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## Dickens's Hard Times : A Critical Note

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# *Dickens's Hard Times:* *A Critical Note*

Unlike *Bleak House*, *Little Dorrit*, *Our Mutual Friend*, or *Great Expectations*, *Hard Times* has failed to win a prestigious place in the Dickensian canon. In spite of its immediate success, it has not really captivated the general public nor has it interested reviewers, critics and even academic circles favourable to Dickens's works. Since the publication of its first number, it has been the target of severe and sometimes stinging criticism. F. G. Kitton, the author of *Dickensiana*, does not even regard *Hard Times* as worthy of inclusion among Dickens's novels. Lord Macaulay, who refused to review it, noted in his diary: "I read Dickens's *Hard Times*. One excessively touching, heart-breaking passage, and the rest sullen socialism" (qtd. in Kitton 424). The editor of *The Rambler* along with a reviewer of Blackwood's *Edinburgh Magazine* were not in the least mild in their criticism. The former clearly observed: "Here and there we meet with touches not unworthy of the inventor of Pickwick; but, on the whole, the story is stale, flat, and unprofitable . . ." (qtd. in Kitton 361-62); the latter found it "more palpably a made book than any of the many manufactured articles we have lately seen" (qtd. in Kitton 451-66). Some decades later, Gissing went as far as to ignore it completely in his book *Charles Dickens: A Critical Study*. To defend his dismissal of the novel, he provided the following depreciatory explanation: "Of *Hard Times*, I have said nothing; it is practically a forgotten book, and little in it demands attention" (65).

Nevertheless, *Hard Times* has had its own admirers and fervent defenders. In addition to such early figures as Ruskin, Taine, and mainly G. B. Shaw whose work is highly indebted to Dickens, recently F. R. Leavis and a group of scholars, including Jack Lindsay, T. A. Jackson and others have praised the novel and considered it as a real masterpiece. They have based their judgments on its artistic as well as thematic merits. Some have been captivated by the seriousness and relevance of its preoccupations, the importance of its message, and the depth of its insight. Others have applauded the absence of complexity in its construction and

the clarity of its style. And others have been mainly attracted by its conciseness and compactness, a method which they have considered as a sound evidence of Dickens's artistic progress and evolution. Edgar Johnson, among others, comments on this compression:

This conciseness makes *Hard Times* a morality drama, stark, formalized, allegorical, dominated by the mood of piercing through to the underlying meaning of the industrial scene rather than describing it in minute detail . . . . (406)

And F. R. Leavis regards *Hard Times* as the work in which Dickens displays his artistic talents:

of all Dickens's works [*Hard Times*] is the one that, having all the distinctive strength that makes him a major artist, has it in so compact a way, and with a concentrated significance so immediately clear and penetrating, as, one would have thought, to preclude the reader's failing to recognize that he had before him a completely serious, and, in its originality, a triumphantly successful, work of art. (187)

It is indeed difficult to share such a view and to rally to Dr. Leavis even though his analysis of the novel remains without doubt not only prominent but also interesting. *Hard Times* is one of the three books by Dickens—the others being *David Copperfield* and *Pickwick Papers*—which have been widely read; this is probably because of its brevity. In fact, of all Dickens's novels, it is the shortest. However, it has never succeeded in establishing itself as a major work or at least in occupying an honourable place in the Dickensian *œuvre*. This can be attributed mainly to the countless flaws and the serious shortcomings which are too obvious to pass unnoticed while reading and/or analysing the tale.

