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Hard Times:
An Ecocritical Reading

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Abstract

The present study is concerned with the environmental and cultural change that occurred in Victorian London as a consequence of the Industrial Revolution, which has altered the relationship between humans and their ecosystem in an unprecedented and irreversible way. Charles Dickens's novel *Hard Times* suggests that the industrial productive system was detaching humans not only from the natural environment around them, but also from the emotional and imaginative sphere inside of them.

Hard Times repeatedly alludes to the parallel between children's impoverished upbringing in the name of fact and rationality, and adults' prosaic conditions of life, in a world where it seems that there is no space left for genuine feelings, pleasure, and of course, nature. If children are raised in an increasingly industrial, dull, and alienating environment, and if they are deprived of all those fables and magical stories which are always full of natural elements, where can they learn about nature? How can they establish a respectful relationship with nature when they become adults?

The first chapter offers an alternative reading of *Hard Times*, by focusing on those excerpts from the novel that describe the changing natural landscape in the fictional industrial city of Coketown; the second chapter attempts to chart the allegorical meaning of the novel, and analyzes the parallel between absence of nature and absence of fancy in the new industrial society; in the last chapter the focus shifts to the battle between the country and the city, which have been traditionally associated to nature and culture, respectively.

Introduction

Throughout his novel *Hard Times*, Dickens describes the industrial productive system of his age, which was not only detaching humans from the natural environment around them, but was also destroying the imaginative, and sensitive world inside of them. The parallel he draws between the disappearance of natural landscape and the disappearance of imagination in Coketown - the epitome of the nineteenth-century industrial city - is the focus of the present study, which intends to provide an ecocritical reading of one of Dickens's major works, and to investigate to what extent it can be considered as a novel that has anticipated modern environmental concerns.

If nature and imagination are presented by Dickens as two sides of the same coin, in his book *The Great Derangement* (2016), Amitav Ghosh also argues that the climate crisis of our age is also a crisis of culture, and thus, of the imagination. Since the dawn of time, he observes, telling stories has been the characteristically human way of addressing and humanizing the big questions;¹ but nowadays, in this era of the so-called 'Anthropocene,' in which humans do change the most basic physical features and processes of the earth,² contemporary culture seems not to be able to take on this new challenge. All the different branches of culture, such as literature, fiction, poetry, art, and so on, which have always responded promptly to crisis of many sorts throughout history, now seem to find it too complicated to deal with the current geological crisis. Literary fiction, for instance, very rarely finds space for this topic, and when it does, it is not taken seriously by common opinion, which often relegates it to the genre of science fiction.³ Before the birth of the modern novel, stories were equally told everywhere; legends and myths about 'what happened' were powerful means to instruct while delighting people, providing accounts and explanations to major issues. The common denominator between these 'ancient' modes and modern novel is the characteristically human necessity of understanding the past and interpreting the present; the main difference between them lies in the fact that, if in the past, people mixed truth and fiction simply because they did not have enough knowledge of reality, nowadays, we are unable to address some issues because we essentially do not want to

¹Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*, London, The University of Chicago Press, 2016, p. 25.

²Ivi, p. 9.

³Ivi, p. 7.

do it. It is as if we do not want to face the truth because we know that we are in the wrong. Concerning the climate crisis, for instance, Ghosh concludes that the modern culture, and especially the Western one, has failed because it has almost always taken an anthropocentric point of view, focusing only on the human aspects, while forgetting the non-human ones. But why does he talk about a crisis of the imagination?

The reason is that, according to him, culture generates wonder and desire: when we read a novel about a pristine, green lawn, we immediately think of freedom, and imagine how relaxing it would be to spend a few time in such a beautiful place; the same happens when we admire a painting, or a picture. Each mode of cultural activity, everyone with its own characteristics and peculiarities, inspires and excites people by evoking images in their minds and emotions in their hearts, creating a bond between them and what they are seeing, listening to, or reading about. Therefore, the fact that contemporary culture does not succeed in addressing such a burning issue is a clear signal that there is something wrong in our imaginative skill: this deficiency inevitably prevents us from moving to action, because we are not emotionally involved in what is happening around us.

In his essay 'Ideas of Nature' (1980), Raymond Williams deals with the evolution of humankind's relationship with nature, departing from the assumption that most people now think of the world 'nature' as something in opposition to the world inhabited by humans, who increasingly talk about "the other kind of nature - trees, hills, brooks, animals" and "contrast it with the world of humans and their relationships."⁴ He argues that our manner of thinking about nature is directly linked, and shaped by human history, since "the idea of nature contains an extraordinary amount of human history."⁵ This is because, exactly like some other fundamental ideas and man-made concepts, like culture or society by way of example, the meaning of the word nature has changed over time, therefore, it now asks to be treated as an 'historical' argument, that has already been analyzed by many different schools of thought in the past. We cannot give a definition to nature, he says, until we are not clear what it actually includes, and in particular, whether it includes humans, or not. Humanity has always had an inherent

⁴Raymond Williams, 'Ideas of Nature,' *Problems in Materialism and Culture*, London, Verso, 1980.

⁵Ibid.

connection to nature; indeed, what has changed over time is our manner of thinking about nature, our approach to it, and this is something strongly related to our history.⁶

The earliest Latin use of the word *natura* had a pure physical connotation; it referred to the inherent and essential constitution of any particular thing present on earth, and from an environmental point of view, it consisted of all the laws ruling the world and its processes. Then, over the course of the centuries, from what was an essentially abstract term, nature came to be used to describe the real multiplicity of elements and living processes organized around it; indeed, what took place was a kind of fusion of the things with their very essence. It was in that moment that a number of early cultures started to personify and venerate nature (if the expression may be allowed) like a goddess; women prayed the spirit of the wind, or the god of the forest when their men went hunting, for instance. If we think of the ancient pagan cultures of the Greeks or the Romans for example, we immediately realize that what they venerated were essentially the natural elements of the world they inhabited. If the personification of nature marked a pivotal change in its semantic evolution, becoming, to use Williams's words, a kind of 'constitutional lawyer,' whose powers went far beyond the limits of human capacity, the decisive turning point came during the nineteenth century, when people abandoned the image of the constitutional lawyer, to embrace the one of the 'selective-breeder force,' according to which nature was directly implicated in the process of the (precisely) 'natural selection.' It was then that humans realized that they had actually the skills - therefore, the possibility - to tame, if not environment as a whole, most of its elements to satisfy their own needs, increasingly reducing the idea of nature to a mere set of objects and elements at men's complete disposal. Williams argues that the current meaning of nature as "all that is not man: all that is not touched by man, spoilt by man"⁷ is linked to a rather worrying abstraction of man himself, that inevitably places him 'apart' from those physical processes in which he is definitely involved, and on which he directly depends. Consequently, it is as if the true separation is not between man and nature, but from a kind of 'abstracted Man' and 'abstracted Nature,'⁸ where the former loses the contact not only with the latter, but also with its natural essence, therefore, with its humanness. This is the reason why, always according

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ibid.

to Williams, we keep looking at the environmental crisis of our time like spectators, without really feeling implicated in what is happening around us. It is as if we have forgotten (or, maybe, have decided to forget) that humans, like all the other creatures on earth, are equally part of it, and equally subdued to the same laws.

Meanwhile, man, precisely as the one so threatened, exalts himself and postures as lord of the earth. In this way the illusion comes to prevail that everything man encounters exists only insofar as it is his construct. This illusion gives rise in turn to one final illusion: it seems as though man everywhere and always encounters only himself.⁹

As Martin Heidegger points out in his essay ‘The Question Concerning Technology,’ it seems that we have become unable to think in environmental terms because we are focused only on ourselves; we think to be the ‘lords of the earth,’ and this anthropocentric belief makes us feel entitled to subdue and exploit everything we find along our path of life. Our resistance has a cultural matrix; it has its origin in the change of the relationship between humans and environment that occurred during the nineteenth century as a consequence of the Industrial Revolution, and the process of urbanization that followed it. From that moment on, people have increasingly felt apart from nature,¹⁰ and even more alarming, they have developed the idea of an opposition between culture and nature, in which the latter constitutes a kind of obstacle to the former. This opposition is particularly evident in Colonial Literature, where the natural environment is often represented as something man has to fight against, in order to bring culture and civilization to backward communities. In fact, the perpetration of injuries and brutalities in the name of Imperialism was inflicted not only on native peoples, but also on their natural environment, for both of them were seen as useful ‘raw materials’ settlers were entitled to exploit. And what was even worse was the fact that they felt at peace with their conscience, for they did it in the name of culture and civilization. But what is ‘culture’ exactly?

⁹Jonathan Bate, *The Song of the Earth*, London, Picador, 2000, p. 68.

¹⁰Ivi, p. 37.

The online *Cambridge Dictionary* gives the following definition: "The way of life, especially the general customs and beliefs, of a particular group of people at a particular time;" culture is thus the set of habits, traditions, products, and ideas that a particular circle of people adopts in a particular time. However, as Jonathan Bate points out in his book *The Song of the Earth* (2000), the word culture has evolved over centuries, changing its meaning more than once; therefore, the one above is just the last (anthropocentric) definition the word has been given in the mid-nineteenth century. The earliest meaning was 'a cultivated field or piece of land.'¹¹ It endured until the end of the eighteenth century, when the primary sense shifted from the cultivated land itself to the action of cultivation. Soon after, it was extended to other forms of farming, such as the cultivation of fish, bees, and other products. Anyway, during the sixteenth century, the word was given another meaning, which was no longer linked to the earth, but rather referred to the progress of society; it became a synonym for 'education' and 'training,' as it was intended as the cultivation of people's mind and manners. These two main senses of the word culture coexisted until the nineteenth century, when the rapid growth of industrialization and urbanization moved the majority of people from the country to the city, causing the old sense to die. Furthermore, in the same period, the word was given an aesthetic connotation, too; in fact, especially in Europe, when we talk about 'our cultural inheritance,' we refer to human artistic and intellectual development as a whole, that is the very thing that has contributed to make our society the one we know, and belong to, today. In this sense, what is really remarkable is the dramatic shift of meaning from the physical work done by farmers in the fields, to the intellectual one which actually serves the moral needs of an increasingly detached-from-nature society. We can undoubtedly say that the meaning has been transferred from working hands to thinking minds, from physical labour to spiritual activity, from the country to the city, exactly as people did. Several ecocritics have argued that it was in that very moment that the division between culture and nature has been made explicit; when 'culture' stopped being located in natural landscapes and rural settings, simultaneously, humans stopped feeling part of the natural environment surrounding them. "Nature was where industry was not,"¹² Williams writes to stress the nineteenth-century tendency (a tendency that has actually been passed down until nowadays) to separate nature from

¹¹Ivi, p. 3.

¹²Williams, 'Ideas of Nature.'

human activities, therefore, to cast it out of human life. If we think of Dickens's *Hard Times*, for instance, we see that it presents a sharp division between the productive centre of Coketown, and the country around it, which is intentionally placed out of the city. It is not by chance that it was when humans started feeling apart from nature, that the word 'environment' was coined as "the set of circumstances or conditions, especially physical conditions, in which a person or community lives, works, develops, or the external conditions affecting the life of a plant or animal."¹³ Bate argues that, prior to the nineteenth-century development, there was actually no need for a word to describe the influence of physical conditions on persons and animals, because it was self-evident that everyone and everything were intimately related to the natural setting. But from the late eighteenth century onwards, due to the increasing human tendency to alter the landscape both within and outside the city, people have started feeling the necessity to coin a word that could describe the kind, as well as quality, of their surroundings. Despite many historians have argued that, even at that time, the rural landscape was influenced by humans as much as the urban one, what is important to note is that, since the very beginning of the process of industrialization and urbanization, people have developed the idea that the country offers a natural environment, whereas the city an artificial one. Therefore, the word 'environment' has emerged as a sign of that crucial difference.¹⁴

To quote Williams, "this process was denounced as unnatural: from Goldsmith to Blake, and from Cobbett to Ruskin and Dickens, this kind of attack on a new 'unnatural' civilization was powerfully deployed;"¹⁵ indeed, among the multiplicity of reasons that make *Hard Times* an undisputed masterpiece, there is the fact that it offers a detailed depiction of the nineteenth-century social, as well as environmental change that followed the Industrial Revolution. As one of the leading art critics of the Victorian era, John Ruskin, declared, "*Hard Times* should be studied with close and earnest care by all those interested in social questions;"¹⁶ indeed, Ruskin considered this novel as Dickens's greatest work, in which he did not only capture and analyze the major social issues of his age, but he also succeeded in making them legible to a vast majority. In his

¹³Definition by *The Oxford English Dictionary*.

¹⁴Bate, *The Song of the Earth*, p. 14.

¹⁵Williams, 'Ideas of Nature.'

¹⁶<https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/the-condition-of-england-novel>, viewed 23 January 2020.

book *The Dickens World* (1941), British critic Humphry House writes that *Hard Times* can be regarded as Dickens's way of expressing the widespread embarrassment and indignation for the issues and heavy contradictions that were present in Britain at the time; from the problem of pollution due to industrial activity, to the increasing human alienation among factory workers, from the moral dilemma about children's education, to the question of women's social role. Like most of his contemporaries, he was fascinated by positive aspects, such as the technological progress, the improvement in transport, or the explosion in knowledge, that the Industrial Revolution was making possible; but, at the same time, he witnessed firsthand the social, and environmental impoverishment that Utilitarianism - the economic mode of the time - was actually causing. Indeed, what worried authors and intellectuals like him was the new 'utilitarian' psyche that the industrial apparatus forged out; Utilitarianism was a nineteenth-century moral and economic theory that advocated actions promoting overall happiness and the betterment of society. Now as then, it is known as the principle according to which an action is morally right only when the consequences it produces benefit a majority.¹⁷ In a moment in which economy and industry were the cornerstones of the whole Victorian system, the utilitarian doctrine became a kind of 'Bible' everyone had to follow. The result was, to quote a passage from the novel, "You saw nothing in Coketown but what was severely workful" (*HT* 28).¹⁸ While reading *Hard Times*, we realize that it was exactly the exacerbation of being always pragmatic, useful, productive - to use a current common saying, 'on the crest of the wave' - in every field, and in every phase of human life, the prime source of spiritual malaise among his contemporaries. The 'workful' Coketown is the quintessential of the nineteenth-century industrial city, therefore, any reader of Dickens's times could identify with what it was reading. The detailed depictions of the urban, and (few) natural landscapes that he provides throughout the novel, were essentially what his public saw in their everyday life. Moreover, Mr. Gradgrind could be the professor of any nineteenth-century school; Stephen Blackpool could be the ordinary poor laborer of any nineteenth-century factory; Louisa, Tom, and Sissy could be the victims of any utilitarian-mode school of the time. The reason of this choice lies in the fact that, according to him, the novelist's task was

¹⁷<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/utilitarianism-history/>, viewed 26 January 2020.

¹⁸Henceforth all the direct quotations from *Hard Times* will be taken from the following edition: Charles Dickens, *Hard Times*, London, Penguin Books, 1995.

to deal with ‘national’ problems without losing the contact with individual lives;¹⁹ therefore, if he wanted his reading public to feel involved in the narration, and even more important, to develop a critical opinion about what he was denouncing, he had to write about men, women, children, and landscapes that they could easily recognize.

As he repeatedly stresses throughout the novel, by means of characters like Mr. Gradgrind or Mr. Bounderby, beside industrialization and urbanization, the Victorian era was an age of statistics and figures;²⁰ when the Government discussed reforms, for instance, the reports containing all the main points of the various meetings were then published in the so-called ‘blue books’ by individuals in charge, that Dickens regarded as men “who see figures and averages, and nothing else - the representatives of the wickedest and most enormous vice of this time.”²¹ Although Dickens generally despised such a pragmatic category of men (as the last quote clearly highlights), he was also very interested in the contents of some of their works; in fact, especially during the late 1840s, he turned increasing attention to certain social ills - above all Utilitarianism, children and workers’ poor condition, pollution in towns, people’s health - that previously had not particularly interested him, and then put his opinions and considerations in his own writings; *Hard Times* is undoubtedly one of them.

The present study addresses precisely the way in which Dickens’s *Hard Times* deals with the relationship between the disappearance of natural landscape and the disappearance of imaginative power in nineteenth-century society. First of all, it is necessary to clarify that the word ‘nature’ has a double meaning in the novel; in fact, it is not solely to be equated with a physically green and fertile environment,²² as it actually refers to the typically human (and childish) creativity, too. The association between the respective extinction of nature and fancy in the new industrial civilization is the very essence of this thesis, whose major aim is to investigate to what extent Dickens’s *Hard Times* can be considered as a work that has prefigured modern Ecocriticism. There are several elements that make this novel suitable for an ecocritical analysis: firstly, it is set in a (fictional) post-industrial city, Coketown, where people witness firsthand the environmental, as well as social change of Dickens’s times;

¹⁹F.S. Schwarzbach, *Dickens and the City*, London, The Athlone Press, 1979, p. 121.

²⁰<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/utilitarianism-history/>, viewed 26 January 2020.

²¹Excerpt from a letter by Charles Dickens to Charles Knight: *Letters*, London, Chapman and Hall, 30 January 1855.

