is that of a machinery that runs itself:

> TIME WENT ON in Coketown like its own machinery: so much material wrought up, so much fuel consumed, so many powers worn out, so much money made. But, less inexorable than iron, steel, and brass, it brought its varying seasons even into that wilderness of smoke and brick, and made the only stand that ever was made in the place against its direful uniformity.(*HT*, 66)

The town is like a prison that simply cages the individual living there:

> It contained several large streets all very like one another, and many small streets still more like one another, inhabited by people equally like one another, who all went in and out at the same hours, with the same sound upon the same pavements, to do the same work, and to whom every day was the same as yesterday and to-morrow, and every year the counterpart of the last and the next. (*HT*, 65)

This is a description of the devastating life of the Coketowners, which certainly lacks fancy and abounds in facts. The key statement is that the workers are "equally like one another" - the people, Dickens assumes, must be alike because they live in streets that are alike. They resemble the environment they live in, in what actually represents a metonymic image. Human beings are just "*complements to the machines*" – *whole humans reduced to hands*" (*HT*, 25). In the fictional world of the novel, workers are treated as little more than interchangeable parts in the industrial machinery, with low wages and inhumane working conditions:

> " - a race who would have found mere favour with some people, if Providence had seen fit to make them only hands, or, like the lower creatures of the seashore, only hands and stomachs" (*HT*, 67).

A major preoccupation of Dickens's is Victorian education, more precisely the impact industrialism has on it. We are offered numerous examples of how seriously education is affected by industrialism; this, in fact, is another area in which Dickens demonstrated extraordinary insight into the British civilization of his times. The novelist chooses to begin his work in the classroom, which he depicts as a microcosm of the world outside – "*a plain, bare, monotonous vault of a schoolroom*" (*HT*, 47). His choice of launching the plot of a novel in such a setting should not be regarded simply as a literary device in which the author creates the world of the novel in miniature to foreshadow coming events. In Dickens's view, this classroom has been intentionally created as a factory whose sole and explicit purpose is to manufacture future workers.

In the classroom the pupils are taught under a strict order, and the goal of education is to learn *facts*. The children are not allowed to use their imagination, or

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"fancy" (8) as their teachers call it, and Gradgrind presents a Utilitarian vision of education that is meant to censor anything that is opposed to the principle of teaching solely facts. In the Chapter entitled "Murdering the Innocents", the pupils are addressed by numbers, and Gradgrind asks Sissy Jupe, who is pupil number twenty, to define a horse factually. Sissy is the daughter of a clown at Sleary's circus and to her wonder and dismay she is not able to do that, but when Bitzer, a dedicated pupil of the philosophy of facts at Mr. Gradgrind's model school, is asked to define a horse factually he provides an accurate description of a horse: "*Quadruped. Graminivorous. Forty teeth, namely twenty-four grinders, four eye-teeth, and twelve incisive ... Age known by marks in the mouth*" (*HT*, 6). This is an example of Utilitarian logic and education.

According to the theories mouthed by Thomas Gradgrind, education is a process by which innocence and imagination are rooted out of the children, so they will grow into soulless human beings well prepared for the drudgery of industrial life. By adopting this cynical attitude towards the education of his day, Dickens virtually states that the power structure uses society's supposedly benevolent institutions to perpetuate its own power and to subjugate those whom these institutions are supposed to help. This theory would later be voiced by the French sociologist Michel Foucault, who would state that "power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production" (Foucault 1991: 194).

Conclusion

As usual with Dickens's novels, *Hard Times* places the problems of early Victorian society under the spotlight and introduces the industrial imaginary in the overall framework of literary creations. In this particular novel, the problems the author focuses on are those of the poverty-ridden, dehumanizing factory towns that sprung up in England during and as a consequence of the Industrial Revolution.

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