

Course: B.A. ENGLISH (HONS)
Year: First Year
Paper no: 1
Title of Paper: English Literature 4
Title of Unit: Charles Dickens's *Hard Times*
Unit No: 2
Author: Manila Kohli
External Reviewer: Prof. G.K. Das
Course coordinators: Prof. Shormistha Panja
and
Ms. Davinder Mohini Ahuja

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Introduction
2. Shift from Agrarian to Industrial Economy
3. Growth of Industrial Towns
4. The Industrial Novel
5. Representation of Working Class in *Hard Times* and *Mary Barton*
6. Critique of Utilitarianism and Related Ideologies in *Hard Times*
7. Education as a Theme in *Hard Times*
8. Dickens's Women – Angels/Whores
9. A Note on the Ending

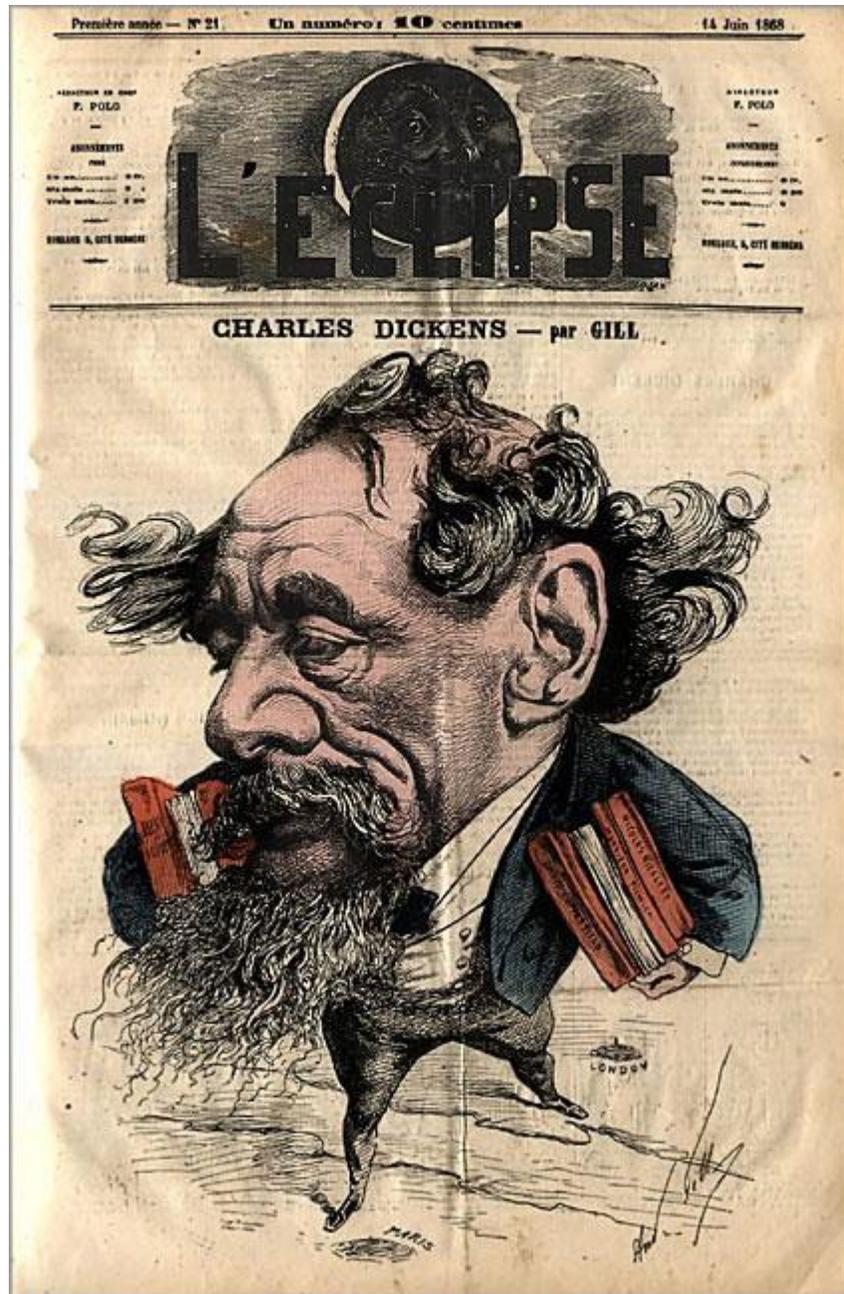


Fig. 1 Caricature of Charles Dickens, 1868
Source: "[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Portal: Charles Dickens](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Portal:Charles_Dickens)"

HARD TIMES

2.1 Introduction

Charles Dickens was born at Portsmouth on 7th February 1812. His father, John Dickens worked as a clerk at the Navy Pay Office. Though John Dickens earned enough to support his wife and children, he could not manage his money which landed the family in trouble time and again. Their financial affairs were in a mess in the early 1820s and twelve year old Charles had to pitch in. He was made to join a firm called Warren's Blacking which manufactured boot blacking. His job was to paste printed labels on the pots of paste blacking and for this work he was paid six shillings a week. It was an experience that left an indelible mark on his young mind and later found expression in many of his works, most notably in the trials of young David Copperfield who was forced to work in a warehouse by his stepfather, Mr. Murdstone. While he spent a miserable year at Warren's Blacking, his father was put in debtors' prison. Dickens's work at the blacking warehouse brought him in contact with working class boys, an association which the young boy found very humiliating. Speaking of this period in his life to his friend and biographer, John Forster, Dickens said, "No words can express the secret agony of my soul as I sunk into this companionship... and felt my early hopes of growing up to be a learned and distinguished man crushed in my breast" (Forster 22).

In March 1825 after the financial condition of his family had improved, Charles Dickens resumed his schooling and later, went on to work with a group of solicitors. At the age of seventeen he left the clerical job to work as a short hand reporter. His first literary sketch was published in the Monthly Magazine in December 1833 and subsequently, he published under the pseudonym, Boz. From the very beginning, Dickens enjoyed immense popularity and was referred to as "the inimitable Boz."

Dickens's novels are characterized by loose plots and a huge cast. Most of his characters are 'flat'

E.M. Forster talks about the distinction between flat and round characters in his work, *Aspects of the Novel* (1926). While a flat character is unidimensional and does not "grow" in the course of the novel, a round character is complex and alters as the work progresses. Thus, while Mrs Tulliver in George Eliot's *Mill on the Floss* may be seen as a "flat" character, Maggie may be considered a "round" character.

rather than 'round.' He builds character from "a repeated set of gestures,

phases and metaphors” (Christ 1238). For instance, in *Hard Times* whenever Bounderby appears, he talks of his humble origin and boasts of being a self-made man. Discoveries and coincidences abound in the novels of Dickens with a high dose of sentimentalism.