²²Kate Flint, *Introduction to Hard Times*, London, Penguin Books, 2003, p. xiii.

secondly, its characters turn out to be the victims of the same utilitarian system that was actually dominating the Victorian society; thirdly, the novel presents a sharp division between the productive centre of Coketown, and the country around it, which is intentionally placed out of the city, therefore, out of people's lives. These are just a few examples that show how Dickens's novel can be considered, at least according to this alternative interpretation, as a work that precedes modern Ecocriticism.

The first chapter draws on those excerpts from the novel in which the author describes the changing natural landscape in Coketown. I will try to demonstrate that the way in which Dickens depicts it as a dull, monotonous, in other words, 'unnatural' place, can be seen as something more than a mere unsympathetic description of a setting, for it can be interpreted as an even more vibrant denunciation towards the very system that has actually reduced the town in such a poor state. When he writes that Coketown is an "ugly citadel, where Nature was as strongly bricked out as killing airs and gases were bricked in" (*HT* 65), Dickens is implicitly criticizing his contemporary "philosophy of the improvers, that nature is decisively seen as separate from men."²³ Furthermore, the use of the adjective 'ugly' is not random, on the contrary, it is full of meaning, and implies that even his own experience of the new city life, and opinion of the industrial cityscape are far from being positive. By means of colours and allegorical images, he makes his readers enter in a world that essentially reflects the appalling environmental, as well as sanitary conditions of mid-nineteenth-century England, where fog, smoke, mud, and offensive odour were actually part of people's everyday life.

The second chapter draws on the parallel between absence of nature and absence of fancy that Dickens carries out throughout the novel. It is the development of the author's idea of nature as something that goes beyond the common definition of it as a physically green environment, as it refers, according to him, to human imaginative and emotional life, too. As the titles of the three sections of the novel, 'Sowing,' 'Reaping,' and 'Garnering,' demonstrate, according to Dickens, natural environment and people are strongly related; he draws a parallel between his characters' physical and psychological growth, and the three phases of harvesting, suggesting that humans might even tame nature, but in the end, they will never succeed in escaping those living processes that actually bind them to it. To Dickens, what was actually alarming in his

²³Williams, 'Ideas of Nature.'

contemporary society was the educational Utilitarianism, in other words, the utilitarian method adopted at school. In *Hard Times*, he specifically attacks its fanatical exaggeration, and the dangerous long-term consequences it entails at the personal, as well as social level. By telling the sowing, reaping, and garnering of his characters, especially the children's ones, he correlates the disappearance of natural landscape in Coketown, with the disappearance of imagination in its inhabitants, trying to demonstrate how risky a social philosophy based only on productivity and profits can be in the long term. The issue of prioritizing facts or fancy as a preparation to adulthood is a theme to which Dickens returns again and again throughout the novel. In an age in which there were many different attitudes towards children's education, Dickens has often been considered as the 'Defender of the Fairy Tale,'²⁴ for he defended the value of fancy as a necessary means to distinguish between reality and imagination, and to become able to live together according the rules imposed by society.²⁵ The aim of this chapter is to show that environment directly affects children's upbringing, and contributes in determining what kind of men or women they will be when they become adults. It is thus an attempt to answer to the following question: What does it happen to children who grow up in a world where it seems that there is no space left for both nature and fancy?

The third chapter is focused on the 'clash' between the country and the city that was actually one of the main consequences of the Industrial Revolution, which marked a decisive turning point in the transition from an essentially rural society to a developed, industrialized one. By means of some excerpts from the novel, I will try to infer what could have been Dickens's attitude towards the changing social fabric under the impact of industrialism. In *Hard Times*, he refers to factory workers as 'Hands' to underline their alienating working condition, and he often describes the cityscape of Coketown as a 'dark' place; he joins some of his contemporary writers, such as Baudelaire and Thomson, in denouncing the condition of darkness and sickness affecting the urban setting, which does not regard exclusively the landscape, but the relationship among people, as well, for they ended up feeling alienated from the environment and living processes of which they were actually part. Environmental pollution and social malaise

²⁴Elaine Ostry, *Social Dreaming: Dickens and the Fairy Tale*, New York, Routledge, 2002, pp. 29-30.

²⁵Katharina Boehm, *Charles Dickens and the Sciences of Childhood*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, p. 141.

are thus presented as two faces of the same coin, for the process of migration from the country to the city has caused the extinction of both the ecosystem and the organic community which were there before. The result was, to say it in Marxist terms, that humans were alienated twice: in fact, they lost the contact not only with the world around them - a world that they actually did not recognize anymore - but also with the intimate and emotional part which was inside of them. In 'Ideas of Nature,' Williams writes that "this process was denounced as unnatural: from Goldsmith to Blake, and from Cobbett to Ruskin and Dickens, this kind of attack on a new 'unnatural' civilization was powerfully deployed." Dickens is identified by Williams as one of those who raised voice against the degeneration of civilization at all levels; it is not by chance thus, that even in *Hard Times*, "Nature was where industry was not,"²⁶ to stress the typically modern tendency to separate nature from human activities, therefore, to cast nature out of human life. Another 'modern' element in the novel is the fact that Dickens identifies the country as a refuge from the harshness and dullness of the city, as a place of physical, as well as psychological healing for all those who need a "draught of pure air" (*HT* 256). What can be seen as a metaphorical 'battle' between the country and the city, which have been traditionally associated to nature and culture, respectively, is at the basis of modern studies, such as Ecocriticism, Cultural Ecology, Ecolinguistics, and so on, which are essentially focused on the change of the relationship between humans and environment, and on the way in which this evolution has been addressed by literature. In this study, and especially in this last chapter, I will try to provide some evidence to support the idea that *Hard Times* was ahead of its time, in the sense that it has anticipated some of the key points of modern environmental studies.

²⁶Williams, 'Ideas of Nature.'

Chapter 1. Changing Environment in *Hard Times*

1.1 Plot of the Novel

Set in an imaginary industrial city named 'Coketown', which can be seen as the epitome of the nineteenth-century industrial city, *Hard Times* tells the story of a family, the Gradgrinds, and a group of labourers working for a powerful factory owner named Josiah Bounderby. Thomas Gradgrind is the wealthy headmaster of Coketown school and a model of Utilitarian virtue; he devotes all his life to a philosophy of rationalism, statistics, and facts, and raises his two children, Tom and Louisa, banning fancy and wonder from their minds. Even at school, Thomas Grandgrind teaches his students to rely only on facts, and discourages them from developing any kind of fanciful and imaginative thought.

He takes in a student of his, the kind and imaginative Cecilia Jupe, nicknamed Sissy, after the sudden disappearance of her father who is a circus entertainer. As they grow older, Tom becomes a selfish, hedonist young man, whereas Louisa becomes an unhappy young woman who feels as if she is missing something important in her life. Louisa feels at loss; she is apparently cold and detached, but this is just a mask she puts on herself to hide her inner sense of confusion. In fact, she has actually a deep desire of happiness and love. The only one that Mr. Gradgrind is unable to convert is Sissy; she is so free-spirited and happy about life, that he does not succeed in shaping her mind at the sign of facts and rationalism. On the contrary, when she gets older, Sissy becomes a kind-hearted, charitable young woman who never abandons her deep belief in the power of imagination, emotions, and love among human beings. In the end, Mrs. Gradgrind remains a marginal character throughout the novel; she represents the resigned Victorian wife who is subdued to her husband and has no say in the matter of her children's upbringing.

At the age of seventeen, Louisa is pushed to marry Josiah Bounderby, a wealthy banker and factory owner, who is a close friend of Mr. Gradgrind's. Mr. Bounderby is much older than Louisa, but the very fact that he is wealthy is what really matters to Mr. Gradgrind. Any time is good for Bounderby to remember that he is a self-made man

who was abandoned by his mother as an infant, and has succeeded in becoming what he is thanks to his own forces. Louisa's arranged marriage to Bounderby is very useful for her brother Tom, who works as an apprentice at Bounderby's bank, and wants to advance his career. Tom's selfishness is so deep-rooted that he cannot see how unhappy and lonely his sister actually feels. After the marriage, Sissy remains at the Gradgrind's home to look after Sissy and Tom's younger siblings.

In the meantime, an impoverished factory worker in Coketown named Stephen Blackpool, struggles with his love for Rachel, another factory worker. Stephen cannot marry Rachel because he is actually already married to an insane, drunken woman. He asks an advice to his employee, Mr. Bounderby, who informs him that divorce is possible only for wealthy people who can afford its high legal expenses. When he leaves Bounderby's house, he meets Mrs. Pegler, an odd old woman with an inexplicable interest in Bounderby.

James Harthouse, a wealthy young man from London, arrives in Coketown to start his political career as a disciple of Mr, Gradgrind, who has now become a Member of British Parliament. He immediately notices Louisa and decides to try to seduce her. Thanks to Mrs. Sparsit's aid, a frustrated former aristocrat who works for Mr. Bounderby, he tries to attract Louisa's attention.

Meanwhile, tensions between employers and employees continue to grow, and the Hands, a term used by Dickens to refer to factory workers, organize a union strike; only Stephen Blackpool refuses to join, as he feels that it would only worsen the crisis between workers and factory owners. After this decision, he is not only cut off by his colleagues, but he is also fired by Mr. Bounderby when he refuses to spy on them. Tom proposes him a deal: he tells him that if he waits outside the bank for some consecutive nights, he will help him. Stephen agrees and does what Tom has told him to do, but when he sees that days go by and no help arrives, he packs his things and leaves Coketown. Shortly after, the bank is robbed and everybody lay the blame on Stephen.

James Harthouse succeeds in corrupting Louisa, who becomes increasingly interested in him. Louisa picks up the courage to confide to her father that his philosophy of facts and self-interest has made her deeply unhappy, and has left her married to a man she does not love. Listening to his daughter's despair, Mr. Gradgrind

begins to realize his faults, and sees the limits of his philosophy for the very first time in his life. Louisa eventually decides to leave her husband.

Meanwhile, Stephen decides to come back to prove his innocence; on his way, he unfortunately falls into a mining pit and the fall injures him badly. When he is finally discovered by Rachel and Louisa, it is too late; he dies shortly after having said goodbye to his beloved Rachel. Soon after, Louisa and his father realize that the true responsible for the bank robbery is Tom and arrange to help him to leave the country.

In the end, it is revealed that Mrs. Pegler is actually Bounderby's mother, whom he has forbidden to visit him. Thus, it is also revealed that Bounderby is not that self-made man he has always maintained to be; on the contrary, he is a cruel, uncharitable man, unable to feel emotions and sympathy towards those less fortunate than himself.

The novel ends with Gradgrind giving up his philosophy of fact - he realizes that his own principles have led his children to their downfall - and since that moment on, he devotes his political power in helping the poor. Louisa succeeds in putting her mind at rest about her past and her neglect of feelings.

1.2 Natural, or Unnatural, Landscape in Coketown

Dickens describes Coketown as a monotonous and dull place, unsuitable to human needs, and hostile to human life, where every physical and social feature is exactly the opposite of what it should be. The heavy and careless manipulation of the physical environment, which Dickens implicitly denounces in this novel, has caused nature to be destroyed to leave room to factories and buildings; in the same way, natural instincts and imaginative spontaneity have been eradicated from people to satisfy the requirements of the driving utilitarian system. Dickens describes the setting of his novel in the following way:

It was a town of red brick, or of brick that would have been red if the smoke and ashes had allowed it; but, as matters stood it was a town of unnatural red and black like the painted face of a savage. It was a town of machinery

and tall chimneys, out of which interminable serpents of smoke trailed themselves forever and ever, and never got uncoiled. It had a black canal in it, and a river that ran purple with ill-smelling dye, and vast piles of building full of windows where there was a rattling and a trembling all day long, and where the piston of the steam-engine worked monotonously up and down, like the head of an elephant in a state of melancholy madness. (*HT* 27)

The first element which stands out is the 'red brick' of which all the buildings of Coketown are built. This red-brick town is described by Dickens as 'unnatural'; this is a word that recurs with extraordinary frequency throughout the novel. The unnaturalness of the city is due to two main facts: firstly, it has been erected in that very place where there was nature before, taking the place of all those trees and plants which constituted the natural ecosystem of the countryside; secondly, since factories and buildings have been erected without any aesthetic embellishment, without any care about human emotional needs, the physical feature of the industrial landscape is perceived by the inhabitants as exactly the opposite of what it should be. Indeed, 'vast piles of building full of windows' have been erected in Coketown; this image is familiar also for twenty-first-century readers, as it constitutes the typical setting of modern metropolises and outskirts, which are mainly composed of rather identically shaped buildings, and where natural elements are increasingly hard to find.

Dickens adds that 'It was a town of machinery and tall chimneys'; the use of the words 'a town of' seems to entail that the city is only made of machinery and chimneys, and nothing else. As a matter of fact, Coketown is the quintessential of the industrial city, a place where people and machinery work all day long, 'monotonously up and down, like the head of an elephant in a state of melancholy madness,' producing not only wealth, but also a perpetual dirty haze in the air, that comes from the factory chimneys in the form of 'interminable serpents of smoke.'



1. View of Coketown.

Coketown is described by Dickens also as an “ugly citadel, where Nature was as strongly bricked out as killing airs and gases were bricked in” (*HT* 65); this passage clarifies that the setting of *Hard Times* is not a place of nature, in the sense that its inhabitants have bricked up the city and have left outside nature as if it were an enemy. Industrialization has reduced the ecosystem of Coketown to a few, and even ill, elements; watercourses have become black, streets are covered by ashes, and even the sunlight is opaque because of gases and fog. The few natural images show how far the city is from romantic ideals of nature;²⁷ the green landscape, which is contaminated by industrial activity as well, still survives out of the city, where “there were trees to see, and there were larks singing, and there were pleasant scents in the air, and all was overarched by a bright blue sky.” (*HT* 256) The different worlds of this novel - the industrial centre and the countryside - are joined together by Dickens’s idea that society, as well as its culture and its environment, can be classified as either natural or artificial. The first one is ‘natural’ in the sense that it undergoes the laws of nature; the second one is ‘artificial,’ man-made, for it follows human-imposed patterns.²⁸

The truth is that there is no room for nature in Coketown anymore; factories have had the upper hand, and smoke and gases have taken its place. Although Charles

²⁷Elaine Ostry, *Social Dreaming: Dickens and the Fairy Tale*, New York, Routledge, 2002, p. 54.

²⁸Kate Flint, *Introduction to Hard Times*, London, Penguin Books, 2003, p. xii.

Dickens never openly criticizes his contemporary social or political conduct - he always expresses his opinions in a veiled way, by means of irony and satire - the use of the adjective 'ugly' to describe Coketown is full of meaning, and implies that his experience of the 'unnatural' industrial setting is far from being positive. Readers should always keep in mind that Dickens lived and wrote in nineteenth-century Victorian London, which was the cradle of the Industrial Revolution; he saw firsthand how industry caused the old rural community to fade away, and he was aware of the dangers caused by pollution in cities. In fact, during the late 1840s, Dickens turned his attention to certain social ills that previously had not particularly interested him, and he joined the movement for sanitary reform that took root in England in those years. Although he was not one of its leaders, he eventually became one of its most fervent advocates; his involvement in the sanitary movement took the form of a series of articles published in his weekly journal *Household Words*.²⁹

As a matter of fact, pollution was a major issue still in that period. The river crossing Coketown, which obviously alludes to the Thames, is described by Dickens as 'a black canal [...] that ran purple.' Since the dawn of time, the river has been associated to water, prosperity, fecundity, and of course, life. As a matter of fact, almost all the greatest civilizations of the past developed close to rivers: Ancient Egypt developed along the Nile River, Mesopotamia civilization developed within the Tigris-Euphrates river system, the Romans started their ascent close to the Tiber River, and so on. Since the river has always been considered a symbol for birth and life, the fact that Dickens describes the Coketown river as 'a black canal' is far from being irrelevant; the black colour is the quintessential of life denial, and is often associated to evil and death. Therefore, the river is not only black because of pollution, but it is also sterile like an aged woman's womb. If the river is dead, how can the city of Coketown be a place of life and birth? How can its inhabitants be able to love and feel emotions in a place where everything they see seems to be dead? That is to say that Dickens, through this very first description of the setting, already creates a strong link between the physical environment and the characters of his novel.

Dickens specifically uses black, purple, and red, that are all colors with negative connotations in our imaginary, to describe the industrial setting of his novel and its ill

²⁹On 1 July 1854, Dickens published an article in *Household Words* entitled 'Smoke or No Smoke', which outlined the dangerous, harmful effects of smoke, and proposed suggestions for treating it.

ecosystem. Dickens's detailed descriptions of both colors and smells, allow the readers to feel part of the setting, to the point that they can identify themselves with the characters; they can see what characters see in the novel, and they can smell what characters smell in the novel.

Giving for granted that Dickens took inspiration from the city of London to portray the industrial setting of Coketown, it is worth to spend a few words about the so-called 'Great Stink' of summer 1858.

The source of that terrible smell was the River Thames, into which the city's sewers emptied. Between 1800 and 1850, the amount of waste that the river received greatly increased as the city's population more than doubled. In 1855, scientist Michael Faraday, who was asked to conduct a set of experiments to test the overall quality of the water, described the river's water as "an opaque pale brown fluid with an unpleasant smell and dense clouds of fecal matter, that was running through the hearth of London."³⁰ What Parliament did not understand was the fact that Faraday's warning that the Thames needed to be purity as soon as possible, and above all before the coming of summer, was a prophetic warning, rather than a suggestion. In fact, only three years later, his prediction came true, and London underwent a disastrously hot and stinky summer which contributed to the outbreak of the well-known 'Great Sink' that terrorized London for a couple of months.