As has been underlined by a number of clear-sighted critics, one of the principal factors which have terribly affected *Hard Times* and spoiled it is its artistry. The novel is wanting in inspiration, invention, and dexterity. Dickens's artistic skill seems here to have lost its well-known brightness and glamour; his right hand has lost its cunning. It appears that the novel was written with more apparent labour than the other novels which had been produced before it. Is it his return to weekly serialisation—a mode of publication which he had not used since the years of *Master Humphrey's Clock*—which is responsible for the low quality of the book? With weekly numbers he was confronted with the problem of time and space. In the monthly instalments he could devote more than thirty-two

pages to two to three episodes, but here he was allowed no more than the quarter of that space for two episodes. "The difficulty of the space," he wrote, "is CRUSHING. Nobody can have an idea of it who has not had an experience of patient fiction-writing with some elbow-room always, and open places in perspective. In this form, with any kind of regard to the current number, there is absolutely no such thing" (Forster Vol. II, 120). And to his friend Mrs Watson he declared that "the compression and close condensation necessary for that disjointed form of publication gave me perpetual trouble" (qtd. in Monod 441).

Whatever the cause, *Hard Times* stands as a made book, a manufactured product, a hurriedly-written piece unworthy of the author of such masterpieces as *Dombey and Son*, *David Copperfield* and many other valuable works. Indeed, a glance at some of its artistic devices is enough to justify our argument. The composition is modest; the construction is poor; the sequences are not firmly linked and the threads of the tale are not carefully connected; the style is not refined; the language is sterile and dry; the vivid, fresh, and flowing sentences which prevail in many Dickensian novels, especially *David Copperfield*, are utterly absent; the scenes are poor; the descriptions are monstrously compressed; commentaries are missing. The poetical aura which overwhelms the atmosphere of *Dombey and Son* and renders it more captivating, and the rich symbols which adorn the realms of *Bleak House* (the fog), *Our Mutual Friend* (the river and the dust mounds), and *Dombey* (the railway and the sea) and give them more depth and intricacy do not have their equivalent here. Not to forget, too, the complete absence of any psychological complexity (see Davis).

Neither is the art of characterisation fully convincing. *Hard Times* is "the one of all his works which should be distinguished from the others as specially wanting in that power of real characterisation on which his reputation as a vivid delineator of human character and human life depends" (Whipple 353-58). Dickens is unable to enhance his attack against utilitarianism and industrialism and to make his satire bitter and sharp without spoiling the portrayal of his characters. He drifts once again into exaggeration and caricature and gives free reign to his unbound imagination. Mr Bounderby, Mr Gradgrind, Mrs Sparsit, and others illustrate Dickens's faithfulness to the tradition of caricature with which he was acquainted since the very beginning of his literary career. In fact,

Bounderby's monstrosity and caricatural features have led many a critic<sup>1</sup> to consider him as a gross exaggeration, a horrible "impossibility." In Ruskin's view, Dickens should use his marvellous exaggeration in pieces written for public entertainment and not in works which deal with a "subject of high national importance" (qtd. in Ford and Lane 47); but he maintains that although the novelist's caricature may be found frequently "gross," it is always true. Indeed, his commentary on Dickens's presentation of reality in his writings is worth quoting:

The usefulness of that work . . . is with many persons seriously diminished because Mr Bounderby is a dramatic monster, instead of a characteristic example of a worldly master; and Stephen Blackpool a dramatic perfection, instead of a characteristic example of an honest workman. But let us not lose the use of Dickens's wit and insight, because he chooses to speak in a *circle of stage fire*. He is entirely right in his main drift and purpose in every book he has written; and all of them, but especially *Hard Times*, should be studied with close and earnest care by persons interested in social questions. They will find much that is partial, and, because partial, apparently unjust; but if they examine all the evidence on the other side, which Dickens seems to overlook, it will appear, after all their trouble, that his view was the finally right one, grossly and sharply told. (Ford and Lane 47-48; italics mine)

Two devices which are usually flourishing in Dickens's works are extremely subdued here—humour and pathos. *Hard Times*, as everyone knows, belongs to the second period of Dickens's literary career, a period marked by pessimism, cynicism, and indignation. From *Bleak House*, it is well to remember, we begin to feel a change in Dickens's art. The author became less merry and less exuberant than in the days of Mr Pickwick and Mrs Nickleby. The amount of comedy has decreased considerably: there is a very small number of jokes, comic scenes, and eccentric characters. There are no funny episodes like Mr Pecksniff's inebriation, or amusing speeches like Mrs Gamp's remembrances of her deceased husband. Moreover, the sick jokes which abound in the universe of *Pickwick Papers* and endow it with liveliness and humour—such as Sam's joke about the servant-girl taking laudanum, Alfred Jingle's joke about drains, the comic scene of Ben Allen and Bob Sawyer, the medical students devouring a chicken and discussing the dissection of a baby—have disappeared. The comedy becomes largely satiric, fierce, and hardly cheerful.