Throughout his career, Dickens used his writings to interrogate and examine social institutions and practices of his time. For instance, in one of his early novels, *Oliver Twist*, he criticized the New Poor Law passed by the Parliament in 1834. This consisted of: a) a Poor Law Commission to supervise the implementation of the law. This involved transforming the small parishes into Poor Law Unions and the construction of workhouses in each Union for giving relief to the poor b) the New Poor Law did not proscribe all forms of outdoor relief c) clauses were added to prevent discrimination against non-conformists and Roman Catholics. While good in theory, the New Poor Law often failed spectacularly when put into practice, due to the absence of Parliamentary guidelines, and this led to widespread unemployment. However, despite this criticism, Dickens’ early novels maintain a relatively lighter tone as compared to the novels of the middle period (1846-1857). As his social analysis grew more penetrating and intense, his novels acquired a gloomy and bleak vision. In *Bleak House*, *Hard Times* and *Little Dorrit* (novels of the middle period) the happy endings are difficult to achieve; “order” at the end is very tentative and fragile.

The Old Poor Law dated back to Elizabethan England. According to it, each parish was responsible for its poor and could raise money from the richer locals to provide for the former. However, when the demand for relief increased sharply, the government was asked to intervene. Acting on the report of a commission, the Whig government decided to introduce a workhouse test. It meant that the poor who asked for aid would be placed in a workhouse where the standard of living was lower than that of an ordinary day laborer. The living and working conditions in the workhouses were appalling and this scheme came under attack.

Hard Times, Dickens’ tenth and shortest novel, first appeared in his journal, *Household Words* in the weekly serial form in April 1854. He had completed *Bleak House* in August 1853 and was looking forward to a break, but the falling sales of the journal forced him to start work again. While most of the novels of Dickens were illustrated, *Hard Times* was initially published without any illustrations.

2.2. Shift from Agrarian to Industrial Economy

Hard Times has been generally read as Dickens's attempt to engage with and make sense of the sweeping changes that took place in Britain in the wake of the Industrial Revolution and his novel was just one of the many contemporary literary responses. The nature of industrial change drew a variety of responses ranging from optimism and excitement about the boom in trade and commerce, admiration for the enterprising spirit of the key figures involved to a negative appraisal of the seamier side of this growth. **The Industrial Revolution** was not just an economic revolution; the developments in technology in the later half of the eighteenth century – for example the invention of power loom, steam engine etc. – radically changed the lives of thousands of people and led to a massive restructuring of the old order. With these inventions powered machines gradually replaced hand labour.

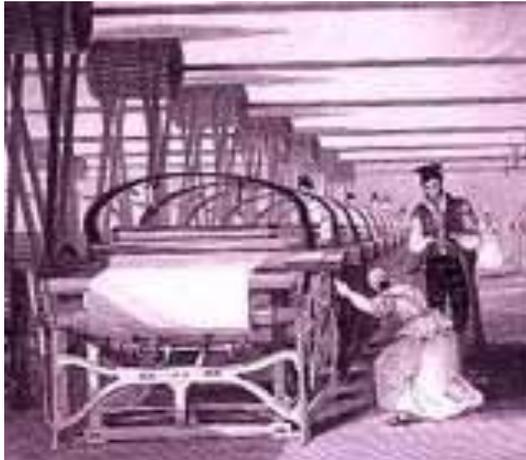


Fig.2 Power loom weaving, Lancashire, 1835

Source: www.bbc.co.uk/history/trail/victorian_britain...

As Friedrich Engels points out in *The Condition of Working Class in England* (1845), “before the introduction of machinery, the spinning and weaving of raw materials was carried on in the workingman’s home. Wife and daughter spun the yarn that the father wove ...” (Engels 27). Most of these weavers lived in the country. They were their own masters in the sense that there were no fixed working hours and most of them could spare time for cultivation on the small pieces of land they owned.

Friedrich Engels (1820-1895), a German social scientist and political theorist, was born into a business family in Barmen in West Germany. After the 1848 revolution in Germany he shifted to the communist camp and collaborated with Karl Marx on *The Communist Manifesto* (1848). Together they are known as the Fathers of Communist Theory.

However, this way of life changed with the invention and improvement of machines, such as, the multi-spindle jenny, which could do the same job more efficiently and quickly than a weaver/weavers, thereby rendering the latter jobless. The cloth spun and the goods made were cheaper, thus forcing independent hand weavers to abandon their trade in the face of such stiff competition and hire themselves out to the first factory owners.

There was considerable resentment among the workers and, in fact, in some places in England resistance to machines took the form of riots. For instance, in 1802 riots broke out against the introduction of gig mills and shearing frames in the woollen industry. The nature of work also changed drastically -- instead of being closely involved with the making of the product, a worker was confined to managing the machine so that his work became highly automatic and monotonous. "In contrast to the farm and field, a way of life within living memory, in the factory there was no time for talk or joking, only the adapting of emotional rhythms to the methodic rhythms of the machine" (Sussman 246). In fact the title of Dickens's novel, *Hard Times*, captures this sense of a time that is no longer one's own, which is moulded to the demands of machines and machine owners. David Craig points out that phrases like weary times or *Hard Times* were very common in folk songs between 1820 and 1865 and he goes on to quote a song sung in the mills of South Carolina:

Every morning just at five,
Gotta get up, dead or alive,
Its *Hard Times* in the mill, my love,
Hard times in the mill. (Craig 400)



Fig.3 Boys working in a cotton mill.
Source: www.bbc.co.uk/history/trail/victorian_britain...