2. The 'Silent Highway Man' is a cartoon published in a magazine in summer 1858. This cartoon depicts the allegorical figure of death rowing a boat on the polluted and foggy River Thames. Death is here associated with pollution and disease.

³⁰<https://www.choleraandthethames.co.uk/cholera-in.london/the-great-stink/michael-faraday/>, viewed 21 November 2019.

It contained several large streets all very like one another, and many small streets still more like one another, inhabited by people equally like one another, who all went in and out at the same hours, with the same sound upon the same pavements, to do the same work, and to whom every day was the same as yesterday and tomorrow, and every year the counterpart of the last and the next [...] the jail might have been the infirmary, the infirmary might have been the jail, the town-hall might have been either, or both. (*HT* 27-28)

Uniformity and unnaturalness of the urban setting goes hand in hand with the standardization of people's lives and the dehumanization of its inhabitants, who increasingly look like the machines they use every day at work to do the same actions. People living in Coketown know nothing but 'fact', and they are eternally dissatisfied, because they work continuously and monotonously all day long, but then they are prevented from enjoying the fruits of their work, as they are destined to their employers. This excerpt expresses the close, deep relation existing between humans and environment; people are deeply influenced by the environment in which they grow up, and they are instinctively pushed to adapt themselves to the place in which they live. Adaptation is thus part of human nature, and it is one of the crucial points of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, first edited in 1859, that illustrates the scientific theory according to which animal species evolve through a process of natural selection which is based on the principle of adaptation; in nature, only those who are able to adapt, survive. Therefore, since human beings are animals like all the other creatures existing in nature, if the ecosystem around them changes, only those who adapt themselves to the new environment are safe. The Industrial Revolution non only asks workers to adjust their skills to include new technologies, but it also asks humans to modify their souls and their lives. Unlike the artisans, who have their own tools and skilled traditions handed down from one generation to another, the new factory workers have few skills and no tools of their own, and they work long hours at a pace dictated by the machines they serve; this very fact that humans serve the machines, and not the contrary, is maybe the most unnatural aspect of the new industrial society.

People in Coketown live in a place where everything is dull, flat, where every building could be any building as they are all interchangeable; the industrial environment in which they live seems to have no beauty, no mystery. For this reason, it is not surprising that even the population becomes increasingly 'like one another', without any kind of passion and feeling. If the environment of Coketown is monotonous and dull, it thus follows that there will be a certain monotony about its population, too. An English witness in the 1840s illustrates the working conditions of a 19-year-old woman in the following way:

The clock strikes half past five; the engine starts, and her day's work commences. At half past seven, and in some factories at eight, the engine slacks its pace (seldom stopping) for a short time, till the *hands* have cleaned the machinery, and swallowed a little food. It then goes on again, and continues full speed till twelve o'clock, when it stops for dinner. Previously to her leaving the factory, and in her dinner hour, she has her machines to clean. The distance of the factory is about five minutes' walk from her home. I noticed every day that she came in at half-past twelve or within a minute or two. The first thing she did, was to wash herself, then get dinner (which she was seldom able to eat), and pack up her drinking for the afternoon. This done it was time to be on her way to work again, where she remains, without one minute's relaxation, till seven o'clock; she then comes home and throws herself into a chair exhausted. This is repeated six days in the week (save that on Saturdays she may get back a little earlier, say, an hour or two), can there be any wondering at their preferring to lie in bed till dinner-time, instead of going to church on the seventh?³¹

These are the conditions in which industrial workers have to work; as the author of this excerpt points in the last few lines, workers spend all the day next to the machines they serve, and in the end they are so tired, that they have no more strength to

³¹Kevin Reilly, *The Human Journey, A Concise Introduction to World History*, London, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2012, p. 288.

do something else, something which could give joy to their sad and monotonous life. This passage perfectly summarizes any Coketown inhabitant's average day, where the only thing which seems to matter is hard work. "You saw nothing in Coketown but what was severely workful" (*HT* 28); it means that any feature, any element of the city is linked to, and depends on, the work by which it is sustained. Work is the city's nourishment, and people are only small parts of this mechanistic system.

Throughout the novel, all Dickens's descriptions of the landscape, both natural and industrial, have an element in common: darkness. Every time he describes the city, he underlines the fact that it is darkened by smoke; Coketown is habitually without the light of the sun because the smoke is so thick that it prevents the sunrays from illuminating the city. As a result of this, in the distance, it shows as a "black mist" (*HT* 256). In the following passage, Dickens describes the city in a one of a kind sunny midsummer day, when the sunlight succeeds in partially illuminating the underlying cityscape:

Seen from a distance in such weather, Coketown lay shrouded in a haze of its own, which appeared impervious to the sun's rays. You only knew the town was there, because you knew there could have been no such sulky blotch upon the prospect without a town. A blur of soot and smoke, now confusedly tending this way, now that way, now aspiring to the vault of Heaven, now murkily creeping along the earth, as the wind rose and fell, or changed its quarter: a dense formless jumble, with sheets of cross light in it, that showed nothing but masses of darkness: Coketown in the distance was suggestive of itself, though not a brick of it could be seen. (*HT* 111)

Coketown is a city of haze and soot, it is covered by the smoke produced by its own factories, and, seen from a distance, it looks like a formless mass of darkness. Once again, Dickens denounces the question of pollution in industrial cities. It is surprising how current this description could be, to the point that Coketown could be any modern metropolis of our time. The scene depicted by Dickens immediately makes us think of

those Asia's cities that are at the centre of current public debate because of their dramatically high levels of air pollution. Nowadays, emissions from coal factories are the major anthropogenic contributors to air pollution in Asia, and cause many environmental, as well as health risks, such as respiratory diseases, cardiovascular diseases, and cancer. In Dickens's Coketown, as well as in several cities across Asia, air pollution is due to the burning of fossil fuels, principally coal, which cause everything to be covered by a dense, toxic haze. It is not by chance, thus, that Dickens named the major setting of his novel 'Coketown', that is 'the town of coke'. "When the sun began to sink behind the smoke [...] when the smoke was burning red" (*HT* 123); sunset, which is one of the most suggestive, even romantic moments that people can experience, is ruined by the presence of smoke which deliberately grabs the spotlight. The absence of natural light is part of Coketown to the point that, after the sun sets, the darkness of the night does not fall upon it, but rather it seems to rise slowly out of the ground up to the sky. In a place like this, it seems that any kind of bond between humans and the ecosystem has been broken; everywhere and anytime there is something reminding people that nature does not exist anymore, and that they should forget it in order to concentrate their energy upon what really matters.

In *Hard Times*, Dickens's representations of the industrial settings are characterized by an extraordinary effort at realism to involve the readers in a direct experience of the places in which the narration is set. For this reason, Dickens uses words and phrases related to the five senses throughout the narration; he insists on dark colours, monotonous sounds, nauseating smells, ugliness and unnaturalness of the environment, and so on. He spends few words about vegetation in Coketown, because natural landscape was banished out of the city, exactly as it happens quite everywhere today. However, there is a passage towards the end of the novel in which he describes the countryside out of Coketown:

It was customary for those who now and then thirsted for a draught of pure air [...] to get a few miles away by the railroad, and then begin their walk, or their lounge, in the fields [...] out of the smoke. Though the green landscape was blotted here and there with heaps of coal, it was green

elsewhere, and there were trees to see, and there were larks singing, and there were pleasant scents in the air, and all was overarched by a bright blue sky. Under their feet, the grass was fresh; beautiful shadows of branches flickered upon it, and speckled it; hedgerows were luxuriant; everything was at peace. (*HT* 256)

This depiction of the natural landscape is a riot of colours and beauty: vegetation is green, luxuriant, and fresh; the sun shines and the sky, that is always hard to see in Coketown because of pollution and smoke, here is blue and clear; the air is pure, and everything is pleasant and beautiful. The country is the place where people can have ‘a draught of pure air’, and find relief from the hardness and dullness of the city. In a world where everything is mechanic, unnatural, and dramatically alienating, people still feel the human impulse to escape and be in contact with nature again. Therefore, nature becomes the place where urban people seek refuge and recover their soul. In fact, in this passage, Sissy and Rachel are walking out of Coketown to escape for a little while from the problems they have left at home. However, contrary to what readers could think, this long-awaited return to country and nature is actually far from being peaceful, as it is the place where Sissy and Rachel find Stephen Blackpool dead. In addition, in the second part of the description, Dickens writes that everything Sissy and Rachel see in the country is actually spoilt, undermined by abandoned engines, machines, and other waste products of factories. The ghost of industry spares nothing, it goes everywhere. This is because development and progress have caused the old rural community to fade away, therefore rural peace is just a mere, cruel illusion; the Coketown countryside is not really spoiled, it has rather ceased to exist. This is obviously a provocation to raise his readers’ awareness about the dangers of giving up any contact with nature and, as a consequence, one’s innermost essence.

Dickens’s interest in showing how important and ‘natural’ the relationship between people and the ecosystem actually is, is apparent in the titling of the three sections of the novel: ‘Sowing’, ‘Reaping’ and ‘Garnering’, which parallel his characters’ growth and psychological development with the inevitable cycles of agriculture. Sowing, reaping, and garnering, that are the three main phases of

harvesting, establish the Biblical allusion according to which “For whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap”;³² the use of this Biblical connotation suggests that the education children receive in their formative years is decisive, as it directly affects their adult life. In *Hard Times*, Dickens denounces Mr. Gradgrind’s system of education, which forces children to learn only hard facts, and nothing else, leading them to be unable to tackle situations which require a little bit of imagination or experience in life. This educational system was rather common in Victorian times, where Utilitarianism affected any field of people’s life, education included. What Dickens tries to demonstrate is that, when children’s minds are seeded only with facts and notions, without any kind of imagination and fantasy, they are destined to become adults who are lacking in feelings and emotions, as they have never learnt about them. They thus reap what they have been sowed.

Dickens’s persistent use of imagery drawn from a vegetative, non-industrial world, even when he uses it to describe the absence of nature, suggests that nothing and nobody can escape from natural, organic patterns, as they will always win out over human imposed ones. The novel is clearly characterized by two different worlds, whose societies and cultural forms can be classified as either natural or artificial. Dickens opposes the industrial, ‘workful’ city of Coketown, where everything is mechanical and artificial, to the magical world of Sleary’s circus, of which Sissy is the most outspoken representative, where people are helpful, generous, and capable of feeling sincere compassion and sympathy. Sleary’s circus is thus the antithesis of the industrial and business world, and it is the proof that neither nature, nor fantasy can be definitely cast out of people’s life. This is made apparent since the very beginning of the book, when Mr. Gradgrind, the most resolute believer in the value of facts, cannot avoid vegetative metaphors to explain his philosophy of education: “Now, what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else.” (*HT* 9) Dickens’s continuous use of vegetative imagery throughout the novel reminds his readers of the importance of celebrating nature and naturalness, as they remain part of people’s life even in the most industrial and alienating environment.

³²The Bible, Galatians 6:7. The meaning is: ‘You reap what you sow.’

1.3 *Hard Times*: a Social Critique

London, and the city in wider terms, is the setting of most of Dickens's novels. Reading Dickens, we realize that he does not choose the city only as the setting of his novels, but rather situates it at the centre of his fiction, as if it were a character itself. Given the importance of the city in Victorian England, London was the cradle of the Industrial Revolution, the main protagonist and the beating heart of the nineteenth century when everything has started to change. For Dickens, the city was the central phenomenon of modern civilization, and the cosmopolitan extension of the new social patterns that developed from it.³³

1.3.1 Industrial Fiction

The most crucial phase of the Industrial Revolution occurred during the Victorian Age (1837-1901), which was a long period of development, prosperity, and economic growth, that transformed people's life in an unprecedented way, and spread from England to the far corners of the earth. From an environmental point of view, industrialization gave humankind a new degree of control over nature; humans started feeling apart from nature,³⁴ and this new presumption entailed many negative consequences at the environmental and social levels. A number of authors and intellectuals of the time, who were aware of the spiritual and material corruption under the impact of industrialism, became increasingly critical of the new psyche forget out of those socioeconomic conditions.

Among them, Charles Dickens tried to draw popular attention to the major issues of his time; throughout his career, he considered fiction to have the dual functions of amusement and instruction, and he believed that it was the prime role of literature to raise people's awareness about the evils of the time.³⁵ For this, Dickens can be considered as a campaigner novelist, who identified the industrial system and the

³³Alexander Welsh, *The City of Dickens*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1971, p. 71.

³⁴Jonathan Bate, *The Song of the Earth*, London, Picador, 2000, p. 37.

³⁵F.S. Schwarzbach, *Dickens and the City*, London, The Athlone Press, 1979, p. 121.

utilitarian doctrine as the prime sources of social evil and spiritual malaise. He thought it was his duty to make his reading public familiar with serious social problems, unpleasant revelations that could seem impossible to believe, but that were unfortunately true; he thought it was his duty to make people aware of certain aspects of social reality that had become remote to people's sensibility.³⁶ And fiction, according to him, was a powerful means to do it. That is why, in most of his novels, he juxtaposed detailed descriptions of London misery, such as the exploited lives of factory workers or children in slums, with amusing sketches of the city and ridiculous caricatures of its inhabitants.³⁷

Inspired by industrial development, a new fictional genre emerged in nineteenth-century Britain, giving particular importance to topography, with narratives set in grimy manufacturing towns that reflect the most urgent issues of the industrial cities of those times. Such narratives give detailed pictures of Victorian industrial society, and deal with the so-called "Condition of England Question"³⁸ which was at the centre of public debate. For instance, Dickens's *Coketown* reflects the most sinister aspects of the author's city of London; again, Elizabeth Gaskell's social novel *North and South* (1854) is set in the fictional industrial town of Milton, whose depiction is based on Manchester, where the author lived. Both Dickens and Gaskell witnessed the brutal world wrought by the Industrial Revolution, seeing firsthand the impact it had on society, and especially on rural, bucolic communities, that increasingly faded away. In their industrial fiction, they also underplay the sinister aspects of the city's environmental features, with its visible pollution generated by intense industrial activity.³⁹ Even in Dickens's *Coketown*, the smoke is visible to the eye, and although it could seem an exaggeration, its "monstrous serpents of smoke" (*HT* 71) are closer to the documented reality of those times.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Marina Spiazzi, Marina Tavella, *Only Connect...New Directions*, Bologna, Zanichelli Editore, 2009, pp. 37-39.

³⁸The "Condition of England Question" was a phrase coined by Thomas Carlyle in 1839 to describe the conditions of the English working-class during the Industrial Revolution; it had a great effect on a number of writers of fiction in the Victorian era and after.

³⁹<https://www.journals.openedition.org>, viewed 10 December 2019.

1.3.2 Victorian England: a Place of Contradictions

During the late 1840s, Dickens increasingly turned his attention to certain fundamental social ills that previously had not particularly interested him. Seeing firsthand the dangers of air pollution due to industrial activity that people breathed in London, and having experienced the terrible ‘Great Stink’ of 1850s, he eventually joined the movement for sanitary reform that took root in England in those years, becoming one of its most fervent advocates. His involvement in the sanitary movement took the form of a series of articles published in his weekly journal *Household Words*;⁴⁰ on 1 July 1854, Dickens published an article entitled ‘Smoke or No Smoke’, which outlined the dangerous, harmful effects of smoke, which was visible to the eye, as well as harmful for lungs. The problem of pollution and sanitation went hand in hand with the problematic change of natural environment in mid-nineteenth-century London, where the fog, the smoke, and even the mud, had become part of Londoners' everyday experience. As Dickens denounced in his novel *Bleak House*, published in 1852, the London cityscape was characterized by an atmosphere of darkness and stagnation. There was mud everywhere in the city, where many sewers were completely open, and where many people used the public streets as toilets, that were usually simply holes in the ground. Therefore, the mud must have been nothing less than a liquid ordure at those times. Besides the absence of a sewage system, which caused every refuse to end up in the River Thames, that had become a kind of open sewer, London had to face another major problem: factory smoke forming a perpetual dirty fog over the city. When, especially with hot weather, the river gaseous effusions mixed with the smoky fog, life in every part of the city was in danger. The question nagging historians and intellectuals of that time is how such realities could be endured by people who could hardly avoid daily contact with them. Did they refuse to see the naked reality around them, or were they really unaware about it? This is absolutely one of the great mysteries of the Victorian Age.

⁴⁰*Household Words* was an English weekly magazine edited by Charles Dickens in the 1850s. It took its name from Shakespeare's *Henry V* line “Familiar in his mouth as household words”.