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, in an unsigned review, *The Westminster Review* (October 1854) wrote: "Mr. Bounderby . . . is a most outrageous character—who can believe in the possibility of such a man?" 604-08.

Naturally enough, *Hard Times* is black, sombre, deprived of Dickens's fresh, flowing humour. It is even declared as the darkest work of all his late novels. It is, in A. E. Dyson's words, "a skeletal novel" (186). As the reader can notice, once we step into its grim, claustrophobic universe, any opportunity for jest becomes difficult, if not impossible. The atmosphere of the novel is heavy and threatening. The characters who accompany us all throughout our journey in the book have nothing attractive about them; they are repulsive and highly disgusting. They are no more than monsters, grotesque figures who make us ill at ease, turn our blood cold, and never allow us to laugh or simply to smile. Their hypocrisy, narrow-mindedness, and blind devotion to the utilitarian doctrine have rendered them nightmarish and deprived them of all human features. This is indeed the case of Bounderby and Gradgrind, the fervent advocates of Bentham's philosophy.

It is worthy of notice that the novel does contain a few moments of humour, but they are far from representing a source of entertainment or, at least, of relief. They are used only to consolidate Dickens's satire on utilitarianism and make it more vehement. In short, this humour goes hand in hand with the general preoccupation of the novel. It is not free; it is highly disturbed. Such is the case of the scene in which Mrs Gradgrind scolds her children for their secret visit to the circus (BK. I, ch. IV); or that in which Bounderby and Gradgrind go to Sleary's circus to see Sissy's father and get lost as they could not understand the wild language of the merry, common players (BK. I, ch. VI).

The quality of pathos in the novel is also poor. There are no memorable pathetic scenes like those we meet abundantly in *Dombey*, with Little Paul's death and the horrible sufferings of his sister, Florence, or in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, with the famous tragedy of Little Nell which moved to tears the Victorian audiences, or in *Bleak House*, with the heart-breaking end of Jo, the poor crossing sweeper. Stephen's infernal life with his drunkard wife, his rejection by his fellow-workers, and his ultimate decease do in no way equal in force the scenes mentioned above. They are not handled with power and insight; they are clumsily introduced in the story. Unfortunately, among the early critics there were not many dry-eyed resisters. For instance, Edwin P. Whipple wrote: "Any reader who can contemplate [the relation existing between Rachel and Stephen Blackpool] without feeling the tears gather in his eyes is hopelessly insensible to

the pathos of Dickens in its most touching manifestations" (qtd. in Collins 303).

But the failure of *Hard Times* should not be ascribed chiefly to Dickens's artistry; his treatment of political economy does certainly reveal an extraordinary ignorance, a horrible lack of experience, knowledge, and education. In his essay on the book in *The Atlantic Monthly*, Whipple remarked:

If Dickens had contented himself with using his great powers of observation, sympathy, humour, imagination, and characterisation in their appropriate fields, his lack of scientific training in the austere domain of social, legal, and political science would have been hardly perceptible. (qtd. in Collins 318)

Some years later, Gissing endorsed Whipple's view:

One feels, however, that the faults of such a book as *Hard Times* must, in some degree, be attributed to Dickens's lack of acquaintance with various kinds of literature, with various modes of thought. The theme, undoubtedly, is admirable, but the manner of its presentment betrays an extraordinary naiveté, plainly due to untrained intellect, a mind insufficiently stored. (22)

Surely, the artist seems to have ventured on grounds where he had nothing except his extraordinary genius. He wrote of a subject with which he was imperfectly acquainted, of people who were utterly outside the range of his experience, of matters relating to social and economic science for which he was poorly equipped. And this poverty is highly transparent in the novel. Indeed, he does not analyse, debate, argue, or provide proofs; he simply exposes his ideas on the subject and merely paints social life, as Richard Simpson observed:

With all his quickness of perception, his power of seizing salient points and surface-shadows, he has never shown any ability to pierce the depths of social life, to fathom the wells of social action. He can only paint what he sees, and should plan out his canvas accordingly. (qtd. in Collins 303-04.)