2.3. Growth of Industrial Towns

Rapid industrialization also involved mass exodus from the countryside to the emerging industrial centres: Lancashire was the center of cotton industry and Yorkshire that of wool industry. There was a steep rise in the population of cities, such as, Manchester (a possible model for Coketown in *Hard Times*,) Preston, and Bolton, which became symbols of chaotic and uncontrolled urban development. The increase in population was not matched by an increase in resources and basic facilities. In these industrial towns, the workers (or hands, the term by which the manufacturing class chose to dehumanize them) lived and worked in appalling conditions. Lack of proper sanitation and presence of heaps of filth in these areas led to frequent outbreak of diseases like cholera. Engels and other foreign and English commentators (such as, French travel writer, Alexis de Tocqueville) have left detailed accounts of the life in working class districts. According to Engels:

St. Giles (a slum in London) is in the midst of the most populous part of the town, surrounded by broad, splendid avenues in which the gay world of London idles about...It is a disorderly collection of tall, three or four storied houses, with narrow, crooked, filthy streets...the houses are occupied from cellar to garret... and their appearance is such that no human being could possibly wish to live in them ... scarcely a whole window pane can be found, the walls are crumbling ... heaps of garbage and ashes lie in all directions and the foul liquid emptied before the doors gathers in stinking pools (Engels 46).



Fig.4 Punch cartoon, 1894: Important meeting of smoke makers (Industrial waste and chemicals added to pollution levels)
Source: www.bbc.co.uk/history/trail/victorian_britain...

The factory owners distanced themselves from this urban squalor and lived in spacious houses and villas in the suburbs of these industrial towns.

In the absence of any laws and regulations in the early stages of industrialization, the workers had to labour in highly unsafe working conditions for meager wages. In her industrial novel *Michael Armstrong, the Factory Boy* (1840), Frances Trollope describes how a large number of children were maimed or killed in accidents: “The miserable creature to whom the facetious doctor pointed was a little girl about seven years old, whose office... was to collect... from the machinery and from the floor, the flying fragments of cotton that might impede the work... the child was obliged, from time to time to stretch itself with sudden quickness on the ground, while the hissing machinery passed over her... accidents frequently occur; and many are the flaxen locks rudely torn from infant heads in the process” (Ingham 83).



Fig.5 Image of a child dragging a cart full of iron ore
Source: Wikipedia

Factory inspection was introduced in England in 1833; and the British Parliament adopted the Ten Hours Bill (which fixed the working hours) as late as 1847 after a long and bitter agitation. However, the latter applied only to juveniles and women workers, leaving the working men at the mercy of the employers. Working in dusty, damp and cramped spaces of the mills and factories, standing or sitting in the same position for long hours – all these took toll on the health of the workers who also had to face physical abuse if they tried to take a break from the gruelling schedule. In the case of women, abuse went beyond occasional beatings as some factory owners and overseers demanded sexual favors. Thus, as Engels points out, mills often turned into “harems” (Engels 87).

The unrest and growing frustration of working classes found expression in several movements, but the most organized and large scale of these was the Chartist movement. What was remarkable about this movement was that its leaders were from the proletariat (unlike the previous campaigns which were led by upper or middle class men). Some of the key figures were William Lovett and Fergus Connor. These Chartist leaders also brought out their own newspapers for instance, *The Northern Star*, to educate the workers about the need for struggle and the developments in Chartist wings in other parts of the country. In many towns the Chartist associations had women sections as well though, by and large, these women were more concerned about the rights of their men folk than their own. The Chartists were most active from 1836 to 1842. They felt that greater representation in the Parliament was a prerequisite for economic reforms. Therefore, they drew up a charter demanding voting rights for all men, secret ballot, abolition of the requirement and that MPs should be property owners. This charter was placed before the House of Commons, first in 1839 and then in 1842 but it was rejected.

2.4. The Industrial novel

		
	<p>Elizabeth Gaskell (1810-1865) moved to Manchester in 1832 after her marriage to Revd. William Gaskell. In 1849 she met Dickens in London who asked her to contribute to his journal, <i>Household Words</i>. She wrote a number of short stories and novels. In 1857 she completed the biography of her friend, Charlotte Bronte.</p>	

The writers of the period, of both fiction and nonfiction, engaged themselves with the broad issues in their writings such as the growth of the urban proletariat, the changing class equations and

class conflicts, the growth of trade unions, and demand for reformist measures. Representation of these issues in fiction led to the growth of a subgenre what is now known as the industrial novel. It included works of middle class writers (Elizabeth Gaskell, Dickens, Frances Trollope amongst others) for middle class readers as well as those by members of working class, for instance, Ernest Jones (who was closely associated with the chartists).

The early industrial novels sought to create awareness about the plight of the workers and the urgent need for reform. Child labour in factories was

one of the major problems and many writers used the figure of the ill used factory child and woman. They also intervened in the debates about the Factory Acts and reforms. Some of the early works were John Walker's *The Factory Lad* and Caroline Bowles's *Tales of the Factories*. While some of these early works dealt with the matter in terms of a simple contrast between the "evil" manufacturers and the "good" workers, the later industrial novels tried to present a more nuanced and complex analysis of the issues involved. However, there are some significant differences between the works of middle class writers, such as Gaskell and the fiction as well as life stories of working class writers like Ernest Jones. The works of the latter group of writers were overshadowed by canonical writers' works for a very long time. For example, in his book, *The Working Classes in Victorian Fiction*, Peter Keating claims that "a critical search in Victorian literature for a working class tradition leads inevitably to the pessimistic conclusion reached by William Empson, 'It is hard for an Englishman to talk about proletarian art, because in England it has never been a genre with settled principles and such as there is of it, that I have seen is bad'" (Keating 3). What such a judgment does not take into account is the fact that these working class writers might have had a very different view of art and its purpose from that of their middle and upper class contemporaries.

2.5. Representation of the Working Class in *Hard Times* and *Mary Barton*

Among the well-known writers of "industrial fiction" was Mrs. Elizabeth Gaskell, the wife of a Manchester clergyman. Her novel, *Mary Barton* was published in 1848. Unlike *Hard Times* which introduces only two working class characters, Stephen Blackpool and Rachel, (and examines several issues other than the evils of factory system) *Mary Barton* gives a detailed description of the various aspects of working class life -- domestic as well as public -- through a large number of characters. Both the writers draw attention to the dismal condition of the industrial towns and the utter deprivation of the mill workers, but the styles used by them are very different -- while Gaskell's account is factual and descriptive, Dickens tends to paint a metaphoric picture. Coketown is described as "a town of unnatural red and black like the painted face of a savage" (Dickens 20).¹ Dickens's description of the workers' lives movingly renders their abject state:

It (Coketown) contained several large streets all very like one another, and many small streets still more like one another,

¹ All references to *Hard Times* are to the 2001 Norton edition and parenthetical page references to the text are prefaced with "Dickens."

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 tomorrow... (Dickens 21) (Emphasis added).