3. London's fog.

Dickens's vibrant satire of London's appalling sanitary conditions and environmental crisis in *Household Words* and *Bleak House* parallels the succeeding publication of the novel *Hard Times*, which is in turn set in a smoke-blackened industrial city where 'Nature is bricked out and killing air is bricked in.' (*HT* 65) It is worth noting the specific words that Dickens uses in this phrase; he substitutes the word 'pollution' with 'killing air', to underline the fact that smoky air is not merely polluted, but it is rather dangerous and cancerous for people's life. However, atmospheric and environmental pollution in Coketown appears as an unavoidable by-product of a society dominated by productivity and profits that brings, together with smoky air, wealth and the promise of a prosperous future for all (or quite all). This is why Coketown, with its ill natural ecosystem, is the silent setting for all the events that take place throughout the novel. Dickens's textual strategy provides for a description of the setting as it is, maintaining and accepting, in a way, the status quo. This is because, as a novelist, Dickens's purpose is never exclusively satirical; in his novels, he mixes satire with humour and irony, and his purpose is never to condemn, but rather to amuse his readers.⁴¹ He uses an imagery which is full of menace, that he represents through metaphors of evil and savagery. Moreover, he makes full use of adjectives and qualifiers which repeatedly delineate, and even exasperate, the characteristics of the

⁴¹Welsh, *The City of Dickens*, p. 10.

setting. There are three main images that he uses to express how alien and unnatural a place like Coketown is: the mad elephants, the serpents, and the Fairy Palace;

The Fairy palaces burst into illumination, before pale morning showed the monstrous serpents of smoke trailing themselves over Coketown. A clattering of clogs upon the pavement; a rapid ringing of bells; and all the melancholy-mad elephants. Polished and oiled up for the day's monotony, were at their heavy exercise again. (*HT* 71)

The image of the melancholy-mad elephants stands for the obedient and longsuffering factory workers and machines in Coketown, that work all day long and never take a rest. The fusion of humans and machines in this exotic animal, the elephant, suggests that the industrial system is not only alienating, but is also out of control, as it brings humans to a state of alienation which is so deep and incurable, that they end up by being tamed by the machines they serve. But why did Dickens choose exactly the elephant? Perhaps because during the Victorian Age, which was among other things a prosperous period for the crown's colonial enterprise, the British population got in touch with new animal species, and the elephant, more than any other animal, was imagined as an exotic hybrid of animal and machine, for its strength was exploited for working and carrying goods.⁴² "The piston of the steam-engine worked monotonously up and down, like the head of an elephant in a state of melancholy madness" (*HT* 27); this passage openly compares machines to elephants, stressing the melancholy and monotony that characterize the work of both of them.

If the metaphor of the melancholy mad elephants expresses a feeling that the industrial system is out of control, the one of snakes adds that it is also malevolent, like the tempter-snake of the Garden of Eden.⁴³ The factory chimneys, that trail "monstrous serpents of smoke" (*HT* 71) over Coketown, are cancerous, but at the same time they are tantalizing and unavoidable, for they bring progress and wealth.

⁴²<https://muse.jhu.edu/>, viewed 10 December 2019.

⁴³F.S. Schwarzbach, *Dickens and the City*, p. 146.

The metaphor of the Fairy Palace points out how devoid of fancy the factories really are, and how misleading they are, as they can appear to be Fairy Palaces only to those who are ignorant of their interiors and their purposes. This is because none of the buildings in Coketown reflects the need that it should fulfill, as they are all interchangeable, featureless, and of course unnatural.

1.3.3 Industrialization vs Dehumanization

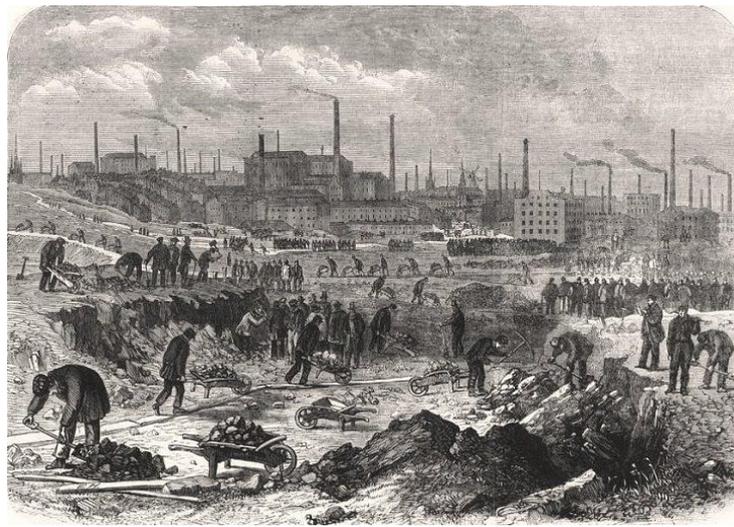
On every page, *Hard Times* manifests its identity as a critique of mid-Victorian industrial society, dominated by the Utilitarian principles of materialism, competition, and individualism. Although Dickens did not interpret alienation in the philosophical sense of Marx and Engels,⁴⁴ he understood that alienation was a common condition of urban man, whose emotional life and emotional needs were swept away from Utilitarian rationalism. In *Hard Times*, he deals with the ills of modern industrial society, that is dominated by productivity and profits, two twin evils that turn human beings into machines behaving according to the rules of the system. This new vision of human life, which is increasingly rigid, detached, and narrow, is one of the worst by-products of industrialization, and the major theme of *Hard Times*.

Human alienation in industrial society is clear in Dickens's metaphorical substitution of working people with the expression 'Hands'; men and women consist only of their hands, for only their hands can have functional purposes. When he introduces the readers to "the hardest working part of Coketown" (*HT* 65), he describes the working class in the following way:

Among the multitude of Coketown, generically called the 'Hands', - a race who would have found more favour with some people, if Providence had seen fit to make them only hands, or, like the lower creatures of the seashore, only hands and stomachs. (*HT* 66)

⁴⁴Welsh, *The City of Dickens*, p. 12.

The ‘Hands’ are men and women, boys and girls, who work in factory all day long, exactly as the machines they serve. Dickens compares them to an “unnatural family” living in the “great exhausted receiver of body” (*HT* 66) that is Coketown. What Dickens attacks is not so much the importance given to production and economic growth, but the perversion of materialism which leads to the dehumanization of human beings. In Coketown, humans are dehumanized and reduced to mere ‘Hands’, similarly, environment is stripped of its natural features, and becomes a huge ‘receiver of body’.



4. An ordinary working day in Coketown.

In February 1854, the same year of the publication of *Hard Times*, Dickens went to Preston, Manchester, to watch the effects of a strike which had been organized by workers. Immediately after, he wrote the article ‘On Strike’ in *Household Words*, where he expressed all his surprise and gladness in certifying that the situation had been exactly the opposite of what he had expected to find; in fact, everything was quiet and peaceful, men were well-behaved and seemed not to have resentment towards their employers. It does not mean that they did not fully believe in the justice of their case, but rather that they knew that “anger is of no use, starving out is of no use”;⁴⁵ Dickens’s political conclusion was not that the strike is right, but that the best way to solve the

⁴⁵Dickens, ‘On Strike,’ *Household Words*, London, Bradbury & Evans, 1854, vol. VIII: p. 553.

dispute was to submit it to impartial arbitrators agreed upon by both sides.⁴⁶ In *Hard Times*, the issue of strike and trade union is linked to the character of Stephen Blackpool. When tensions between employers and employees continue to grow in Coketown, and factory workers decide to organize a union strike against Mr. Bounderby, only Stephen Blackpool refuses to join, as he feels that it would only worsen the already burning crisis. Immediately after his decision, he is not only cut off by his former colleagues, but he is also fired by Mr. Bounderby, for he refuses to spy on them.

Stephen Blackpool fall into the loneliest of lives, the life of solitude among a familiar crowd. The stranger in the land who looks into ten thousand faces for some answering look and never finds it [...] they even avoided that side of the street on which he habitually walked; and left it, of all the working-men, to him only. (*HT* 142-143)

Stephen's tragedy is inevitable; it seems that he is destined to misery and defeat from the very beginning of the novel, because of his condition of humble industrial 'hand'. In fact, he is not only abandoned by his colleagues and fired by his supervisor, he has also to endure another defeat by the Law, when he is informed that divorce is possible only for wealthy people who can afford its high legal expenses. He is thus prevented from pursuing happiness in every field of his life, at the working, as well as at the sentimental level. Stephen is maybe the main victim of the industrial society, whose huge machinery grounds the people it should nourish. In this perspective, *Hard Times* can be considered one of the groundbreaking novels of the progressive thought, for it denounces the disease and moral illness of a modern civilization which is made of winning oppressors, and losing dehumanized victims.⁴⁷

⁴⁶Norman Page, *Hard Times, Great Expectations and Our Mutual Friend*, London, Norman Page, 1979, pp. 46-47.

⁴⁷Allen Samuels, *Hard Times; An introduction to the Variety of Criticism*, London, Macmillan Educational LTD, 1992, pp. 27-28.

Chapter 2. Nature and Fancy: Two Sides of the Same Coin

2.1 'Nature' in *Hard Times*

In *Hard Times*, nature is not solely to be equated with a physically green and fertile environment;⁴⁸ it consists also in habits of the mind, in human imagination, and especially in children's illuminating power of wonder and fancy. In a society dominated by productivity and profits, where "the tendency is to be frightfully literal and catalogue-like",⁴⁹ Dickens places particular importance on fantasy, creativity, and, above all, imagination, which are "inherent in the human breast"⁵⁰ and which "no amount of steam-engine will satisfy."⁵¹ In this novel, he repeatedly alludes to the parallel between children's impoverished upbringing in the name of fact and rationality, and adults' artificial, prosaic conditions of life in an industrial, increasingly materialistic world where it seems that there is no space left for wonder, genuine feelings, and of course, nature.⁵² He develops the idea of a common oppression of workers and children, who represent the two sides of an extreme and widespread state of social crisis. The family he depicts in this novel, the Gradgrinds, is the mirror of the industrial society in which they live; both of them are characterized by relations of oppression and denial, and in both of them there is a deep desire for fancy and genuine emotions.

The issue of prioritizing facts or fancy as a preparation to adulthood is a theme to which Dickens returns again and again throughout the novel; if children are raised in an increasingly industrial, dull, and alienating environment, and if they are deprived of all those fables and magical stories which are always full of natural elements, where can they learn about nature? How can they establish a respectful relationship with nature when they become adults? And again, should the naturally imaginative mind of the

⁴⁸Kate Flint, *Introduction to Hard Times*, London, Penguin Books, 2003, p. xiii.

⁴⁹John Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens*, London, Hard Press Publishing, 2013, p. 727.

⁵⁰Charles Dickens, 'A Preliminary Word,' *Household Words*, London, Bradbury & Evans, 1850, vol. I: p. 1.

⁵¹Dickens, 'The Amusements of People,' *Household Words*, London, Bradbury & Evans, 1850, vol. I: pp. 13-15.

⁵²Flint, *Introduction*, p. xvii.

child be allowed to develop freely, nourished by fairy tales and fantasy, if then the real world will demand him to behave as a kind of machine?

2.1.1 Sowing, Reaping, Garnering: a Metaphor for Human Life

According to Dickens, natural environment and people are strongly related;⁵³ his interest in showing how important and ‘natural’ the relationship between people and the ecosystem actually is, is apparent in the titling of the three sections of *Hard Times*, ‘Sowing’, ‘Reaping’ and ‘Garnering’, which parallel its characters’ growth and psychological development with the three main phases of harvesting. They collectively suggest that the grounding children receive in their formative years directly affects their adulthood; in fact, these three titles make us think also of the proverb ‘you reap what you sow’, which means that, sooner or later, people face the consequences of their actions.

The novel begins with the ‘sowing’ of its young characters; on one side, Tom, Louisa, and Bitzer, on the other one, Sissy Jupe. Tom, Louisa, and Bitzer, who are Mr. Gradgrind’s two children and his favourite, respectively, are the perfect examples of how the proverb above works; they grow in a completely unnatural and unimaginative environment, where the only things they are taught are facts, notions, and rational sciences, that are planted in them like seeds in vegetable gardens.

The little Gradgrinds had cabinets in various departments of science, too. They had a little conchological cabinet, and a little metallurgical cabinet, and a little mineralogical cabinet; and the specimens were all arranged and labeled, and the bits of stone and ore looked as though they might have been broken from the parent substances by those tremendously hard instruments their own names; and, to paraphrase the idle legend of Peter Piper,⁵⁴ who

⁵³Ivi, p. xii.

⁵⁴Dickens refers to the popular tongue-twister: ‘Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled pepper. Where’s the peck of pickled pepper Peter Piper picked?’

had never found his way into their nursery, if the greedy little Gradgrinds grasped at more than this, what was it for good gracious goodness sake, that the greedy little Gradgrinds grasped at! (*HT* 17)

This excerpt shows that the only kind of relationship between the little Gradgrinds and the natural ecosystem is the scientific one; they learn about nature and its elements through scientific experiments only, using ‘specimens’, ‘labels’, and ‘hard instruments.’ Science is a discipline that entails a kind of distance between the observer and the subject of his analysis; in the same way, Tom and Louisa study nature, never getting in emotional contact with it, and never feeling part of it. Dickens writes that life at Stone Lodge, the Gradgrinds’ home, “went monotonously round like a piece of machinery which discouraged human interference.” (*HT* 59) Mr. Gradgrind’s children, as well as his pupils at school, are lacking in imagination and personal experience, as his system of education denies not only the enjoyment of childhood, but also their awareness and knowledge of the world around them. This is proved when Tom and Louisa are caught by their father peeping into a circus ring: when he tells them off for watching horses from a hole, Louisa answers, “Wanted to see what it was like” (*HT* 19), suggesting that, perhaps, she has never seen a true horse before. Certainly, the little Gradgrinds have studied on books what a horse is, what are its physical features, and so on, but certainly, they have never done such an enjoyable thing like seeing a circus show because, according to their father, it does not teach anything. Later in the novel, Dickens will show that all these constrictions eventually make them unable to tackle everyday life, and address situations requiring experience and maturity that evolve, according to him, from children’s exercise of fancy and imaginative creativity.



5. Illustration of the 'incident' at Sleary's circus.

Another 'victim' of Mr. Gradgrind's is Bitzer. He is one of his best students, and the perfect realization of his pragmatic educational system. This is made clear in the following excerpt, in which he gives his own definition of a horse, which is completely based on rational evidence:

Quadruped. Graminivorous. Forty teeth, namely twenty-four grinders, four eye-teeth, and twelve incisive. Sheds coat in the spring; in marshy countries, sheds hoofs, too. Hoofs hard, but requiring to be shod with iron. Age known by marks in mouth. (*HT* 12)

Bitzer grasps facts easily, but if we consider that he is just a child, and that he shows neither compassion nor imaginative tendency throughout the novel, he seems to lack those basic human qualities that usually characterize his (tender) age. Dickens's physical description of the boy credits his light hair, cold eyes, light skin "so unwholesomely deficient in the natural tinge" (*HT* 12), to his lack of exposure to the sun, and therefore, to his lack of contact with nature as a whole.⁵⁵

The novel continues with the 'reaping' and 'garnering'; at this point, Tom, Louisa, and Bitzer are adults, and reap what they have been planted since they were

⁵⁵<http://victoriantcircle.blogspot.com/murdering-innocents-in-hard-times.html>, viewed 28 December 2019.

little children. To use another famous proverb, this is the moment in which “all chickens come home to roost” (the meaning is that, sooner or later, problems emerged). Bitzer’s separateness from nature has made him grow up into a man who puts aside every emotion and natural instinct, exactly as his beloved teacher; Tom becomes a selfish criminal, who robs Bounderby’s bank, blames another innocent man, and escapes abroad, not being seen again; finally, Louisa matures into a passive, unhappy woman, who has irrevocably married a man she does not love, and whose life, to quote Arthur Schopenhauer, “swings like a pendulum backward and forward between pain and boredom.” The suppression of imagination she has endured since she was a little child produces a dangerous annihilation in her, making her passively accept a risky unhappy marriage, as Dickens points out in the following dialogue between Louisa and her father:

Mr. Gradgrind: ‘Have you any wish, in reference to the period of your marriage, my child?’

Louisa: ‘None, father. What does it matter!’

Mr. Gradgrind: ‘Louisa, you have never entertained in secret any other proposal?’

Louisa: ‘What other proposal can have been made to me? Whom have I seen? Where have I been? What are my heart’s experiences? [...] What do I know, father, of tastes and fancies; of aspirations and affections; of all that part of my nature in which such light things might have been nourished? What escape have I had from problems that could be demonstrated, and realities that could be grasped?’ (*HT* 100)

While Bitzer and Tom never repent, Louisa grows wiser over the novel, and increases awareness about the damages of the impoverished upbringing she has been given by her father. (The gender issue in *Hard Times* will be addressed in ch. 3) Moreover, she realizes that she is lacking, even lost, when life requires a bit of experience and maturity. In the last chapter of Book II, Louisa has a kind of mental

breakdown, during which she vents all the sufferings she has always hidden inside of her heart:

How could you give me life, and take from me all the inappreciable things that raise it from the state of conscious death? Where are the graces of my soul? Where are the sentiments of my heart? What have you done, O father, what have you done, with the garden that should have bloomed once, in this great wilderness here! [...] What you have never nurtured in me, you have never nurtured in yourself; but if you had only done so long ago, or if you had only neglected me, what a much better and much happier creature I should have been this day! [...] It has been my task from infancy to strive against every natural prompting that has arisen in my heart; if you had known that there lingered in breast, sensibilities, affections, weaknesses capable of being cherished into strength, defying all the calculations ever made by man, and no more known to his arithmetic than his Creator is, would you have given me to the husband whom I am now sure that I hate? [...] If I had been stone blind; if I had groped my way by my sense of touch, and had been free, while I knew the shapes and surfaces of things, to exercise my fancy somewhat, in regard to them; I should have been a million times wiser, happier, more loving, more contented, more innocent and human in all good respects, than I am with the eyes I have. [...] With a hunger and thirst upon me, father, which have never been for a moment appeased; with an ardent impulse towards some region where rules, and figures, and definitions were not quite absolute; I have grown up, battling every inch of my way. (*HT* 208-210)

Louisa passionately tells her father that she has an unquenchable thirst of fancy, emotions, love, and nature inside of her, for she has always striven ‘against every natural prompting’ and all the ‘sensibilities, affections, weaknesses’ that she was expected to hide; she has always been prevented from exercising her imagination and

showing her emotions, in favour of ‘rules, and figures, and definitions.’ All this has made her a woman whose ‘garden that should have bloomed once’, a paraphrase Dickens uses for motherhood, is only a ‘great wilderness.’ Indeed, this is more than a given, it is actually a prophecy: unfortunately, Louisa’s awareness comes too late, never remedying the damage of her ‘drought.’ Indeed, she will never succeed in having a family of her own, as for her “Such a thing was never to be” (*HT* 287).