In other words, he does not dig deeply; his discussion remains therefore superficial. Indeed, Dickens's decision to write an industrial novel with no experience save a hasty visit to Preston at the end of January 1854—only two months before the novel began to appear—to watch the consequences and effects of a strike of the cotton workers which had dragged on for twenty-three weeks and to get in touch with workers remains in

many ways surprising and mysterious. At the time, the industrial novel was losing ground; it was already beginning to be treated as old-fashioned, as something of the past. Such novels as *Martin Armstrong*, *Helen Fleetwood*, *Sybil*, *Mary Barton*, and other tales pertain to the 'thirties and 'forties—the age of Chartism when Great Britain knew one of the darkest episodes of its history. Unemployment, poverty, and political corruption caused public dissatisfaction and wrath and nearly led the country to drift into chaos and rioting. The experience and the reasons which motivated the authors of these works are diversified:

Mrs Trollope, who had to write for money and had made her name with social criticism, found a topical subject and approached it with an average sense of decency and justice; Mrs Tonna was inspired by her evangelical faith to a hatred of the factory system and its child employment even more passionate than Ashley's; Disraeli was caught for a moment by an image of feudalism and found his experience in official reports; Mrs Gaskell lived every day among the things she wrote of, and only discovered her talent because she thought the experience had to be used. (House 204)

As has been widely suggested *Hard Times* owes too much not only to *Mary Barton* but to Mrs Gaskell as well. Her experience and knowledge of the subject were immensely rich. If Dickens relied heavily on his fertile imagination and his unequalled genius in his writings, Mrs Gaskell resorted to her domestic preoccupations and wrote of things with which she was familiar and creatures with whom she was in permanent contact. Dickens manifested more than a feeling of mere friendship for his colleague. His editorial letters on her literary production stand as plain evidence that the man was to some degree in love with her. They betray an affection which transcends the limits of admiration. But to go as far as to pretend that Dickens imitated or plagiarised her novel, *North and South*, as some short-sighted critics have done, is to commit a great injustice to both the writer and his work. It is true that Mrs Gaskell read the instalments of *Hard Times* with great fear as she was afraid that Dickens would appropriate her material and steal her thunder; but this is not enough to incriminate him. Indeed, there is no sound evidence or solid justification for this accusation. First, Dickens read the manuscript of her novel after he had commenced his own. Peter Ackroyd has clearly underlined that: "Dickens really did not begin editorial work upon her manuscript until he was well into his own and, if anything, he went to some pains not to clash with *North and South*" (737). Secondly, even though *Hard Times* and *North and South* seem to have the same interest and develop the same



thesis, they are far from being the same thing—"Dickens's mythical and fabulist imagination working on quite different principles from Mrs Gaskell's more naturalistic and domestic preoccupations" (*ibid.*). Most important, in his treatment of certain points we feel that Dickens is doing his best to avoid imitation. Take, for instance, the theme of unions in *Hard Times*, which is "quickly raised and just as quickly forgotten" (*ibid.*).

If Mrs Gaskell's shadow in *Hard Times* seems somehow controversial, is it possible to speak of Carlyle as another source of influence, especially as the novel is dedicated to him? Before tackling this question, let it be underlined that contrary to what some critics have claimed—that Dickens wrote not only *Hard Times* but also all the novels preceding *David Copperfield* "to please" Carlyle (Pearson 211)—there is not the least evidence that he had this intention. The circumstances of the composition of the novel may be of some help here: Dickens had not intended to compile a new story for a year when the idea laid hold of him in a violent way. And in all his correspondence there is no statement which may encourage us to share such a view.