The repetition of the word “same” and the phrase “like one another” brings the reader closer to the monotony and dullness of the workers’ existence. As Stephen J. Spector points out, “Only at the end of the passage are human beings mentioned, and properly so, since they are subsumed by the savage, unnatural city as interchangeable parts in a machine they have created... Each person has been reduced to a small, repetitive ‘behaviour’”. However, one needs to note that the workers are “equally like one another” only from the masters’ perspective who do not see them beyond their function and whose spokesperson in the novel is Bounderby, the owner of the mill where Stephen Blackpool works. According to him, all workers “expect to be set up in a coach and six, and to be fed on turtle soup and venison with a gold spoon...” (Dickens 55).

When one considers the works of middle class writers, there are several tropes and patterns that emerge as far as the representation of the proletariat is concerned. The assumption with which many such writers begin is that the working class is incapable of articulating its own desires and hopes and needs to be spoken for. Thus, the agency rests with the middle class writer. Margery Sabin shows how writers ranging from Thomas Carlyle to Mrs. Gaskell work with this premise. For example in the preface to her novel, *Mary Barton*, Mrs. Gaskell expresses her wish to give some outlet to the agony “which, from time to time, convulses this *dumb* people.” In a similar vein Carlyle asks for “some clear interpretation of the thought which at heart torments these *wild inarticulate* souls struggling there... like *dumb* creatures in pain...”¹

Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881)



was born in Scotland in a Calvinist family. He was a well-known essayist, satirist and historian who wrote extensively on a wide range of subjects including a book on Chartism in 1839. He called Economics “the dismal science” and became a controversial social commentator. Dickens dedicated *Hard Times* to Carlyle.

Many of these novelists are also preoccupied with the question of workers' political association. A close analysis of the representation of the workers' movements and that of strikes and demonstrations in these novels throws up some interesting questions. For example, one needs to see in what light these demonstrations or strikes are represented -- as mischief or as a rightful outpouring of workers' grievances or something in between. In *Hard Times* the workers in Bounderby's mill go on a strike. The union leader, Slackbridge (whose very name is suggestive) is presented in an unfavourable light. The narrator does not mince words as he compares Slackbridge to the workers who have assembled to hear him: "He was not so honest, he was not so manly, he was not so good-humored ; he substituted cunning for their simplicity and passion for their safe solid sense" (Dickens 107).

¹Margery Sabin, "Inside the Shark's Mouth : William Lovett's struggle for Political Language" *Knowing the Past – Victorian Literature and Culture*, ed. Suzy Anger (London: Cornell UP, 2001) 42-43.

This is Slackbridge's first appearance in the novel, but the narrator does not seem to waste much time in pronouncing his judgment. Slackbridge is condemned as soon as he is introduced. And as a result the reader gets very little time and space to form his/her own impression of the situation and the characters involved. The discerning narrator sums up the matter for the not-so-discerning mass of workers who, the former suggests have been taken in by the union leader's rhetoric. Under the guise of pitying the workers, the narrator constructs them as gullible or people who are easily led astray:

...it was particularly strange and it was even particularly affecting, to see this crowd of earnest faces, whose honesty in the main no competent observer free from bias could doubt, so agitated by such a leader. (Dickens 106-07)

Thus, by demonizing Slackbridge, the narrator seeks to contain the threat posed by the workers' coming together.

The only mill worker individualized in *Hard Times*, Stephen Blackpool, refuses to join the union and the reasons he gives for it are vague and personal and do not sound convincing. While the other workers decide to break all ties with Stephen because of his refusal to join the strike, the narrator seems to regard his decision with sympathy, as the following comment on Stephen's speech shows:

There was a propriety, not to say a dignity in these words, that made the hearers yet more quiet and attentive (Dickens 109).

Thus, a contrast is set up between Stephen, the noble worker, who chooses his own path and is passive and earnest, and the evil union leader, Slackbridge, who is aggressive and confrontationist, theatrical and insincere. The suggestion is that working class politics, as depicted in the novel, has little space for individual identity and that instead, it smothers dissent in the name of collective identity. One needs to ask if this is a “faithful” and just representation of working men’s movements of the time. Though some of the protests did take an ugly turn (as shown in *Mary Barton* and as contemporary records can prove) and though workers’ organizations might not always have been open and democratic, there is another side to the picture e.g. a significant section of the Chartists, led by William Lovett eschewed violent methods and there were serious attempts to educate the working class.

Dickens is not alone in viewing the workers’ “combination” with suspicion. The narrator of *Mary Barton* gives a similar reading of workers’ activism as in the following extract: “Combination is an awful power. It is like the equally mighty agency of steam; capable of almost unlimited good or evil. But to obtain a blessing on its labours, it must work under the direction of a high and intelligent will; incapable of being misled by passion or excitement. The will of the operatives had not been guided to the calmness of wisdom” (Gaskell 108). The narrator seems to suggest that the workers are not mature or rational enough to take charge of their own affairs.

The protagonist of Gaskell’s novel, John Barton, is a Chartist. It is interesting to note that initially the novel was named after him and not his daughter, Mary. In fact, in a letter to a friend, Gaskell said that John Barton was to be “the original centre of her tale.” Apparently, she hesitated in giving such obvious centrality to a radical Chartist, a worker who does not plead for justice but demands it, and a worker who offers to (and actually does) kill one of the masters. Thus, the relatively “harmless” Mary and the complications in the love plot acquire a greater prominence in the second half of the novel.²

Gaskell’s reservations as far as the workers’ movement is concerned are manifested in other ways as well. For instance, there are several characters belonging to the working class who disapprove of John Barton’s Chartist links. One of these is Alice, a Good Samaritan, who having helped others selflessly throughout her life has nearly lost her sight. Yet she does not question or blame anyone for the misery in which

she and others like her exist. She frowns upon Barton's association with the union. As in the case of Stephen Blackpool in *Hard Times*, her own last days are also clothed in an aura of religious imagery, images of the next world, of faith and forgiveness. The quietism of such characters as Alice is in stark contrast with the dissenting spirit of John Barton, and the narrator's approval rests firmly with the former's attitude to the issue of class relations.