Louisa’s disease is the result of what William Oddie calls “perverted rationalism.” In his study of *Hard Times* (1973), he deals with Dickens’s attack on materialism, arguing that what Dickens severely criticizes in his novels, and especially in *Hard Times*, is not so much the Industrial Revolution, which unquestionably brought progress and development, but rather its ‘perverted’ frame of mind, and the impoverished educational system that has followed.⁵⁶ In fact, what we identify as the ‘Gradgrind system’ in the novel, was actually very common in Victorian England, where pupils were basically given a pragmatic, factual education in order to make them a passive and unthinking work force, that the employers could easily manipulate.⁵⁷ A perfect representative of this category is Stephen Blackpool, whose ‘repressed’ grounding actually condemns him to be eternally only a cog in the wheel of the system.

Dickens specifically deals with the issue of the relationship between the dramatic physical change which has started in the nineteenth century, and the violation of childhood perpetuated by utilitarian society, in his essay ‘Uncommercial Traveller’ (1860), where he describes a visit to his childhood home of Chatham, that he names ‘Dullborough Town.’ He describes it not only as the place of his youth, but also as the “birthplace of his fancy,”⁵⁸ as, according to Dickens, childhood is the very phase in human life in which fancy and imagination are allowed to develop freely. This nostalgic excursion carries a wider significance, that goes beyond the mere emotional bond between a man and his motherland; in fact, his memory of Dullborough belongs to a lost pre-industrial past, which has been swept away by a new age, aggressively utilitarian and commercial. It can be seen as the epitome of the dramatic shift that has occurred over the first half of the nineteenth century, from a predominantly agrarian,

⁵⁶Allen Samuels, *Hard Times*, London, MacMillan Education LTD, 1992, p. 45.

⁵⁷<https://midtermpapers.com/essays/hard-times-is-set-out-in-three-different-books-the-sowing-the-reaping-the-garnering>, viewed 20 December 2019.

⁵⁸Andrews Malcolm, *Dickens and the Grown-up Child*, London, The Macmillan Press LTD, 1994, p. 42.

pastoral culture, to the modern one of industry, railways, and great cities, that has suppressed not only the natural ecosystem, but also fancy and amusement from people's life. Through his personal experience of revisiting Dullborough, Dickens mourns an age that has gone forever.



6. Illustration by Harry Furniss for the Gutenberg e-book edition of 'Uncommercial Traveller' (2015).

It is worth noticing how Dickens plays with words when naming the toponyms of his writings; he writes that Dullborough is the birthplace of his fancy, but how can a dull place be such a thing? This is clearly a provocation, as the adjective 'dull' suggests lack of imagination and wonder. In the same way, he names the city of *Hard Times* 'Coketown', the city of coke, to denounce its unacceptable environmental crisis. In both cases, he uses words referring to the disappearance of natural beauty, in favour of a new harsh reality. Through his detailed, even fussy, description of Coketown, he attempts to raise his readers' awareness that the spiritual malaise of their age goes hand in hand with the disappearance of nature, in both physical and imaginative senses, from their existence. In fact, the name 'Coketown' signifies 'any factory town' in England, suggesting that the problems it encounters actually take place on a national scale.⁵⁹

⁵⁹Elaine Ostry, *Social Dreaming: Dickens and the Fairy Tale*, New York, Routledge, 2002, p. 54.

2.1.2 Murdering the Innocents

Now, what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts: nothing else will ever be of any service to them. This is the principle on which I bring up my own children, and this is the principle on which I bring up these children. Stick to Facts, sir! (*HT* 9)

Hard Times begins with Thomas Gradgrind pronouncing the statement above, in which he passionately affirms his educational philosophy strictly based on ‘Facts.’ Mr. Gradgrind’s system essentially kills any kind of imaginative and creative impulse that does not reflect reality; during his lessons, students are taught only verifiable and quantifiable facts, for “the reason is the only faculty to which education should be addressed” (*HT* 24). In his school, individuality is sacrificed in favour of a collective brainwashing that eventually prevents self expression and personal experience. Generally speaking, children are the major victims of this perverted system that basically aims to turn them into little machines that can memorize countless data and information, never acquiring true knowledge of anything. In this situation of dangerous disenchantment, Mr. Gradgrind’s calling Sissy “Girl number twenty” (*HT* 10), suggests that students are to him only mere numbers, faceless people that he just has to fill with facts. Therefore, as the title of the second chapter suggests, children are doomed to be ‘murdered’ by the very institution that should, on the contrary, build a future for them.

By means of *Hard Times*, Dickens operates a critique on educational Utilitarianism, on its fanatical exaggeration and its dangerous social consequences. It examines how damaging and limiting an upbringing which allows no place for imagination and natural experience can be, and how risky a social philosophy based only on productivity and profits can be for the whole humankind. In 1855, Dickens wrote:

My satire is against those who see figures and averages, and nothing else - the representatives of the wickedest and most enormous vice of this time - the men who, through long years to come, will do more to damage the real useful truths of political economy, than I could do (if I tried) in my whole life.⁶⁰

This declaration can be considered as the ‘manifesto’ of *Hard Times*, in which the very existence of ‘those representatives’, epitomized in the figures of Mr. Gradgrind and Mr. Bounderby, is as much a ‘fact’ as are the ‘killing airs and gases’ that flutter over Coketown.⁶¹ By means of them, Dickens satirizes all those who strictly attempt to make sense of the world through statistics and material evidence only, without any kind of imaginative projection or aesthetic purpose. If we read Dickens’s first description of Mr. Gradgrind, we immediately realize that it is itself a ‘matter of fact’:

A man of realities. A man of fact and calculations. A man who proceeds upon the principle that two and two are four, and nothing over, and who is not to be talked into allowing for anything over. [...] With a rule and a pair of scales, and the multiplication table always in his pocket, sir, ready to weigh and measure any parcel of human nature, and tell you exactly what it comes to. It is a mere question of figures, a case of simple arithmetic. (*HT* 10)

Mr. Gradgrind is ‘ready to measure any parcel of human nature’ with all his tools, for everything is ‘a mere question of figure.’ Here, Dickens openly denounces that men like Mr. Gradgrind, who think to be able to ‘weigh and measure’ everything and everyone, are actually lacking, for they cannot make distinction among things, and even more important, cannot build relations between them and what is around them. In his

⁶⁰Excerpt from a letter by Charles Dickens to Charles Knight: *Letters*, London, Chapman and Hall, 30 January 1855.

⁶¹Flint, *Introduction*, p. xii.

novels, Dickens often correlates environment to people as, according to him, people become what their upbringing makes them.⁶² As a consequence, children who are raised in situations where they are only fed with facts, then will inevitably ‘see figures and averages, and nothing else’ when they will be adults. In *Hard Times*, the little Gradgrinds live in “a great square house, [...] a calculated, cast up, balanced, and proved house,” which shows in the distance as “a very regular feature on the face of the country” (*HT* 16); everything at Stone Lodge is symmetrical and functioning, exactly as its inhabitants’ everyday life is expected to be;

No little Gradgrind had ever seen a face in the moon; it was up in the moon before it could speak distinctly. No little Gradgrind had ever learnt the silly jingle, Twinkle, twinkle, little star; how I wonder what you are! [...] No Little Gradgrind had ever associated a cow in a field with that famous cow with the crumpled horn who tossed the dog who worried the cat who killed the rat who ate the malt. [...] They had never heard of those celebrities. (*HT* 16)

2.2 The Issue of Childhood

The controversy over the issue of children’s education and the coming-of-age maturity was crucial at Dickens’s times, where the lack of a share educational ideology was actually the manifestation of a more general, deep-rooted uncertainty about the cultural status of childhood in nineteenth-century England.⁶³ In fact, the whole Victorian society was characterized by a sharp class hierarchy, where upper-class children and lower-class children had completely different upbringings; the former usually went to school or studied at home; the latter worked to support their families, as young Charles Dickens had to do after his father was imprisoned for debt. What is worthy of remark is that, in spite of their differences, they were both forms of deprived childhood; if

⁶²Malcolm, *Dickens and the Grown-up Child*, pp. 66-67.

⁶³Ibid.

children working in factories were deprived of the innocence of their tender age, those who had the possibility to study were prematurely forced out of childhood as well, as they were victims of, in Dickens's words, Mr. Gradgrind's method of "educating the reason without stooping to the cultivation of the sentiments and affections." (*HT* 52) In *Hard Times*, the little Gradgrinds are actually neither children nor adults; they are the representatives of all those in whom childhood has been arrested, maturity has been forced, producing lacking adults who are actually precocious grown-up children. Deprived of a proper childhood, Tom and Louisa develop into calculating individuals, who eventually become only mere cogs in the industrial wheel of Coketown, paying, whether they like it or not, for their father's mistakes.

"Leave childhood to ripen in your children,"⁶⁴ Rousseau wrote in the Preface to his novel *Emile* (1762), in which he exhorted his readers to consider a child simply as the child he actually is. And this is almost the same message that Dickens launches a century later through *Hard Times*; on every page, he insists on the dangers of Utilitarianism, which physically destroys natural environment to build industrial centers, and metaphorically destroys children's infancy to build an increasingly mechanical and productive society. The final paragraph of the novel is a challenging warning: "Dear reader! It rests with you and me, whether, in our two fields of action, similar things shall be or not. Let them be!" (*HT* 288). Here, Dickens directly addresses his readers, encouraging them to decide whether to take action against the evils of their times, or to stay passive, accepting the status quo with all its pros and cons.⁶⁵

2.2.1 Dickens: Defender of the Fairy Tale

In an age in which there were different, and often opposite, attitudes towards education, children, and children's literature, Dickens has often been considered as the 'Defender of the Fairy Tale,'⁶⁶ whose two strongest works of defense are 'Frauds on the Fairies' (1853), and *Hard Times* (1854). Having postulated that fancy expressing itself in

⁶⁴Ivi, p. 84.

⁶⁵Flint, *Introduction*, p. xxx.

⁶⁶Ostry, *Social Dreaming*, pp. 29-30.

fictional form gives birth to fairy tale, which is precisely that form of narrative which allows imagination to exceed the limits of the real world, Dickens wrote his essay 'Frauds on the Fairies', in which he defends the value of fairy tales against all those who would give them a didactic and utilitarian aim. He believed that the genre at issue kept a number of moral and social values that his modern, industrial society had already lost.⁶⁷ An excerpt of the essay to follow:

In an utilitarian age, of all other times, it is a matter of grave importance that Fairy tales should be respected. Our English red tape is too magnificently red ever to be employed in the tying up of such trifles, but everyone who has considered the subject knows full well that a nation without fancy, without some romance, never did, never can, never will hold a great place under the sun. [...] It becomes doubly important that the little books themselves, nurseries of fancy as they are, should be preserved. To preserve them in their usefulness, they must be as much preserved in their simplicity, and purity, and innocent extravagance, as if they were actual fact.⁶⁸

According to Dickens, fairy tale is something useful that needs to be respected and preserved from all those who try to suppress or denature it in the name of progress.⁶⁹ He refers to the books as 'nurseries of fancy', as they are the first means to introduce people into the magical realm of fantasy when they are children, and then continue to support them when they become adults, by fortifying them against the evils of the world in which they live. The passionate way in which Dickens defends the value of imagination in this specific essay shows what we could define a 'Romantic tendency.' Indeed, Dickens can be placed among the Victorian heirs of Romanticism, the so-called 'Fantasists,' who revived a number of principles, such as the importance given to imagination, the interest in folk and romance traditions, and the idea that

⁶⁷Ibid.

⁶⁸Dickens, 'Frauds on the Fairies,' *Household Words*, London, Bradbury & Evans, 1853, vol. VIII: pp. 97-100.

⁶⁹Ostry, *Social Dreaming*, p. 28.

imagination needed to be exercised and developed in childhood more than other mental faculty.⁷⁰

To understand this affinity, it is worth opening a window onto the man who can be regarded as the father of English Romanticism, William Wordsworth. As a poet, he proposed a new concept of poetry, based on the fact that it should be a solitary act taking its origin from “emotion recollected in tranquility”;⁷¹ he believed that only in rural, natural environment, man is nearer to his own passions, and can be in contact with his inner emotional sphere. Both Wordsworth and Dickens are interested in the relationship between man and nature, that they consider related and inseparable, and where ‘nature’ means also the world of sense perceptions and emotions.⁷² Another common denominator between the two is the importance given to imagination. Both Wordsworth and Dickens, consider imagination as a means to learn about and understand reality, without never admitting a divorce between the two. According to Wordsworth, the one who is really able to exercise imagination is the poet, a ‘childish’ man “endued with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul”;⁷³ this is because the poet preserves his ‘infant sensibility’, a condition that enables a quasi-organic connection between the child and the world in which he lives.⁷⁴ Similarly, Dickens defends the value of children’s fancy as a necessary means to distinguish between reality and imagination, and to develop what British philosopher Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) would call a “good citizenship”,⁷⁵ when they become adults. In his book, *What Knowledge is of Most Worth* (1884), Spencer writes:

Those various forms of pleasurable occupation which fill up the leisure left by graver occupations - the enjoyments of music, poetry, painting, etc. - manifestly imply a pre-existing society. Not only is a considerable

⁷⁰Ivi, pp. 34-35.

⁷¹William Wordsworth, ‘Preface to Lyrical Ballads,’ *Lyrical Ballads*, London, T.N. Longman & O. Rees, 1800.

⁷²Marina Spiazzi, Marina Tavella, *Only Connect...New Directions*, Bologna, Zanichelli Editore, 2009, pp. 78-82.

⁷³Ibid.

⁷⁴Malcolm, *Dickens and the Grown-up Child*, p.60.

⁷⁵Katharina Boehm, *Charles Dickens and the Sciences of Childhood*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, p.141.

development of them impossible without a long-established social union; but their very subject-matter consists in great part of social sentiments and sympathies. Not only does society supply the conditions to their growth; but also the ideas and sentiments they express. And, consequently, that part of human conduct which constitutes good citizenship, is of more moment than that which goes out in accomplishments or exercise of the tastes; and, in education, preparation for the one must rank before preparation for the other.

Dickens shared Spencer's argument that activities which inspire children's creativity and enjoyment, such as play, reading, painting, listening to music and fairy tales, and so on, play a pivotal role in developing a sound social fabric, where people are able to live together according to the rules imposed by society.⁷⁶ Like Spencer, Dickens was interested in how playful activities enable children to play adult roles and to engage imaginatively with the social world of adults; simultaneously, he deals with the consequences of an upbringing deprived of such things. The character who best represents these problems is Tom Gradgrind, whose education turns out to be 'destructive' for him. By his father's will, he has been raised without all those 'forms of pleasurable occupation' and emotional experiences, which are so important for children's growth, but that his father has always ignored.

All things considered, the instinctive question is: has Mr. Gradgrind achieved the expected result? Has little Tom become a good man? Has he taken a respectable place in the world? None of this. In fact, he eventually becomes a selfish criminal, who betrays his family and cuts all his loved ones off from his life, disclosing the lowliness of an education based only on facts, with no importance given to affection and love. Moreover, his forced exile at the end of the novel represents the capstone of his whole family's failure in establishing social bonds. They all fail: Louisa does not succeed in having a family of her own, Tom is destined to die alone abroad, and widowed Mr. Gradgrind becomes an accomplice, too, when he helps his guilty son to escape, fooling not only the law, but also any kind of rational principles.

⁷⁶Ibid.

However, within the Gradgrind family, there is a great hole. In his book, *Dickens and Women* (1983), Michael Slater argues that the great absence in *Hard Times* is the mother figure; Mrs. Gradgrind's absence is both a cause and a consequence of the family's malaise. Although she seems not to share her husband's interest in facts, she lacks the energy to oppose his system of education. Throughout the novel, she is always passive, and she never demonstrates sympathy towards her children, especially her daughter. Her worst fault is that she does not succeed in providing for them an alternative to her husband's rigid world of facts; as a mother, she should inspire her children's imagination and creativity, rather than annihilating them further. Women are traditionally those who tell fables to their children, giving them an alternative to what is, always traditionally, a more severe father. Anyway, this is not the case of Mrs. Gradgrind, who never expresses her own opinion about anything, giving her husband full power. She just has an epiphany on her deathbed, when she tells Louisa that "there is something - not an Ology at all - that your father has missed, or forgotten, Louisa. I don't know what it is" (*HT* 194); in this very moment, Mrs. Gradgrind suddenly seems to realize that there was something wrong in her children's upbringing and, even if she cannot say exactly what it was, she suggests that Louisa and Tom are missing a key ingredient for becoming 'fully' adults.