Truly enough, no one can deny that Dickens had a great admiration for Carlyle. In one of his letters to him he writes: "I am always reading you faithfully and trying to go your way" (qtd. in Ford 90n). Indeed, between conceiving *Barnaby Rudge* and writing it, Dickens read Carlyle's *The French Revolution* (1837) and *Chartism* (1839). The former had long been his favourite book; he claimed to have read it several times. And in the preface he devoted many years later to his historical masterpiece, *A Tale of Two Cities*, he writes: "It has been one of my hopes to add something to the popular and picturesque means of understanding that terrible time, though no one can hope to add anything to the philosophy of Mr CARLYLE'S wonderful book." And before immersing himself in the composition of the story, he sought Carlyle's aid because he was short of material. He was not only surprised but horribly disgusted when Carlyle sent him two cartloads of books from the London Library, books which he himself used while working on *The French Revolution*. Dickens, of course, chose those which seemed to him of great importance but he relied heavily on his master's book. Anyone who wishes to examine the two books would find that the list of incidents and scenes Dickens took from Carlyle is surprising; the author himself did recognise his indebtedness to this "wonderful book." The fascination Carlyle exerted on Dickens never ebbed; he continued to esteem and appreciate him till the end.

As for Carlyle, he was not wholly satisfied with either Dickens or his art, as we can infer from the following statement: "Dickens has not written anything which will be found of much use in solving the problems of life. But he is worth something; worth a penny to read of an evening before going to bed" (Ford: 1955 89-90). In fact, his dream was to see in Dickens not the clown, the entertainer, the inventor of the awkward Pickwick and the grotesque Mrs Gamp, but the critic of society, the spokesman of the underprivileged. He was, for instance, highly amused by the Circumlocution Office in *Little Dorrit*. It is worth mentioning that since leaving literature and immersing himself in history, Carlyle began to regard all literary genres with disdain. For one whose main concern became the condition of England, the novelists' and the poets' creations were but nonsense and a waste of time. Indeed, when Dickens invited him once to attend a reading of *Pickwick*, he tried to assure him that it would be no waste of time at all: "You would find a healthy suggestion of an abuse or two, that sets people thinking in the right direction" (Ford: 1955 91).

A close and careful reading of *Hard Times* makes it plain that it is, as Humphry House has emphasised, extremely difficult to discern any trace of Carlyle's influence. There may be some ideas and views which may seem to the reader common to both of them, especially concerning their preoccupation with the horrific state of their country and the heartlessness, inhumanity, and blindness of the *laissez-faire* theory. But if we analyse Carlyle's and Dickens's conceptions of many issues in the novel, such as political economy and trade unions, we realise that they are starkly different. *Hard Times* lacks the stinging attacks of *Chartism* or the burning criticism of *Latter-Day Pamphlets*. It should be stressed, furthermore, that Dickens's hostility to Bentham's doctrine should not be attributed to Carlyle, for before he met the historian, he had already assaulted it in *Oliver Twist* by leading a vehement attack against the Poor Law. He had also satirised the infernal life to which industrial progress leads in *The Old Curiosity Shop*. No one can forget the sinister portrait of Wolverhampton, the industrial city in which Little Nell seeks refuge in the course of her tragic pilgrimage through the English countryside.

But the main key to the deficiency of *Hard Times* unquestionably resides in Dickens's treatment of trade unionism. There is indeed more hatred and distrust of it than appreciation of what labour organisation would beneficially effect. Dickens displays an explicit tendency to regard

trade unionism in the same light as utilitarianism; there is no real difference between the representatives of labour and capital: Slackbridge, Gradgrind and Bounderby are put in the same mould; they are described as evil. He also seems to emphasise that a trade union is no more than a divisive body which is powered by self-interest, which is led by corrupt demagogues in whom it is impossible to put faith, and whose main purpose is discrimination instead of union, hatred instead of love, violence instead of peace. It should be added, in passing, that there are three points in the story which have been heavily underlined and which make it difficult for one to take the issue seriously as a representation of industrial conflict: the presentation of the Coketown agitators as weak people who can be easily manipulated; the mysterious nature of Stephen's reason for refusing obstinately to join the Union; and Dickens's strong hatred for Slackbridge, the strike leader.