² Ruth Bernard Yeazell, "Why Political Novels Have Heroines: *Sybil*, *Mary Barton* and *Felix Holt*," *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 18.2 (1985): 126-144. JSTOR 16 Dec. 2008 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1345772>>

Thomas Carlyle also dismisses the political language of the movement as "the clattering of ballot boxes." For him political demands of the workers are nothing but "boils on the surface of a deeper social disease." (Sabin 42-43). Taking into consideration all these examples, one can arrive at the conclusion that the works of these writers reflect the middle class's growing unease at the rise of this new class which, if mobilized, could pose a serious threat to the prevailing order. It may explain the negative portrayal of political action on the part of the workers. However, this sense of discomfort (or even fear) co-exists with expressions of sympathy for the plight of individuals eg, the relationship between Louisa Gradgrind and Stephen Blackpool in *Hard Times*. Louisa is deeply disturbed by her husband's rude dismissal of Stephen and tries to make amends by offering financial help. This is only one of the many instances in Dickens's works where crisis in relations between classes is represented and resolved through an individual's change of heart. Charitable instincts on the part of the upper class characters are substituted for any large-scale social change or reform. Revolt/ strike is treated as synonymous with disorder and not as a means of establishing a new order. But such gestures are futile; after all a repentant Gradgrind does not mean better living and working conditions for the workers of Coketown.

Dickens's article, "On Strike" which appeared in the journal, *Household Words*, in 1854 gives one a glimpse of his views about the factory system and the relation between the two classes. In February 1854 (five days after he had begun *Hard Times*) Dickens visited Preston where workers had been on strike for a very long time and his article was based on what he observed and experienced in Preston. According to him, the solution does not lie in the extreme stand taken by the mill owners and workers:

I believe... that into the relations between employers and employed, as into all the relations of this life, there must enter something of feeling and sentiment; something of mutual expectation, forbearance and consideration... (Dickens 296).

What Dickens says here constitutes the substance of Stephen Blackpool's key speech in *Hard Times*. In an exchange with Bounderby, Stephen gives voice to the pain and misery of his fellow workers:

The strong hand will never do it, Victory and triumph will never do it... Not drawing nigh to folk, with kindness and patience and cheery ways... will never do it till the sun turns to ice (Dickens 116).



Fig.6: Stephen Blackpoll recovered from the Old Hell Shaft-Fred Walker's illustration for Dickens's *Hard Times* (1868)
Source: www.victorianweb.org/...walker/7.html

This is one instance in the novel where Stephen steps out of incoherence/silence that has hung about him and argues the case of his class. But, like Dickens's "solution" in "On Strike", Stephen's is also couched in terms of "feeling", of a "change of heart" rather than a change of system. Moreover, after this moment of eloquence, he seems to be sidelined till the scene of his accident and subsequent death, which is sentimentalized by the novelist. If one looks at the final speeches of Stephen, the refrain is the same - patience, pity and better understanding. And the one instance where he does dwell upon the risk to workers' lives in coal pits, the narrator hastily assures the readers that "he faintly said it, without any *anger* against *anyone*. Merely as *the truth*" (Dickens 203) (emphasis added). Thus, the final image of Stephen is that of a victim, a bruised and broken body whose last wish is that "aw the world may only coom together more, an get a better understanding in one another..." (Dickens 204). The sentimental description of Stephen's death seems to be directed at the middle class readers of Dickens. It is intended to appeal mess.

A similar process is at work at the end of *Mary Barton* also where John Barton, the rebellious mill worker, dies in the arms of Mr. Carson, the father of the man he had murdered. This scene strikes a false note, an attempt on the part of the novelist to present a union which is impossible in the world outside the boundaries of her fiction.

Thus, the vision of these writers does not seem to have space for any essential, structural changes; better interpersonal relationships, greater sympathy on the part of the mill owners and patience on the part of workers etc. are offered as the solution to the problems of industrial England. According to them, the only possible solution is greater understanding between the classes (and not the abolition of the class system itself).

2.6. Critique of Utilitarianism and Related Ideologies in *Hard Times*

Utilitarianism is a school of thought associated most closely with Jeremy Bentham. The main tenet of the Utilitarian philosophy is the "Greatest Happiness Principle, which asserts that it is the duty of "Individuals & legislators to maximize the happiness of greatest number of beings..."⁴ It also believes that all human actions are motivated by the desire to seek pleasure and avoid pain and thus, people act only in self-interest. However, there are several loopholes in the Utilitarian prescription for "greatest good for greatest number." It is indifferent to the fate of the "lesser number", the minority that would obviously be left

out. It also restricts an individual's right or freedom to define what constitutes "happiness" or "good" for him/her. Thus, there is a tension between the interest of the individual and that of the collective. After all, if the interest of the majority is all that matters, individual desire or belief stands little chance. Moreover, such a view of human nature (according to which self-interest determines one's actions) leaves little space for ideas of goodness or morality and makes for a very pessimistic reading.



benthamhttp://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Jeremy_Bentham_by_Henry_William_Pickersgill_detail.jpg

Jeremy Bentham (1748 – 1832): British philosopher is best known for his advocacy of Utilitarianism and his opposition to the ideas of natural laws and natural rights, calling them “nonsense upon stilts.” He also influenced the development of welfarism. He is probably best known in popular society as the originator of the concept of the panopticon.

Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jeremy_Bentham

Another theory of the age that provoked a lot of debate was Thomas Malthus's "Essay on the Principle of Population" (1798). Malthus believed that the rate of human growth tends to exceed the rate at which food and other resources essential for human survival increase and therefore, it is imperative to keep population under control. Since the lower classes outnumbered the upper and the middle classes, it was the former who became the focus of Malthus's analysis. His advice to the poor was in line with the contemporary perception of the lower classes as "less moral." Abstinence, birth control, late marriage etc were put forward as the measures by which the poor could avoid starvation. According to Malthus, providing any kind of financial help to the lower classes was useless as, given their wasteful nature, they would end up squandering all the money and so, the situation would not improve. Thus, there was no need to increase the wages of the working classes to help them tide over economic crises (Bounderby, the mill owner in *Hard Times* seems to share this view about the workers in his mill). Malthus's views were actually appropriated by certain sections of the Victorian society to explain the destitution of the poor as natural or as something of the latter's own making, thereby ruling out any kind of responsibility of the state or the rich.

⁴ Robert Newsom, "Administrative" *A Companion to Victorian Literature and Culture* ed. Herbert F. Tucker (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999).

These thinkers' reading of human nature and condition and the measures they proposed to improve the same did not find favour with many of their contemporaries. Carlyle, for instance, objected to Bentham's notion of what constitutes "good" or "happiness". He thought that the Utilitarian understanding of "good" was too narrow as it focused on the physical and external aspects only. He said:

This is not a religious age. Only the material, the immediately practical... is important to us... Virtue... is no longer a worship of the beautiful and Good; but a calculation of the profitable... Our true Deity is Mechanism (Carlyle 46).