In spite of her secondary, even marginal position in the novel, Mrs. Gradgrind turns out to hold one of the most important roles in the story, for she represents what Louisa would become, if she does not rebel against her father's authority. She thus works as a cautionary exemplum of the harms caused by the 'Gradgrind system,' and more generally, by all those who ignore the individual, as well as social benefits of enhancing the 'natural' activity of fancy.

2.2.2 Fact vs Fancy

Dickens thought that fancy and reality have been drawn apart excessively in the developing industrial society; for this reason, he dedicated part of his writing career to 'restore' the old relationship between the two, as the "fusion of the graces of the

imagination with the realities of life [...] is vital to the welfare of any community.”⁷⁷ Dickens believed that childhood was, to use Elizabeth Bowen’s words, “the age of magic, the Eden where fact and fiction were the same”;⁷⁸ it thus needed to be protected from that overwhelming progress which was altering every aspect of human life, childhood included.

Hard Times can be seen as a moral and cautionary tale, warning society about the dangers of excluding fancy from people’s life. It can be considered as a moral fable not because of its formal technique - it does not end with a moral actually - but rather because of its persistent reminder of its intention.⁷⁹ Mr. Gradgrind’s following discourse to his students is a clear example of this:

Fact, fact, fact! [...] You are to be in all things regulated and governed by fact. We hope to have [...] commissioners of fact, who will force the people to be a people of fact, and of nothing but fact. You must discard the world of Fancy altogether. You have nothing to do with it. You are not to have, in any object of use or ornament, what would be a contradiction in fact. You don’t walk upon flowers in fact; you cannot be allowed to walk upon flowers in carpet [...] You never meet with quadrupeds going up and down walls; you must not have quadrupeds represented upon walls. (*HT* 14)

Dickens’s exaggerated language shows the dangers of exaggeration,⁸⁰ and calls for a balance, a compromise between rationalism and fancy. Ideally, One should “come upon Reason through the tender light of Fancy”;⁸¹ according to Dickens, thus, fact and fancy are complementary,⁸² as, without fancy, reason becomes distorted and destructive. Education should always include a space for children to let their fancy and their imagination free; from a pedagogical point of view, reading imaginative literature is

⁷⁷Dickens, ‘A Preliminary Word.’

⁷⁸Elizabeth Bowen, ‘Out of a Book,’ *Collected Impressions*, London, Longmans, 1950, p. 269.

⁷⁹Ostry, *Social Dreaming*, p. 144.

⁸⁰Ivi, p. 52.

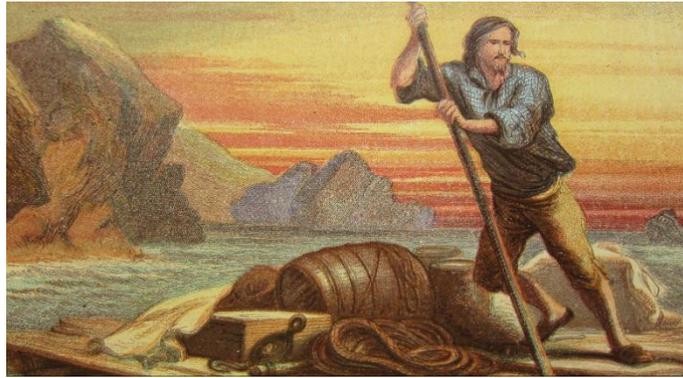
⁸¹Roger Cox, *Shaping Childhood: Themes of Uncertainty in the History of Adult-Child Relationship*, New York, Routledge, 2002, p. 195.

⁸²Matsika Greenwell, *Dickens and the Children of Empire*, London, Palgrave, 2000, p. 181.

necessary to make them able to distinguish between reality and imagination. On the contrary, those who are overwhelmed by facts eventually become lacking and 'deformed' adults.⁸³ In *Hard Times*, Josiah Bounderby is a clear example of this; he is proud of his adherence to reason and the industrial system, he always accuses the others of excess of fancy - he repeatedly accuses Cecilia Jupe of being too creative throughout the novel - but he is actually the one who engages in fancy more than any other character, for he creates a fairy tale of his own life: he tells everybody that his mother left him, that he was a poor, young vagabond, just to make his tale more dramatic, and to make others even more astounded listening to what he has become thanks to his own forces. However, this is not the exact truth; Mr. Bounderby is not the self-made man he has always maintained to be, as he has spontaneously abandoned his house and his family to make fortune on his own. Thus, the very narrative of his life is fanciful. Another example is Thomas Gradgrind who avoids, and wants the others to avoid, any form of fancy that could exceed verifiable facts. "Never Wonder!" (*HT* 52), he always repeats to his children, and 'Never wonder' can be seen as the motto of his own life. For this reason, he torments his mind about what people read in Coketown library:

It was a melancholy fact, that these readers persisted in wondering. They wondered about human nature, human passions, human hopes and fears, the struggles, triumphs and defeats, the cares and joys and sorrows, the lives and deaths, of common men and women! They sometimes, after fifteen hours' work, sat down to read mere fables about men and women, more or less like themselves, and about children, more or less like their own. They took De Foe to their bosoms, instead of Euclid, and seemed to be on the whole more comforted by Goldsmith than by Cocker. (*HT* 53)

⁸³Malcolm, *Dickens and the Grown-up Child*, pp. 83-84.



7. Illustration of Robinson Crusoe's shipwreck.

De Foe, the brilliant author of *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), and Oliver Goldsmith, whose works include *The Deserted Village* (1770) and *She Stoops to Conquer* (1773), were two of Dickens's favorite writers. Both De Foe and Goldsmith wrote fictional stories, set in fictional places, where their protagonists live extraordinary adventures; Robinson Crusoe is shipwrecked on a desert island, where he organizes a primitive empire of his own (*Robinson Crusoe*), and Charles Marlow (*She Stoops to Conquer*) is a man who has travelled the world, as well, and who lets his feelings and his emotions control his life. It is not surprising, thus, that Mr. Gradgrind cannot understand why people loose time reading such surreal kinds of books. He would like them to read books about facts, written by pragmatic authors like Euclid (300 BC), the father of geometry, or Edward Cocker (1631-1675), author of many treatises on arithmetic.

In the previous excerpt, the sentence 'after fifteen hours' work' has a meaning: beyond the implicit denunciation of the extremely strenuous working time of factory workers, who spend 'fifteen hours' at work, Dickens wants his readers to be aware that those who are more in need of reading 'mere fables' are especially those very poor people who restlessly work in factories. In this way, he suggests that fancy can be also seen as a diversion bringing comfort and relief, that is something needed by both children and adults in modern society. Imagination is for them like a breath of fresh air, like a 'vent', as Dickens states in the following excerpt:

Is it possible, I wonder, that there was any analogy between the case of the Coketown population and the case of the little Gradgrinds? [...] That there was any Fancy in them demanding to be brought into healthy existence instead of struggling on in convulsion? That exactly in the ratio as they worked long and monotonously, the craving grew within them for some physical relief - some relaxation, encouraging good humour and good spirits, and giving them a vent. (*HT* 30)

It is worth saying that one of Dickens's purposes in *Hard Times* is to convince his readers of the equivalence between Mr. Gradgrind's educational philosophy and Mr. Bounderby's economic theory;⁸⁴ both of them are related to nineteenth-century Utilitarianism, whose educational and industrial systems were strongly connected. Now as then, school cranks out the adults of tomorrow; in the same way, Mr. Gradgrind's school teaches children to be good workers for Mr. Bounderby's industry. In the novel, the struggle between facts and fancy relates the public sphere, that is the social community of Coketown, to the private one, that is the Gradgrind family. They both suffer from spiritual and moral malaise, and in both of them there is fancy demanding to be shown; what is dramatic is that they all seem to be unable to change the status quo. This is because those who grow up in such a harsh reality are unable to tackle the problems and the difficulties of everyday life, for they have no experience of the world around them; Mr. Bounderby cannot get out the fake story he has built around him, while Stephen Blackpool cannot divorce from the woman who causes him only pain and suffering. In the passage above, Dickens draws a parallel between the Coketown 'hands' and the little Gradgrinds; they are both in a painful given condition, and they are both in need of a 'physical relief'. If children would need less facts and more fancy in their grounding, factory workers would need to restore the contact with the environment around them, and the dialogue with the emotional, imaginative sphere inside of them.

⁸⁴John Peck, *David Copperfield and Hard Times*, London, St. Martin Press, 1995, p. 205.

Dickens was sincerely worried about the atrophy of imagination which characterized his society;⁸⁵ in *Hard Times*, he struggles to assert the existence of a universal human need for fancy ‘demanding to be brought into healthy existence’ which must be satisfied, as it is the only temporary escape from a society that promotes the suppression of any kind of amusement.⁸⁶ Indeed, Dickens considered both fancy and nature as safety valves that beautify people’s lives;⁸⁷ in the novel, the countryside is the place where people can get some fresh air out of the smoke of the city, and recover their souls in the fields, where everything is green, luxuriant, and pleasant (*HT* 256). This is because, according to Dickens, the awakening of reason and moral sense, that corresponds with adulthood, does not diminish human impulsive love for nature;⁸⁸ adults still have an innate instinct towards nature for they are ‘naturally’ joined. In the same way, humans need fancy to alleviate their sufferings and escape from the prosaic conditions of their lives. Paradoxically, those who live in Coketown need imagination also to keep the contact with nature that, otherwise, would totally disappear.

2.3 The (True) Thing Needful

Through *Hard Times*, Dickens suggests that neither nature nor fancy can be cast out of the industrial world, as the realm of fact can itself produce a form of fancy,⁸⁹ giving his readers the hope that imagination can never be completely extinguished. For this reason, he contrasts the fact-driven city of Coketown with Sleary's Circus, which represents amusement and acts as a counter to the efficient, ‘workful’ world that Mr. Gradgrind and Mr. Bounderby represent in the novel. As Sleary says, “People must be amused, [...] they can’t be always working, nor yet they can’t be always learning” (*HT* 45); in fact, the circus is that very place where people can simply amuse, letting their imagination free to soar, and where the world of fancy and magic comes to life. The company’s members “dance upon rolling casks, stand upon bottles, catch knives and

⁸⁵Malcolm, *Dickens and the Grown-up Child*, p. 45.

⁸⁶Ibid.

⁸⁷Ostry, *Social Dreaming*, pp. 56-57.

⁸⁸Malcolm, *Dickens and the Grown-up Child*, p. 77.

⁸⁹Flint, *Introduction*, pp. xx-xxi.

balls, twirl hand-basins, ride upon anything, jump over everything, and stick at nothing” (*HT* 40); obviously, all this cannot be understood by Mr. Gradgrind and Mr. Bounderby who assume that, since such activities produce nothing useful, they have no value.⁹⁰ This is their main mistake, for they insist on calculating the value of the circus in figures, as if it were one of their businesses, but it is evident that in this case they cannot; this is another example of how irrational they actually are.

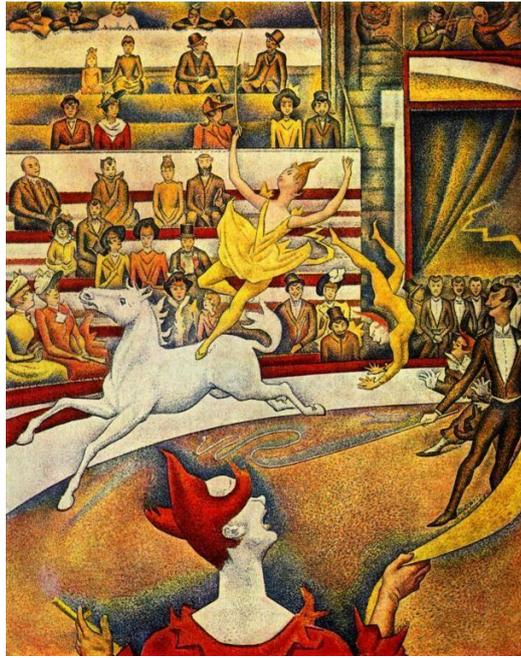
For Dickens, the value of the circus is in its relations, rather than in its good purpose of amusement.⁹¹ He writes that “there was a remarkable gentleness and childishness about these people,” and “an untiring readiness to help and pity one another” (*HT* 40); with these words he suggests that the main value of the circus in the novel is not in entertaining spectators, but in bringing inestimable values such as compassion and love, which are typically ‘childish’ attitudes. These, not facts, are the things that are really ‘needful’ in the industrial city of Coketown, and these are the things that make such an alienating place still ‘human.’ In fact, the circus people “cared so little for plain Fact” (*HT* 42). But why did Dickens choose the circus?

A possible reason could be that its lifestyle and community were among those things that did not survive the Industrial Revolution, when skilled craftsmen, such as the circus people, were replaced by machines and unskilled laborers. The circus, thus, represents the pre-industrial form of labor and society, whose values of genuineness, compassion, and cooperation among people slowly faded away.⁹² This is another point in favor of the novel’s parallelism between disappearance of nature and disappearance of fancy, in the form of wonder, but also human values.

⁹⁰<https://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/>, viewed 30 December 2019.

⁹¹Ibid.

⁹²Ibid.



8. Georges Seurat, *The Circus*, 1890-91, oil on canvas, Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

2.3.1 The Circus as a Diversion

“There is no place which recalls so strongly our recollections of childhood as Astley’s.” This quote belongs to a story written by Dickens and published in *Sketches by Boz*,⁹³ in which the author describes a visit to the Astley’s Amphitheatre, a popular circus in the South of England, whose creator, Philip Astley, is regarded as the father of the modern circus.⁹⁴ Among his major innovations, he integrated circus programs with entertainment experiences including music, clowns, and domesticated animals, especially horses. If Astley acted as a springboard for the establishment of the circus, it certainly rose its popularity after his death, during the Victorian Age, when it got a foothold as a commercial form of entertainment. Its success was essentially due to two key factors: the Industrial Revolution and Imperialism. Industrialization, which brought technological development and new inventions to almost every field of human life, turned out to be very useful for circus companies as well, for they could develop new

⁹³It is a collection of essays and short stories about London that Dickens published in various newspapers and periodicals between 1833 and 1836. 'Boz' is the pseudonym Dickens used at the beginning of his writing career.

⁹⁴<http://victorian-era.org/victorian-era-circus-performances.html>, viewed 10 January 2020.

skills and modern techniques which actually mesmerized their audiences. Moreover, thanks to the resulting progress in rail transport, entertainers and artists could easily travel from place to place to put their shows on stage. Besides this, the Victorian Age was also a prosperous period for the crown's colonial enterprise, during which the British population got familiar with a number of exotic animals transplanted from colonies to Europe, which became a fundamental added value to the circus business. In fact, performances involving animals were very popular at Dickens's times, when everyone would have the opportunity of looking at never-seen-before animal species. In addition, in an historical period in which human progress was the driven force of everything, the circus, with its audacious artists taming wild animals, was seen as another means for demonstrating the unconditional supremacy of human mind and human skill.



9. A tame jaguar in a circus.

In the statement at the very beginning of the paragraph, Dickens openly expresses his appreciation for this form of entertainment, writing that Astley's, and the circus in general, is the very place in which children can set their imagination free, and build memories that will last forever. However, it is in *Hard Times* that Dickens provides his most sentimental depiction of the circus, by using it as a metaphor for fancy and imagination, in contrast to blind Utilitarianism that reduces individuals to

mere inanimate numbers. In the novel, Sleary's circus is a kind of round microcosm, whose tents offer shelter from the ugliness and grayness of the city. In portraying Sissy's company, a kind of nostalgia for the simplicity and genuine values of a pre-industrial world shines through, suggesting that Dickens's opinion about the circus was absolutely a positive one. We do not know exactly whether he was in favour of performing animals, for he actually never talks in detail about them in the novel. He writes about talented acrobats performing amazing numbers, he writes about children "who did the fairy business when required" (*HT* 40); he just pauses a little to introduce Merrylegs, Sissy's beloved dog, which sometimes takes part in performances, but which is actually treated like a member of their big 'family.'

If Dickens's denunciation of the evils of the industrial system can be shared even nowadays, his support to the circus as a positive, almost necessary, safety valve, probably does not have the same consensus. Beside the rhetorical question of whether it is morally right to exploit animals in circuses - animals which end up living all their life in cages - just for people's amusement, another, even more complex dilemma arises while reading Dickens: is the circus, with all its masks, costumes, and tricks, a suitable form of entertainment for young children? Given that they absorb and internalize everything around them, and given that one of the main goals of performers is to astound and shock their audiences, is it possible that they end up scaring children? This subject is certainly open to many interpretations. What is clear is that, at Dickens's time, people were so oppressed by the nasty atmosphere in industrial cities, that any kind of diversion was actually welcome.