Indeed, the crude, ill-drawn portrait of Slackbridge has always shocked critics interested in Dickens's attack on capitalism. The Coketown leader is introduced as an impostor, a liar, an opportunist who is not in the least concerned with the situation of the workers. To stress his dishonesty, Dickens endows the man with a most offensive mannerism of speech. He makes him talk in an orational way which capitalises on all the rhetoric and elocution which do normally accompany hypocrisy. In fact, his rhetoric calls to mind the rant of the canting preachers Dickens incessantly ridicules in his novels: Rev. Stiggins, Chadband, Wopsle, and, why not, Pecksniff, the "moral man" of *Martin Chuzzlewit*. During the meeting of the strikers, Slackbridge addresses them thus:

"But, oh, my friends and brothers! Oh, men and Englishmen, the down-trodden operatives of Coketown! What shall we say of that man—that working-man, that I should find it necessary so to libel the glorious name—who, being practically and well acquainted with the grievances and wrongs of you, the injured pitch and marrow of this land, and having heard you, with a noble and majestic unanimity that will make Tyrants tremble, resolve for to subscribe to the funds of the United Aggregate Tribunal, and to abide by the injunctions issued by that body for your benefit, whatever they may be—what, I ask you, will you say of that working-man, since such I must acknowledge him to be, who, at such a time, deserts his post and sells his flag; who, at such a time, is not ashamed to make to you the dastardly and humiliating avowal that he will hold himself aloof, and will not be one of those associated in the gallant stand for Freedom and for Right?" (BK. II, ch. IV, 602-03)

Here, it is clear that Dickens resorts to his imagination once again and does not control his emotions towards Slackbridge. He lets himself be guided blindly by feelings of hatred and fear. The result is a horrible falsification of the nature of both the leader and the trade union, and a monstrous distortion of its cause. Many critics of different political tendencies have expressed their dissatisfaction with Dickens's description of Slackbridge. Edgar Johnson, for instance, argues:

Such a description is a piece of sheer ignorance, not because union leaders cannot be windbags and humbugs as other politicians can, but because labour organizers are not like Slackbridge and do not talk like him, and did not do so in Dickens's day any more than in ours. (qtd. in Davis 222)

But the most famous criticism is that of George Bernard Shaw who wrote:

Slackbridge, the trade union organizer, is a mere figment of the middle-class imagination. No such man would be listened to by a meeting of English factory hands. Not that such meetings are less susceptible to humbug than meetings of any other class. Not that trade union organizers, worn out by the terribly wearisome and trying work of going from place to place repeating the same commonplaces and trying to "stoke up" meetings to enthusiasm with them, are less apt than other politicians to end as windbags, and sometimes to depend on stimulants to pull them through their work. Not, in short, that trade union platform is any less humbug-ridden than the platforms of our more highly placed political parties. But even at their worst trade union organizers are not a bit like Slackbridge. . . . All this is pure middle-class ignorance. It is much as if a tramp were to write a description of millionaires smoking large cigars in church, with their wives in low-necked dresses and diamonds. (qtd. in Ford and Lane 132-33)

Slackbridge is no other than Gruffshaw, the strike leader Dickens describes in his article "On Strike." But the Coketown union organizer is given much more rein than is Gruffshaw. If we return to his and Slackbridge's prototype—Mortimer Grimshaw—we find that even Gruffshaw is monstrously caricatured. It is true that Grimshaw has a tendency to use exciting speech, but it is full of meaning and is less sentimental than anything we have here. "If our trade cannot prosper, if our commerce cannot flourish, but at the expense of the comfort and happiness of the operatives of this country, I will say let trade and commerce perish, and a new order of things be established" (*The Examiner*, December 3, 1853). Grimshaw does not call for anarchy; he simply proposes that the workers should run the factories themselves: "when the manufacturers see our tall chimneys creeping up, they'll begin to look about them" (*Reynolds's*,

April 9, 1854). In short, he is suggesting a view of co-operative socialism. It is also true that Dickens caricatures the figure of Grimshaw by transmogrifying his appearance—Grimshaw is physically stronger than Slackbridge—and exaggerating his political opinions.