Dickens, who held Carlyle in great esteem, was also critical of the mechanization of all aspects of life. What disturbed him the most was the fact that most of these theories (and theorists) treated human beings as mere numbers that added up to a certain total to prove a certain law. In the zeal to collect figures and study facts, individual lives were disregarded.

Some of the problems outlined above are taken up in *Hard Times*-Thomas Gradgrind is the embodiment of Benthamite and Malthusian ideas which determine his relations with others and the way he brings up his children –especially Louisa and Tom. In Dickens's works the external appearance of a character is often a mirror to his/her nature and the novelist uses this method to introduce Thomas Gradgrind to the readers: "The scene was a plain, bare, monotonous vault of a schoolroom and the speaker's square forefinger emphasized his observations. The emphasis was helped by the speaker's square wall of a forehead....The speaker's obstinate carriage, square coat, square legs, square shoulders...all helped the emphasis" (Dickens 5).

The repetition of the word 'square' suggests sharpness, a lack of softness and rigidity, all of which emerge as features of Gradgrind's personality as the novel progresses. The same style and images are repeated in the description of Gradgrind's aptly named house, Stonelodge. Both the places associated with Gradgrind - the school and Stonelodge - are characterized by an absence of warmth and feeling. The school, described as a vault (a burial chamber) actually tries to kill "fancy" and "wonder", anathema to Gradgrind, the self-proclaimed champion of "Fact". Thus, an opposition is set up between fact/reason and fancy/feeling, terms which are used by Dickens to structure and spell out his critique of the theories of his time (discussed in the beginning of this section). What Dickens primarily objects to is the quantification of human happiness and misery,

the practice of reducing human beings to figures in order to justify this or that theory. Gradgrind's own children are the first to be affected by his skewed view of life. From the minute they can make sense of the world around them, the little Gradgrinds are bombarded with "facts" and expected to be "somethingological" (Dickens 18). Poetry and "idle story books" are forbidden, as is the circus.



HARD TIMES.

BOOK THE FIRST. SOWING.

Fig.7: Mr. Gradgrind catches Louisa and Tom at the circus
Original Source: Illustration in Charles Dickens's *Hard Times*, American Household Edition, 1870.
Secondary Source: www.victorianweb.org/.../reinhard/ht3.html

Thomas Gradgrind's philosophy also influences his decision regarding personal relations; hence, this "eminently practical" man married a woman who "was most satisfactory as a question of figures" (Dickens 18). When it comes to his daughter, he brings the proposal of Bounderby, a man old enough to be Louisa's father. Since love is nothing but a

fanciful notion, Gradgrind tells his daughter to think about the proposal from “the dispassionate ground of reason and calculation” (Dickens 75). Not blessed with the ability to make sense of anything but cold, hard facts, he fails to notice Louisa’s confusion and struggle. The failure of Louisa’s marriage and of her life in general is thus shown to be a consequence of Gradgrind’s misguided enthusiasm for facts at the cost of human emotions.

The other product of the unnatural training imparted by Thomas Gradgrind is his son who, like Bitzer (the model Gradgrind pupil), is a creature wholly committed to self-interest. For both these young men, other people are mere objects, to be used to further their own interest. Tom’s character is blighted to such an extent that he cajoles his sister to sell herself in marriage to a man she does not care for. He also deceives Stephen Blackpool, an act which leads to the latter’s unfortunate death. When upbraided by his father for his wrongdoings, Tom throws the former’s facts and laws back at him: “So many people are employed in situations of trust; so many people, out of so many, will be dishonest. I have heard you talk... of its being a law. How can I help laws? You have comforted others with such things, father comfort yourself!” (Dickens 212). According to Dickens what ails the system in Coketown and the Gradgrind household is the same – the tendency to see human beings as hands/vessels, to treat everything as measurable and sellable, the absence of human touch etc. Individuals seem to have been lost sight of in the maze of statistics:

Fact, fact, fact, everywhere in the material aspect of the town; fact, fact, fact, in the immaterial. The M’ Choakumchild school was all fact and the relations between master and man were all fact... (Dickens 21).

Sleary’s circus is presented as the counterweight to the Gradgrindian philosophy in the novel. While Gradgrind believes in “fact” and sees all human actions as motivated by self-interest, the circus world represents “fancy” and emotion and offers several examples of action motivated by love. Sissy Jupe (daughter of a circus employee), who is enrolled at Gradgrind’s school is considered a bad influence on other children and so the latter decides to ask her to leave. He is confirmed in his opinion by Bounderby who sneers at the circus people’s so-called irresponsible ways and rustic language. Callous in his handling of Sissy, Bounderby is put to shame by the kind-hearted circus people who offer a home to the deserted girl. Later these very people – a girl “extremely deficient in ... Facts” (Dickens 72) and Mr. Sleary, the circus owner, come to the rescue of Gradgrind and his son, Tom. Dickens seems to suggest that though these

people might not possess the middle class virtues of modesty and correct behaviour, they have what is essential to the survival of a social group. He makes this point in the confrontation between Bitzer and Mr. Sleary. Rejecting Gradgrind's appeal for sympathy, Bitzer tells him bluntly that "the whole social system is a question of self-interest" (Dickens 214). Eventually, it is Mr. Sleary who tackles Bitzer and helps Tom escape, thereby proving that there is more to human nature than self-interest.



Fig.8: Sissy with Gradgrind and Bounderby.

Original Source: Charles Dickens's *Hard Times*, American Household Edition, 1870.

Secondary Source: www.victorianweb.org/.../reinhard/ht3.html

However, the circus and the value system it symbolizes, do not really offer any viable alternative to the system that it opposes. The human touch, the need for amusement might be acceptable as a corrective to the Gradgrindian overemphasis on fact, but it is certainly not a solution to the problems of the working class of Coketown; it is as if "Dickens's Sleary is offering the poor circuses but no bread"(Caserio 10). Thus, to make a point made earlier in this paper, a good heart alone is not an answer to the questions the novel sets out to examine.

Moreover, the circus is a relatively limited world. Sleary seems to preside over it as a father figure to the other members who are willing to be guided by him. It seems too distant from the emerging industrial economy to offer it a useful model of relations. What problematizes our perception of Sleary's circus is the fact that he helps Tom (the one responsible for Stephen's death) in evading justice. The sidelining of the workers'

question is also reflected in the way events are plotted: Stephen's death and the injustice done to him are overshadowed by the interest in the fate of Tom.