2.3.2 Sissy: Upholder of Fancy

The character who most strongly denounces the absurdity of living in a world of statistics and mere abstractions is Cecilia Jupe, nicknamed 'Sissy', the daughter of a circus performer who is taken in by the Gradgrind family as a servant after her father abandons her. Sissy's nature is so good and emotionally healthy, that Mr. Gradgrind's philosophy does not succeed in affecting her. The truth is that she cannot deeply understand what she is taught at school because it is too rational and abstract for a

young girl like her, who turns out to be actually the most realistic and matter-of-fact character in the novel. This is evident when Mr. Gradgrind asks her whether she would carpet a room with representations of flowers - something he would never dare to do - and she answers 'Yes', as "It wouldn't hurt them, sir. They wouldn't crush and wither if you please, sir. They would be the pictures of what was very pretty and pleasant, and I would fancy" (*HT* 14). She seems to be the only one to recognize that there is a difference between reality and representation of reality. Her 'wrong' answers are clearly the 'right' ones, but her teacher disagrees; "You don't walk upon flowers in fact; you cannot be allowed to walk upon flowers in carpets", he replies. This is because, as representatives of the world of 'facts,' both Mr. Gradgrind and Mr. Bounderby can understand reality only if it strictly respects rational rules; they obviously cannot accept carpets with representations of flowers, for they (rationally) do not exist in nature, and supposing they did, people would never walk upon them.

Sissy has an inborn liveliness that has not yet been extinguished; even when her father abandons her, her boundless devotion to him does not waver, showing the strength of human attachment against a system that promotes only estrangement and detachment. In spite of her suffering, she never stops being kind, caring, and sympathetic towards the others; she is the main force for goodness and generosity in the novel, as well as the main upholder of imagination and creativity. What remains with her of the environment in which she has grown up is the spirit of sympathy, compassion, and mutual cooperation, rather than the art of illusion and trick. This is because the circus company was more than a company; it was actually her family. She believes in the power of imagination to nurse and alleviate people's sufferings; for this reason, when she was at the circus with her company, she used to read fairy tales to her father after hard days at work, so that "Often and often of a night, he used to forget all his troubles in wondering whether the Sultan would let the lady go on with the story, or would have her head cut off before it was finished."⁹⁵ (*HT* 62)

Sissy is also the only one who understands Louisa's malaise after her marriage with Mr. Bounderby; her sympathetic nature and human compassion inspires Louisa to take action, and makes her able to reawaken her hidden sensitive side, as well as the 'innate' good nature inside of her, something that she has always attempted to repress.

⁹⁵Excerpt from *The Arabian Nights*.

In fact, at a certain moment of the novel, Louisa realizes that the way in which she has been brought up was wrong, for it has passed over all the pleasurable experiences that beautify human life:

I often sit wondering here, and think how unfortunate it is for me that I can't reconcile you to home better than I am able to do. I don't know what other girls know. I can't play to you, or sing to you. I can't talk to you so as to lighten your mind, for I never see any amusing sights or read any amusing books that it would be a pleasure or a relief to you to talk about. [...] It's a great pity, Tom. (*HT* 54-55)

According to Dickens's classification of modern society as either 'natural' or 'artificial,' it is apparent throughout the novel that the former is always to be preferred over the latter.⁹⁶ He definitively clarifies this point when he outlines the future of his characters, and reveals that Sissy, the first representative of the 'natural' world, and the main upholder of fancy, is the only character who definitely has an happy ending:

Happy Sissy's happy children loving her; all children loving her; she, grown learned in childish lore; thinking no innocent and pretty fancy ever to be despised; trying hard to know her humbler fellow-creatures, and to beautify their lives of machinery and reality with those imaginative graces and delights. [...] She holding this course as part of no fantastic vow, or bond, or brotherhood, or sisterhood, or pledge, or covenant, or fancy dress, or fancy fair; but simply as a duty to be done. (*HT* 287-288)

⁹⁶Flint, *Introduction*, p. xii.



10. A mother reading fables to her children.

Chapter 3. The Clash between the Country and the City

3.1 Towards the City

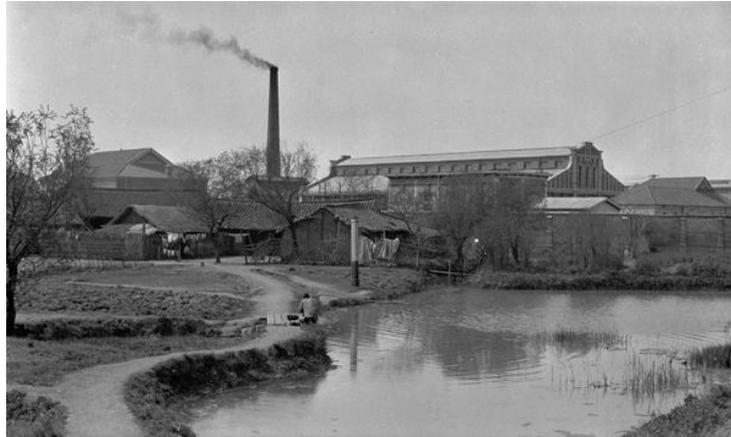
The nineteenth century constituted a turning point in the transition from an essentially rural society to a developed, urbanized one. This was basically due to the Industrial Revolution, which caused the location of manufacturing processes and productive centers to radically change: in fact, from country farmsteads and artisans' workshops, industrial production became concentrated in urban centers, pushing millions of people to leave their fields in the country, in order to find better working conditions in cities. Therefore, it is clear that it was industrialization that pushed the process of urbanization, drawing entire rural communities to the cities.

In his novels, which are for the most part set in cities, Charles Dickens often uses rivers to connect the rural 'idyllic' riverside in the country, with the dirty urban one, which has actually become not only a characteristic element of the modern cityscape, but also part of its frenetic life.⁹⁷ For instance, in *Hard Times* - inspired by the English industrialized society of Dickens's times, a society which was literally taking the place of the old agrarian one - it is evident that the Coketown river has suffered from industrialization just as the population has. The fact that, nearby the city, it becomes black and purple, with "ill-smelling dye" (*HT* 27), is the proof; these 'unnatural' characteristics are nothing but a side effect of the polluting factory activity, and make it just another 'victim' of the new urban system. It is worth considering that this typical nineteenth-century need for 'connecting' the country and the city inevitably entails the existence of their separation; from that moment on, in literature, as well as in reality, they have started being treated as two separate identities, each one with its own characteristics and peculiarities.⁹⁸ Dickens's description of Coketown as an "ugly citadel where Nature was as strongly bricked out as killing airs and gases were bricked in" (*HT* 65) perfectly conveys the idea of 'separation' between the new urban setting,

⁹⁷<https://www.tandfonline.com>, viewed 14 January 2020.

⁹⁸Raymond Williams, *The Country and The City*, London, The Hogarth Press, 1985, p. 264.

described as a “labyrinth of close streets upon streets” (*HT* 66), and the ‘old’ rural one, which has actually been ‘bricked out’ of the city.



71. The Coketown urban riverside.

3.1.1 New Social Patterns

It is not possible to talk about industrialization without saying anything about the new economic mode associated with it: capitalism, whose fundamental principle of supply and demand has changed society in an unprecedented way, causing new urban residents to be dependent on the global market to provide their daily needs. Within the capitalist society, a new social structure developed: old social groups, such as the landowning nobility and the peasantry, declined, in favour of new ones, like the new industrial élite of industrialists and bankers which took over. Consequently, even those who remained on the land were forced to change their productive system, yielding and producing for the market, rather than for their own subsistence. Furthermore, many artisans, who had for centuries done manufactured goods for a living, using only traditional handicraft methods, suddenly found themselves displaced by new industrial machinery, which actually did their same work, but much more quickly. Just to have an idea, in the first two decades of the nineteenth century, Britain had around 240,000 hand-loom weavers;

in 1856, more than 90 percent of them were dismissed.⁹⁹ A nineteenth-century song lamented the sad twist of fate of unemployed English weavers:

Who is that man coming up the street,
With a weary manner and shuffling feet;
With a face that tells of care and grief
And in hope that seems to have lost belief?
For wickedness past he now atones,
He's only a weaver that no one owns.
Political economy now must sway
And say when a man shall work or play.¹⁰⁰

In *Hard Times*, Dickens reproduces with extraordinary precision the social structure that came to establish at his times. At the top, he puts Mr. Bounderby, the representative of the emerging social class of wealthy bankers and industrialists: “He was a rich man: banker, merchant, manufacturer, and what not” (*HT* 20); then, he puts Mr. Gradgrind, his son Tom, and James Harthouse, on behalf of another, just a bit less well-off, middle class of professionals, teachers, and small business owners; finally, by means of Stephen Blackpool and Rachel, he represents the second major social group to emerge in Victorian England, the factory workers. In the novel, Stephen is described as “a good power-loom weaver [...] among the multitude of Coketown, generically called the ‘Hands’” (*HT* 20); ‘hands’ is the word Dickens uses to refer to factory workers, suggesting that, unlike the artisans or craftsmen of the previous era, who had their own tools and skilled traditions handed down from one generation to another, this new working class was composed of rather unskilled men, who worked long hours next to the machines they served using only, or rather only, their hands.

⁹⁹Kevin Reilly, *The Human Journey, A Concise Introduction to World History*, London, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2012, pp. 286-287.

¹⁰⁰Ibid.



18. Assembly-line workers.

Beside the new techniques and technological improvement, the Industrial Revolution brought its most dramatic change in the organization of work. In the modern factory, the labor force worked on the assembly line, where everyone had to keep the position assigned by the supervisor; there was a predetermined working time and, even more important, workers were wage-earners, therefore the money they made came from their employees' calculations, rather than being the effective outcome of their work. As a consequence, even people's daily routine changed. Urban men were no longer peasants, farmers, or artisans, whose daily bread depended exclusively on their sweat and tears, for the more they worked, the more they earned, and if they did not work, they put nothing on the table at night; in factories, workers followed the instructions and rules of a third party, in order to receive a salary which was never proportional to the task they had actually performed.

Besides the fixed salary and established working time, another modern concept arose during the industrial era: leisure time. In his book, *Leisure in the Industrial Revolution* (1980), Hugh Cunningham talks about a 'Leisure Revolution' which occurred in the nineteenth century, as a consequence of the process of industrialization and social metamorphosis of that period. Cunningham writes that the earlier period of the Industrial Revolution, that is the one which started in the eighteenth century and lasted until the 1860s, reflected the traditional leisure activities of the pre-industrial

rural society, whose social life was heavily ritualized by seasons, and where everything was organized at a small-scale local level. In Dickens's times, such occasions were rather seen as escapes from the strains of a coercive industrial system which, de facto, increased the intensity of working hours; the lack of moderation at work produced a lack of moderation in the leisure time, as well.¹⁰¹ On this topic, Cunningham observes that drinking at the pub was one of the major forms of working-class entertainments: "noisy drunken riot alternating with sullen silent work"¹⁰² became part of people's everyday routine. There was a clear connection between the modification of leisure activities, and the new environment and working habits of industrial England. In fact, in an age of social dislocation from the country to the city, the pub constituted a kind of 'heaven' from the overcrowded urban streets, a place where workers could find relief, enjoying warmth, light, and conviviality. From an environmental point of view, pubs' customers could usually benefit the use of an adjoining garden, which was one of the few occasions they had to see and relish natural elements. Indeed, since the land was becoming a real mirage in the urban setting, people, and especially the poor working-class, no longer had easy access to open natural areas, which were usually 'bricked out,' confined out of the city. The pub, therefore, provided a kind of bridge between urban people and the disappearing natural landscape around them.



19. People enjoying in a pub.

¹⁰¹<http://www.victorianweb.org/history/leisure1.html>, viewed 15 January 2020.

¹⁰²Ibid.

However, drinking in pubs was not the only leisure activity of the early Victorian society, since other forms of entertainment, such as games, animal and flower exhibitions, circus and music-hall shows, emerged in that period. In *Hard Times*, for instance, Sissy's circus is presented as one of the few pleasurable experiences and good distractions the Coketown population can afford.

3.1.2 Women's Role in the New Urban Environment

If the Industrial Revolution transformed the social class structure of nineteenth-century England, it also fundamentally altered family life, as well as the role of women within it. In the previous agricultural society, the majority of women combined productive labor in the country with their domestic duties; it was quite easy, as the farm or shop in which they worked, and their home were often the same place. As industrialization moved the productive centers, and therefore work sites, towards the city, the majority of women were forced to withdraw from their wage-earning labor, for they could not carry out both their productive and domestic roles anymore. This change caused a new ideology of domesticity, defining women as wives and mothers, whose only duty was to make the home a "heaven in a heartless world,"¹⁰³ to be formed. However, the idea of keeping women at home essentially regarded the middle-class women, for those belonging to the poor working class could rarely afford to resign; in fact, their economic conditions were so uncertain, that they were often forced to send their children to work in factories and mines to get by.

Together with the new-established social structure, even the crucial transformation of women's role is present in *Hard Times*, where the major female figures, Louisa, Sissy, and Rachel, belong to different social classes, therefore they live completely different lives. Throughout his book, *Dickens and Women* (1983), Michael Slater argues that Dickens can be considered as an exponent of the Victorian cult of domesticity, according to which women had to be first of all good wives and caring mothers, for they were expected to behave as 'born nurses' made to minister to the

¹⁰³Reilly, *The Human Journey*, p. 288.

others' needs. This is particularly evident in his choice of including an arranged marriage in the plot of *Hard Times*, where the 'well-trained' Louisa Gradgrind is persuaded by his father to marry Mr. Bounderby, a man who is much older than her, and that she certainly does not love:

You have been accustomed to consider every other question, simply as one of tangible Fact. [...] Now, what are the Facts of this case? You are, we will say in round numbers, twenty years of age; Mr. Bounderby is, we will say in round numbers, fifty. There is some disparity in your respective years, but in your means and positions there is none; on the contrary, there is a great suitability. Then the question arises, Is this one disparity sufficient to operate as a bar to such a marriage? (*HT* 97-98)

This excerpt represents a true innovation in the presentation of the issue of gender gap at those times; Louisa's victimization, in fact, is not a matter of sex, for it comes from her father's educational system, rather than from a violent, aggressive husband. What is remarkable in Dickens's depiction of Louisa as a suffering domestic victim is the fact that she suffers as a daughter and as a sister, rather than as a wife. She certainly has to deal with the consequences of an arranged marriage that causes her only pain and melancholy, but the very origin of her victimization lies in her childhood education, which was entirely focused on facts and figures, and which has developed only her intellect, at the expense of all other faculties. Her lack of experience makes her marry Mr. Bounderby just because she thinks that it would please her father, and because she knows that it would benefit her brother's career. Feeling responsible for her family's reputation and 'position' is Louisa's true burden - and, to be honest, it was actually the burden of most of middle-class women at those times.

The typically feminine attachment to family is strongly related to Dickens's fundamental belief that men's nature and psyche differ fundamentally from women's ones.¹⁰⁴ For Dickens, 'womanliness' is not a matter of nurture - that is the kind of

¹⁰⁴Michael Slater, *Dickens and Women*, London, J.M. Dent & Sons LTD, 1983, p.238.

education and upbringing children receive - but is rather something related to women's nature. To him, the 'natural' differences between men and women are as sharply established and timeless as the physical ones. Furthermore, since it is nature that has made women "those who are our best and dearest friends in infancy, in childhood, in manhood, and in old age, the most devoted and least selfish natures that we know on earth,"¹⁰⁵ women are spiritually superior to men by their nature. In this sense, Dickens would have certainly dissented from American gender theorist Judith Butler, who argues that gender is a social construct, a by-product of society, consisting of a set of actions and attitudes imposed by society, which leads babies to behave either as men or as women. It is thus the grounding children receive to decide their gender, rather than something they are born with.

Anyway, although she is able to reflect on her predicament, achieving a sad wisdom about herself and her lacking childhood, Louisa is eventually able to take action thanks to Sissy, who is the perfect realization of Dickens's idea that women are spiritually superior, and "turn to us always constant and unchanged, when others turn away."¹⁰⁶ Louisa is literally regenerated by Sissy, who seems to be the only one to understand, and alleviate her suffering. This is essentially due to the 'natural,' children-oriented nurture she was given in her tender age, totally different from Louisa's one. Dickens praises Sissy's helpful nature because he was fascinated with the idea of female solidarity among women; on the contrary, he considered a mark of real evil when a woman showed no sympathy towards unlucky, miserable members of her own sex.¹⁰⁷ This is epitomized in the figure of Mrs. Sparsit, who does all she can to facilitate Louisa's descent of the allegorical staircase she constructs in her fantasy:

It became the business of Mrs. Sparsit's life, to look up at her staircase, and to watch Louisa coming down. Sometimes slowly, sometimes quickly, sometimes several steps at one bout, sometimes stopping, never turning back. If she had once turned back, it might have been the death of Mrs. Sparsit in spleen and grief. (*HT* 195-196)

¹⁰⁵Dickens, *Speeches*, London, The Mayfair Library, 1847, p. 83.

¹⁰⁶Ibid.

¹⁰⁷Slater, *Dickens and Women*, p. 245.