As has been briefly mentioned above, two months before the serialisation of *Hard Times*, Dickens went in quest of copy to Preston where the cotton workers were leading a long strike. After his return to London in early February 1854, he published an account on this expedition entitled "On Strike" in *Household Words*. Curiously enough, the picture devoted to the Preston strikers and their leaders as well as his attitude to them are not in accordance with anything we have here. It seems that he went there expecting to find violence, confusion, and rioting. To his surprise, the streets were deserted and quiet; the workers were at home. And at one of the two meetings which he attended, he noticed honesty, courtesy, and order: "If the Assembly, in respect of quietness and order, were put in comparison with the House of Commons, the Right Honourable The Speaker himself would decide for Preston" (*Household Words*, 11 February 1854). He appreciated their efficiency, competence, and honourable character in general:

Perhaps the world could not afford a more remarkable contrast than between the deliberate collected manner of these men proceeding with their business, and the clash and hurry of the engines among which their lives are passed. Their astonishing fortitude and perseverance, their high sense of honour among themselves; the extent to which they are impressed with the responsibility that is upon them of setting a careful example, and keeping their order out of any harm and loss of reputation; the noble readiness in them to help one another . . . could scarcely ever be plainer to an ordinary observer of human nature. (*ibid.*)<sup>2</sup>

He explains that the workers were neither naïve nor ignorant; they were aware of the serious consequences which their action might engender, and they were completely convinced of the righteousness and the justice of their cause, but they did not show the least feeling of animosity or hatred for the majority of employers. He also notes that the strike organizers refused to listen to a group of Manchester delegates from the

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<sup>2</sup> See also Geoffrey Carnall, "Dickens, Mrs Gaskell and the Preston Strike," *Victorian Studies*, VIII (1964), 31-48; and David Lodge, "The Rhetoric of *Hard Times*," *Language of Fiction*, (London, 1966), 144-63, as well as Williams, "The Reader in *Hard Times*."

Labour Parliament, as they felt that these honourable gentlemen marginalised the strike and tried to explain and justify the policy of the Labour Parliament. This wisdom, order, dignity and moderation are totally absent from *Hard Times*.

But this contrast should not astonish the reader too much. It is true that in the same article, "On Strike," Dickens records his defence of the strikers on his railway trip against an angry gentleman who asserted that: "They wanted to be ground . . . to bring 'em to their senses" (qtd. in Wilson 236). Yet, it is interesting to underline that his defence of the workers is exclusively against the lockout behaviour of the masters and not for their strike. In fact, the political conclusion of the article is that striking is not right. He calls it a "deplorable calamity" and "a great national affliction," wasting energy, wages, and health, and he regrets "the gulf of separation which it hourly deepens between those whose interests must be understood to be identical or must be destroyed" (*ibid.*).

Three years before, on the occasion of a strike organised by engine-drivers and firemen of the North Western railway line, he had attacked the strikers severely and had declared: "we must deny the moral right or justification . . . to exert the immense power they accidentally possess, to the public detriment and danger" (qtd. in Ackroyd 726). He urged the workers to return immediately to their occupations and warned them not to use their power against the public and the firms which had provided capital in order to allow them to work: "What the Directors might have conceded to temperate remonstrance, it is easy to understand they may see it culpable to yield to so alarming a combination against the public service and safety" (qtd. in Wilson 236).