2.7. Education as a Theme in *Hard Times*

Children's education and the state of schools in England was not a new territory to write about for Dickens. He explores the subject in one of his early novels, *Nicholas Nickleby* and later, in *David Copperfield* and his interest goes beyond the boundaries of his fiction. He personally helped arrange aid for various schools, especially institutions for orphans and physically challenged children (Collins 3). He returns to the issue of education in *Hard Times*, where the opening scene is set in Thomas Gradgrind's model school. The title of the second chapter, "Murdering the Innocents" and the name of the teacher, M'Choakumchild, make it clear that the school is meant to "choke" children's imaginative and creative powers. Knowledge based on experience and acquired through senses is rejected in favour of worship of facts. One of the titles Dickens once considered for his novel was *Hard Heads and Soft Hearts*. The school chapters of the novel build upon this opposition and give it a concrete shape through two pupils, the circus girl, Sissy and Bitzer. While Sissy, who has lived all her life with horses, is unable to define one, Bitzer gives an answer that meets Gradgrind's standards: "Quadruped. Graminivorous. Forty teeth..." (Dickens 7).

Dickens's distaste for facts divorced from feelings and experience is evident in the comparison of Sissy and Bitzer:

...whereas the girl was so dark-eyed and dark-haired, that she seemed to receive a deeper and more lustrous colour from the sun...the boy was so light-eyed and light-haired that the self-same rays appeared to draw out whatever little colour he ever possessed...His skin was so unwholesomely deficient in the natural tinge, that he looked as though, if he were cut, he would bleed white (Dickens 7).

Towards the end of the passage Bitzer seems to turn into something less than human. Later, the lessons learnt at school are put to "good" use by Bitzer. He works as a spy for Mrs. Sparsit and Bounderby and considers no one's interest but his own. Not having been taught to treat others as individuals with equal rights, he treats them as mere objects to be exploited for his own selfish interest. On the other hand, Sissy, who fails

to master “facts” and principles of political economy, turns out to be the real saviour of Gradgrind and his family.⁵

2.8. Dickens’s Women – Angels/Whores

While nineteenth century women writers such as George Eliot, Bronte sisters, have been justifiably praised for their nuanced and penetrating analysis of woman’s position in the Victorian society, Dickens has been criticized for the lack of complexity and depth when it comes to the female characters in his fiction. A look at Dickens’s relationship with the most important women in his life tells a lot about his expectations and fears regarding women. While Charles Dickens was fond of his father despite the latter’s shortcomings, he had mixed feelings for his mother, Elizabeth. One of the things he held against her was her reluctance to withdraw him from Warren’s Blacking even after his father was released from the debtors’ prison. Dickens told his friend, Forster: “I never afterwards forgot, I never shall forget, I never can forget, that my mother was warm for my being sent back” (Forster 32). However, it is also true that his mother visited him frequently at the blacking warehouse where he worked.

Dickens had married Catherine Hogarth and the two had ten children, but it was a relationship which gradually deteriorated after the initial years. Dickens complained that Catherine was neither a good housekeeper nor a caring mother and that her sister, Georgina Hogarth had to shoulder all the responsibilities, including care of the younger children. The result was a messy separation in 1858.

One wonders if Dickens’s resentment is partly responsible for the negative pictures of mother figures in his fiction. From Mrs Skewton, the selfish mother of Edith in *Dombey and Son* to Clara, the young mother of David in *David Copperfield*, there are a large number of women who are shown to fail in their duties towards their children. Mrs. Gradgrind in *Hard Times* also belongs to this category. Unable to (or unwilling to) put up a resistance to her husband, she neglects her children. She is shown to be too absorbed in her own real or imaginary illnesses to be a help to them, especially her daughter Louisa. The younger Gradgrind children are nurtured by the substitute mother figure, Sissy Jupe.

⁵ For a discussion of the schoolroom scene, see F.R. Leavis, “*Hard Times*-An Analytic Note,” *The Great Tradition* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1948).

However, as Jean Fergusson Carr observes, Dickens's handling of Mrs. Gradgrind is problematic. While he presents the Gradgrind children as victims of their father's "factomania", there is no attempt to extend that understanding to Mrs. Gradgrind (Carr 446-47). The narrative seems to marginalize her as much as her husband does. (It is surely significant that one never knows her Christian name; her identity is subsumed within that of her husband).

The concept of the "Angel in the House" is crucial for an understanding of Victorian ideas about ideal female behaviour. (However, this definition was limited to women of a certain class and drew a distinction between the role of middle and lower class women). According to this idea, men and women had different spheres: while man's sphere was that of work, home was woman's sphere and it was her duty to keep it pure. The qualities of the angelic woman were "extreme emotional sensitivity, weakness of intellect, unlimited selflessness and crucially, a lack of animal passion" (Ingham 23).



"FORGIVE ME, PITY ME, HELP ME!"

Fig.9: Sissy and Louisa

Original Source: Charles Dickens's *Hard Times*, American Household Edition, 1870.

Secondary Source: www.victorianweb.org/.../reinhard/ht12.html

Dickens's novels have a large number of such angelic creatures and Sissy Jupe, to a large extent, belongs to this category. Deserted by her father and offered a home by Mr. Gradgrind, Sissy devotes herself to the welfare of the members of the Gradgrind household. She comes to the aid of a shattered Louisa and nurses her back to health and hope. As if by magic, this "good fairy" drives James Harthouse out of Coketown and Louisa's life. All her movements out of the house are in service of its members and in the end she is rewarded with a brood of "happy children."

On the other hand, Louisa's emotional growth and her ability to bond with others are severely influenced by the training imparted by her father. She is conscious of the lack in her life, however. She knows that her parents' marriage is a loveless one and she asks Sissy if her father loved her mother. However, Louisa is not one of Dickens's angelic young women. She is spirited and not docile; she can think for herself and most important of all, she is not desexualized. Patricia Ingham observes that as opposed to the chaste Sissy, Louisa comes very close to transgression in her affair with James Harthouse. The symbolism associated with her throughout the novel is that of fire which to a Victorian reader, would have signified sexual desire (Ingham 98). Perhaps as a punitive measure, Louisa is denied a conventional happy ending reserved for a "good" woman: "Herself again a wife - a mother... Did Louisa see this? Such a thing was never to be" (Dickens 222).

For a novel which deals with the industrial question, there is nothing very remarkable about the portrayal of working class women. As with the male workers, in *Hard Times* too, Dickens seems to work with the opposition of a good and patient woman and "a creature so foul to look at... that it was a shameful thing even to see her" (Dickens 55). The latter, of course, is Stephen's wife whose sketch in the novel confirms the middle class fears about the base, "animalistic" nature of the working class.

The only working class woman drawn at some length is Rachael. But even in her case, the novel does not give any details about her working life and her views about the condition of people like her. (It does seem to be a major omission at a time when working class women were active participants in the struggle for better wages, lesser working hours). The only work related act that can be attributed to her is the dubious one of dissuading Stephen from joining the union.

Rachael is presented in a manner quite similar to that used to describe Sissy, with emphasis on their qualities of self-abnegation and kindness. To Stephen, she is one of God's angels with "a glory shining round her

head” (Dickens 68). It is interesting that both Stephen and Rachael have biblical names. In the novel they are the ones most closely linked with Christian ideas of faith and forgiveness. This particular strategy of delineating character casts Stephen and Rachael in a “pacifist” mould. Rachael’s future life, as is predicted at the end of the novel, confirms this reading:

...a woman working, ever working, but *content* to do it, and preferring to do it as her *natural* lot (Dickens 221).

The narrator seems to approve of such workers who hold no grudges unlike Slackbridge, the trouble maker.

2.9. A Note on the Ending

Unlike open ended modern and postmodern novels, most Victorian novels had neatly tied resolutions with the major characters accounted for. While the good were generally rewarded with marriage and wealth, death took care of the so-called evil/unpleasant elements. The colonies of Britain provided another means of dealing with those who posed a threat to the order at the end. Such unwanted characters could be conveniently banished to the colonies. Thereby, a confrontation with them or what they represent was deferred (or avoided). In *Hard Times* this is the fate of Tom, who is sent abroad and later dies without meeting his family. Charles Dickens also followed this pattern and most of his novels had a conventional happy ending. But in *Hard Times* he departs from his usual practice outlining a gloomy future for the majority of the characters. To an extent, this is the beginning of a trend as the novels of this period grapple with serious social problems to which no answers are available. The conclusion of the novel also reaffirms the author’s faith in change at the level of the individual as the key to a more equitable and just social set up:

Anne Humphreys states that the conclusion of *Hard Times* disappointed the initial readers and a dramatic version of the novel by Fox Cooper (1854) changed the ending completely – in the final act, Tom is saved, Bounderby has a change of heart and Stephen and Rachael get married (Humphreys 396).

“Dear reader! It rests with you and me, whether, in our two fields of action, similar things shall be or not. Let them be” (Dickens 229).

One also needs to note that the author sidesteps the industrial question in the end; the workers are remembered only as an afterthought and that too, not in their own right, but as beneficiaries of Sissy's kind deeds.

Works Cited

Carlyle, Thomas. "Signs of the Times." *A Carlyle Reader: Selections from the Writings of Thomas Carlyle*. Ed. G.B. Tennyson. Cambridge: CUP, 1984.

Caserio, Robert L. "The name of the Horse: *Hard Times*, semiotics and the Supernatural." *NOVEL: A Forum. On Fiction* 20-1(1986): 5-23. JSTOR. 16 Dec. 2008 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1345616>>.

Collins, Philip. *Dickens and Education*. London: Macmillan, 1965.
Works Cited.

Craig, David. *The Real Foundations: Literature and Social Change*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1979.

Dickens, Charles. *Hard Times*. Ed. Fred Kaplan and Sylvere Monod. New York: Norton, 2001.

Engels, Frederick. *The Condition of the Working Class in England*. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1953.

Foster, John. *The Life of Charles Dickens*. Vol. 1. London: J.M. Dent Ltd., 1966.

Gaskell, Elizabeth. *Mary Barton*. London: Penguin, 1996.

Humphreys, Ann. *Hard Times. A Companion to Dickens*. Ed. David Paroissien. Oxford: Blackwell, 2008.

Ingham, Patricia. *The language of Gender and Class: Transformations in the Victorian Novel*. London: Routledge, 1996.

Keating, P.J. *The Working Class in Victorian Fiction*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971.

Spector, Stephen J. "Monsters of Metonymy: *Hard Times* and Knowing the Working Class" *ELH* 51.2(1984): 365-384.

Sussman, Herbert. "Industrial England." *A Companion to Victorian Literature and Culture*. Ed. Herbert F. Tucker Oxford: Blackwell, 1999.

Web Links

The Dickens Page: Charles Dickens (1812-70)

<http://www.lang.nagoya-u.ac.jp/~matsuoka/Dickens.html>

Charles Dickens

<http://www.helsinki.fi/kasv/nokol/dickens.html>

Charles Dickens Gad's Hill Place

<http://www.perryweb.com/Dickens/>.

The Dickens Heritage Foundation

<http://www.dickensfoundation.org/>

Charles Dickens (Novels)

<http://www.literature.org/authors/dickens-charles/>

Charles Dickens -- Biographical Information (Victorian Web)

<http://landow.stg.brown.edu/victorian/dickens/bioov.html>

2.10. Summary

Hard Times, Charles Dickens's tenth novel was published in weekly parts in his journal, Household Words. Set in the industrial city of Coketown the novel deals with a period in which the English society was being redefined and restructured by the forces unleashed by the Industrial Revolution. The second and third units of this essay look at the ways in which people's lifestyle and work patterns underwent a change in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The rise of the subgenre of "the industrial novel" is to be seen in this context as contemporary writers' attempt to make sense of a fast changing world – a world transformed by technological innovations such as, railways, a world of new class equations with the middle classes asserting themselves more than ever before. Early nineteenth century was a period of great socio-political turbulence in Europe. Though England remained relatively peaceful, the establishment did see the growing urban proletariat as a source of threat. This concern was reflected in the writings of middle class (both fiction and non-fiction) and the fifth unit examines Gaskell and Dickens's response to the industrial question in *Mary Barton* and *Hard Times* respectively. Dickens disagreed with the Utilitarian ideas about human nature, role of the state etc. and he attacked the same in his novel. The sixth unit considers Dickens's treatment of the "Utilitarian" characters in the novel. A good number of Dickens's novels bear a testimony to his lifelong interest in the subject of children's education. The seventh unit looks at education as a subject in *Hard Times*. Dickens has drawn a lot of flak from feminist critics for his inability to go beyond stereotypes as far as portrayal of women is concerned and the second last unit tries to see how far this view holds true. The last section is a comment on the politics of the ending of *Hard Times*.