For all this, the gulf between the portrait of the Preston organisers and that of the Coketown leader is immense. We may wonder, therefore, whether Dickens's aim was to avoid disappointing his middle-class public. But such a judgment is difficult to maintain, for we know that the readers of the novel are to a large extent those who read "On Strike." In Wilson's view,

it seems . . . more probable that the novel called forth a heightened picture all round, and in writing about the strike meeting he had only to draw upon that part of himself which had (with some reason) despised the more violent leaders of the chartists, that feared so desperately mob rule, to find himself in tune with the middle class who could take so much concern for social reform in *Household Words*. (237)

Dickens's caricature of the leader of the Coketown strikers and his explicit rejection of the trade union solution even though he recognises the ability of the members to conduct their own business in a responsible and efficacious way can be ascribed to a number of reasons. First of all, Dickens held some widespread false ideas, which were common to most of the Victorians, on trade unions. On the one hand, the leaders of these organisations were dismissed as frauds and demagogues; on the other, the unions were likely to be undemocratic by persecuting the workers who did not accept to join them.<sup>3</sup> Both points are plainly stressed in *Hard Times*, the first through Slackbridge and the second through Stephen.

Secondly, as has been noted before, Dickens had a deep horror of revolutionary hysteria, an obsession which he had developed during the dark years of Chartism and from which he never recovered. He was afraid that strike might lead to rioting and cause the whole country to drift into chaos and even civil war. This fear of violence is clearly expressed in his two historical novels *Barnaby Rudge* and *A Tale of Two Cities*, and it is also accompanied by a feeling of contempt and hostility for the mob. In fact, Dickens never advocated revolution or saw it with a favourable eye. He was indignant and revolted to see innocent human beings maliciously manipulated by monsters for their own ends, horribly transformed into beasts, shedding the blood of innocent victims, committing the most abominable deeds, and even doing harm to themselves. In fact, he attempts in both novels to convey the same message: Revolution can never be a solution. In *Barnaby Rudge*, the violence ends with the death of many people, especially the weak and poverty-stricken and the ruin of those who have had the chance to stay alive; nothing has changed; the old order is still maintained as if the mob and revolution were but a nightmare. Similarly, in *A Tale*, the *régime* which has decapitated the tyrannical system turns out to be its exact travesty. Its new arm, the guillotine, is a clear instance that the revolution has completely failed to realise its aim.

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<sup>3</sup> In a letter to a Manchester friend (March 28, 1856), Kingsley, who called himself a Socialist, wrote: "I admire your boldness in lifting up your voice to expose the tyranny of "Union" strikes. From my own experience of demagogues . . . I can well believe every word you say as to the "humbug" connected with the inner working of them" (qtd. in House 209n).

Finally, it seems probable that Dickens's life-long distrust of political association and his early experience as a reporter in the House of Commons are partially responsible for this attitude to trade unions (see Brown). As everybody knows, he was contemptuous of Parliament which was for him "merely 'the national dust-yard', where the 'national dustmen' entertain one another 'with a great many noisy little fights among themselves', and appoint commissions which fill blue-books with dreary facts and futile statistics" (Leavis 206). He never stopped deriding its members as sloths, jobbers and wastrel dandies.

But if trade unions are no solution, what can be done to settle the conflict between labour and capital? Who can protect the workers and defend their rights and interests? Dickens once again does not suggest a workable alternative nor does he offer any practical cure to the ills he exposes in the novel. He simply suggests that there must be cooperation between workers and employers and that neither side can be always right without reference to the other. He also argues that brotherhood, decency, and generosity should mark the relationship between the two. "Political economy," he clearly explains in "On Strike," "is a mere skeleton unless it has a little human warmth in it" (*Household Words*, 11 February 1854). As Brown has noted, Dickens was unable "to solve the problem set by a capitalism which had the support of the 'Manchester School' academics on a high level while it satisfied the cupidity of ruthless employers on a lower one" (144). However, he succeeded in creating awareness that the problem did exist and in getting the attention of the middle-class who were "happily ignoring it" (*ibid.*).

To sum up, it becomes clear that the unpopularity of *Hard Times* is far from being groundless. Dickens's artistry is unusually poor; his social analysis is relevant but it is seriously affected by his political attitude to workers and trade unions. *Hard Times* in no way displays Dickens's talent. It is the only book by Dickens which can hardly be called Dickensian.

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