Dickens agreed with the Victorian conception of the woman as a spiritually closer-to-God creature, and a source of moral strength and encouragement for her fellow human beings. In the novel, beside Sissy, who plays a pivotal role in Louisa's process of awareness, there is another character to embody this ideal: Rachel. She is too modest to understand that she is not just the poor factory worker she is convinced to be, and that, on the contrary, she literally save Stephen. In fact, she succeeds in preventing him from ruining his life when, exasperated by his drunken wife, he decides to take the extreme action. Stephen, who is actually in love with Rachel, often compares her to an angel throughout the book: "You are an Angel. Bless you, bless you! [...] You have changed me from bad to good. [...] You have saved my soul alive!" (*HT* 89) She is also another exponent of Dickens's beloved category of 'sisterhood among women;' in fact, after Stephen's death, Rachel will be the only one to take care of his widowed ill wife.

Given that Dickens did support the Victorian cult of domesticity, as Slater exhaustively demonstrates in his book, it is not as clear what was his attitude towards women at work. In *Hard Times*, in fact, he seems to sympathize with both women, Sissy and Rachel, who work the former as a servant at the Gradgrinds' house, and the latter as a 'hand' in a factory; or like Louisa and her mother, who do not work at all. Anyway, what is evident in the plot of *Hard Times*, is Dickens's conception of woman as a naturally domestic being, whose first and only task should be to oppose the hostility and coldness of the industrial city. If, in the new modern society, the father was seen as the breadwinner, the one who was expected to support the family, the mother was expected to take care of her children's health, as well as their spiritual and emotional life. This is exactly the opposite of what happens inside the Gradgrind family, where Mrs. Gradgrind does not succeed in providing for her children an alternative to the rigid world imposed by her husband; as a mother, she should inspire her children's imagination and creativity, but the truth is that she actually annihilates them further. In line with tradition, women have always been considered the counterpart of who is, always traditionally, a more severe father. However, this is not the case, for Mrs. Gradgrind is so cold and detached, that she never seems to feel sympathy towards anybody. Her illness turns out to be both physical and spiritual, because she really seems to be unable to feel true sentiments. Even when Louisa is forced by her father to get married just to 'maintain the family position,' the only thing she is able to say is:

I hope your health may be good, Louisa; for if your head begins to split as soon as you are married, which was the case with mine, I cannot consider that you are to be envied, though I have no doubt you think you are, as all girls do. (*HT* 101)

3.2 A Lonely Walk Along the Street

It was falling dark when Stephen came out of Mr. Bounderby's house. The shadows of night had gathered so fast, that he did not look about him when he closed the door, but plodded straight along the street. (*HT* 150)

In his book *The Country and The City* (1973), Raymond Williams argues that the perception of the modern city has often been associated with a man walking along its streets. Urban novelists such as Dickens, Gaskell, Gissing, and so on, identify the lonely figure in the city as the cornerstone of their narrations, for it represents the sense of detachment and isolation which actually characterizes the whole urban experience.¹⁰⁸ In the quote above, this experience is perfectly recreated in Stephen Blackpool, who wanders alone along the streets of Coketown, after having been informed by Mr. Bounderby that he will not be able to divorce from his insane wife. Stephen's sense of discouragement and estrangement constitutes a bond between the city and him; it is as if both Stephen and the city were surrounded by an impenetrable dark fog representing, on one side, Stephen's no-way-out situation and loss of perspective, and on the other one, the city's alienating atmosphere from both a physical and psychological point of view. For this reason, the phrases 'It was falling dark' and 'The shadows of night' are suitable for double interpretation: they can be considered as simple time indicators, but they can also be seen as allegorical expressions describing Stephen's mental derangement, for he seems to be unable to think clearly because of the 'shadows' and 'darkness' that are obfuscating his mind.

¹⁰⁸Williams, *The Country and The City*, pp. 233-234.

Throughout the novel, Dickens's descriptions of the city's landscape are characterized by a recurring element: darkness. Coketown is habitually without the light of the sun because of pollution due to factory activity. Anyway, Dickens suggests that the 'serpents of smoke' (*HT* 27) are not the only threat looming over the city, for there is an even more alarming menace darkening its inhabitants' lives: alienation. In *Hard Times*, alienation, in the sense of estrangement and detachment, is presented as an inevitable condition of urban man, whose emotional needs have been swept away from utilitarian imperatives imposed by society.

The Coketown community is described as a big group of people who 'exist' rather than live together; adults work in the same factory, children go to the same school, but the truth is that they are all actually alone. In fact, another common denominator between the urban setting and its inhabitants is the condition of, to quote Charles Baudelaire's poem *Crowds*, "multitude and solitude"; urban life is nothing more than a never-ending succession of men and events, all equal and interchangeable, like the Coketown red-brick buildings (*HT* 27). The crowd along the street, for Baudelaire, is the form of universal life, where "The man who is unable to people his solitude is equally unable to be alone in a bustling crowd."¹⁰⁹ The modern man is thus expected to be able to manage his state of unavoidable solitude in an environment in which he is overwhelmed by other people. Loneliness among a multitude is, in fact, one of the worst aspects of the nineteenth-century society (and, to be honest, of our society, too), where relationships among people increasingly lose importance, in favour of individualism, self-interest, and the rather pathological search for happiness and self-fulfillment. As James Thomson points out in his famous poem *The City of Dreadful Night* (1874), there is a close relation between the vision of the modern city and the condition of human life:

That city's atmosphere is dark and dense,
Although not many exiles wander there,
With many a potent evil influence,
Each adding poison to the poisoned air.

¹⁰⁹Charles Baudelaire, *Crowds, The Flowers of Evil*, Paris, Auguste Poulet-Malassis, 1857.

Thomson writes that the city's atmosphere is dark and sick, and that its inhabitants are "The saddest and the weariest men on earth;"¹¹⁰ it means that the condition of darkness and sickness affecting the urban setting does not regard exclusively the landscape, as the presence of poisoned airs pollutes the social relationships among people, as well. Environmental pollution and social malaise are thus two faces of the same coin, for the urban migration has caused the extinction of both the ecosystem and the organic community which were there before. The result is that there is a scattering of 'exiles' wandering throughout a place they do not recognize and identify as their real home.



110. A lonely man walking along the streets.

Dickens, who 'anticipates,' in a way, Thomson's belief that the physical environment affects the social fabric, as well as the preoccupation for the increasing human isolation from both the others and the self, describes another lonely walking of Stephen's throughout Coketown, in which he seems to appropriate Baudelaire's concept of 'multitude and solitude': "Stephen Blackpool fall into the loneliest of lives, the life of

¹¹⁰James Thomson, *The City of Dreadful Night*, London, National Reformer, 1874.

solitude among a familiar crowd. The stranger in the land who looks into ten thousand faces for some answering look and never finds it” (*HT* 142-43). After his misadventures, what remains of Stephen, who has been cut off by his colleagues and fired by his supervisor, is just a lonely figure among a crowd, which ignores and avoids him. This crowd is ‘familiar’ to Stephen; even though they do not greet, he knows very well the ‘faces’ he meets on his way back to home. This is something happening very often even nowadays; how many times do we avoid greeting our neighbors? How many times do we look away from someone we know, just because we are in a hurry and do not want to lose time? This is a typically modern attitude.

Today, we are isolated mainly because we choose to be isolated, because we want to reach individual success, and in our project, everyone and everything around us constitutes a distraction that has to be avoided. The result is that we become like Stephen, alone among a multitude who passes by without deeming us worthy of even a glance.

3.3 Rediscover the Country

As Raymond Williams argues in his essay ‘Ideas of Nature’ (1980), the nineteenth century marked a decisive turning point in the relationship between man and nature, since the technological improvement brought by the Industrial Revolution gave a part of humankind a new degree of control over nature and its phenomena. This unprecedented human power caused nature to be increasingly seen as a mere “set of objects, on which men could operate;”¹¹¹ this new philosophy, which literally placed nature out of people’s life - “Nature was where industry was not,”¹¹² Williams writes to stress the typically modern tendency to separate nature from human activities, therefore, to cast it out of human life - entailed an ever more dramatic consequence, that consisted in the reshaping of the human idea of both nature and the relationship with it. The problem, according to Williams, was that they did not consider very deeply what this reshaping might do to men, who ended up abandoning the environment and living processes of

¹¹¹Raymond Williams, ‘Ideas of Nature,’ *Problems in Materialism and Culture*, London, Verso, 1980.

¹¹²Ibid.

which they were actually part, to go to live in new (urban) places they actually did not identify as their real home.

However, against any projection, the irrepressible process of urbanization of the nineteenth century paradoxically led to a kind of ‘revival’ of the country. In fact, especially during the second half of the century, something crucial happened even out of the cities; despite rural Britain was considered subsidiary, for the centre of people’s life had almost completely become the city, the rural, pastoral experience, with all its traditions and memories, persisted and even intensified, as well as the idea that the simple country life was the key to the pursuit of real happiness.¹¹³ Many authors of the time, such as Emily Bronte, George Eliot, and Thomas Hardy, devoted their writing careers to celebrate rural life in all its forms, and exactly as Dickens does in *Hard Times*, to denounce the abuses perpetrated by humans on the natural world. In Eliot’s *Adam Bede* (1859), for example, there is a sharp opposition between the two main settings of the novel, Hayslope and Snowfield. Situated in the green and fertile region of Loamshire, the small town of Hayslope is characterized by a deep-rooted agricultural identity, for the bond between people and land is still very strong. Closeness to nature makes its population genuine, kind-hearted, and capable of true feelings. It is not possible to say the same of those living in Snowfield, who seem to know nothing but hardness and strain. The absence of nature - it is situated in a sick and infertile region, named Stonyshire - makes it the epitome of the industrial city, where people had been forced to move to work in rocky mines and factories. As the name suggests, this is a barren and lifeless place, like a snowfield.

Together with the deepening awareness of the benefits and spiritual advantages of time spent in contact with nature, an increasing sentiment of nostalgia for a vanishing rural past started catching on, especially during the Victorian Age, when people started being nostalgic of the ‘good old ways,’ and worried about what we could define a ‘loss of place.’¹¹⁴ In 1759, German philosopher Friedrich Schiller wrote an essay entitled ‘On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry,’ in which he wrote: “With painful nostalgia we yearn to return as soon as we have begun to experience the pressure of civilization and hear in the remote lands of art our mother Nature’s tender voice.”

¹¹³Williams, *The Country and The City*, p. 248.

¹¹⁴Jonathan Bate, *The Song of the Earth*, London, Picador, 2000, p. 25.

Among those who better succeeded in portraying this rural and ‘painful’ nostalgia, Hardy certainly deserves a honor place. In most of his novels, *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* (1891) for example, he uses to compare his characters’ sufferings to the ones of animals; in this way, he makes nature a co-protagonist of his novels, whose living beings suffer from the evils of the modern world, exactly as humans do. At the basis of this attitude there is Hardy’s conviction that man is nothing but a creature of nature, therefore, he shares the same joys and pains of his fellow animal beings. This pantheistic vision of the natural world, where all the elements of the earth live together in rhythm with nature, is in open contrast with the mechanical order and artificial lifestyle of the industrial city, where money and human needs seem to have irreparably taken over.¹¹⁵ For this reason, since the mid-nineteenth century, the country has increasingly been identified as a place of physical and spiritual regeneration, a kind of ‘heaven on earth’ where all those who need to escape from the monotony of the city can find relief. If we think about it, it is rather a paradox. It is not a secret that our selfish and immoral behavior is having dramatic consequences on the earth; yet still, the more we exploit and destroy nature in our everyday life, the more we are attracted by natural, rural settings in our leisure time. We thus abuse, and look for nature at the same time; is not this a contradiction? The truth is that this is just another utilitarian way of ‘taming’ nature, for we value it only when we really need it. Nowadays, from an economical point of view, travel agencies and tour operators take enormous profit from this modern desire to go ‘back to nature;’ they know very well how to profit from this psychological mechanism which makes us feeling attracted by places which seem to be ‘purer’ than the cities in which we spend most of our time.

Similarly, this concept is present even in Dickens’s *Hard Times*, where the author writes that “it was customary for those who now and then thirsted for a draught of pure air [...] to begin their walk, or their lounge in the fields” (*HT* 256). Probably, we long for this ‘gone’ world because we are not entirely happy with our modern life, with its speed, its noise, its mechanization which have distanced nature from our lives to the point that we literally have to look for it in the time of need. By stating that “the earth became vulnerable once humans have looked away from where they walked,”¹¹⁶ Bate is trying to say is that, if we really want to save our planet, which is actually the only real

¹¹⁵Williams, *The Country and The City*, p. 252.

¹¹⁶Bate, *The Song of the Earth*, p. 26.

house we have in this life, we definitely need to restore our old relationship with nature. We have to knock us off the pedestal we have built on our own, and start up again from the ground.



111. Painting by British artist Henry John Yeend-King (1855-1924).

Conclusion

Usually, while reading fiction, we mainly focus our attention on the plot; we are interested in what happens to the protagonist, in the way in which he or she relates to the other characters, and the only thing we usually long to know is whether there will be a happy ending or not. It is not easy to find out the reasons of this long-established attitude, since it is something involuntary and, to an extent, innate in everyone of us; what is certain is that it is related to an even more innate human tendency to have always an anthropocentric approach to everything.

My experiment in this study has essentially consisted in reversing the traditional pattern according to which the setting basically serves the 'dominant' plot; through this shift, I have been able to analyze those topographic elements and ecological concerns that have placed *Hard Times* among the so-called 'industrial novels' of the nineteenth-century.¹¹⁷ What has been always (or rather always) seen as the mere background of the narration - in this case, the environmental change that occurred in Victorian England as a consequence of the Industrial Revolution - becomes the very core of this work, in which it is explored in details by means of excerpts from the novel that are often underestimated and 'passed by.'

What has pushed me in this direction is the way in which Dickens portrays and treats the city of Coketown. Indeed, he does not only rely on it for the setting of his fiction, but rather situates it at the very centre of his novel; the city becomes the very generator of the plot, and one of the determining elements of its development. The reason is that, in Dickens's time, the industrial city was increasingly becoming the centre of people's life; everything in that world passed through it, and everyone in that world was connected to it, therefore, subjected to its metamorphosis.¹¹⁸ It is not by chance, thus, that the perception of the modern cityscape has often been associated with a lonely man walking along its streets,¹¹⁹ an attitude that Dickens repeatedly connected to the figure of Stephen Blackpool. Given the centrality of the city in the nineteenth century, it is not surprising that even the few episodes in the novel that articulate a

¹¹⁷Kate Flint, *Introduction to Hard Times*, London, Penguin Books, 2003, p. xi.

¹¹⁸Marina Spiazzi, Marina Tavella, *Only Connect...New Directions*, Bologna, Zanichelli Editore, 2009, p. 39.

¹¹⁹Raymond Williams, *The Country and The City*, London, The Hogarth Press, 1985, p. 264.

pastoral, rural nostalgia, depend upon the city, since they are presented as its environmental counterpart; for instance, when Dickens writes that the country of Coketown is situated “a few miles away [...] out of the smoke” (*HT* 256) of the town, he adds that:

In the distance one way, Coketown showed as a black mist; in another distance, hills began to rise; in a third, there was a faint change in the light of the horizon, where it shone upon the far-off sea. (*HT* 256)

In this novel, the environment is described as something real and 'alive,'¹²⁰ even though the correct adjective would be 'dead,' since nature in Coketown has been affected by progress exactly like any of its inhabitants; when Dickens writes that the town “had a black canal in it, and a river that ran purple with ill-smelling dye” (*HT* 27), it is evident that the city river has suffered from industrialization just as the population has. Moreover, the fact that, nearby the city, it becomes dark and 'ill-smelling,' is the proof that the polluting factory activity has made the watercourse just another 'victim' of the new industrial, and urban system. In so doing, the author parallels the city's ecological degradation with the one of its population; Coketown is nothing but an “ugly citadel” (*HT* 65), whose natural ecosystem has been banished, to leave room to factories and buildings, as well as to all those “killing airs and gases” (*HT* 65), polluting not only the landscape, but also the social fabric. In fact, on every page of *Hard Times*, Dickens seems to suggest that the utilitarian productive system of his age was detaching people not only from the natural environment around them, but also from the emotional and imaginative sphere inside of them; throughout the novel, he repeatedly alludes to the parallel between children's impoverished upbringing in the name of fact and rationality, and the increasing environmental derangement, in world where it seems that there is no space left for genuine feelings, pleasure, and of course, nature.

My hope in this thesis has been to provide some evidence to support the idea that *Hard Times* was, to an extent, ahead of its time, in the sense that it has anticipated

¹²⁰Spiazzi, Tavella, *Only Connect*, p. 40.

some of the key points of modern environmental studies. In fact, twenty-first-century Environmentalists have argued that the Industrial Revolution marked a decisive turning point in the relationship between man and nature - something that has irreversibly led to the dramatic environmental degradation we are experiencing today. As Raymond Williams observes in his essay 'Ideas of Nature,' Dickens was among the first ones to raise his voice against the 'unnatural' process which was detaching humans from nature; furthermore, as his satirical attack against Mr. Gradgrind's educational system demonstrates, he was even more afraid of the dramatic consequences that such a cold philosophy could have on society, when preached to sensitive, and easy-to-manipulate young children. In my opinion, these are the reasons that make *Hard Times* a testimony to the social, as well as environmental upheaval of the mid-nineteenth century, and Dickens a precursor of modern Ecocriticism, for his extraordinary examination of one of the pivotal moments that have changed the course of human (and not only human) history, forever.



126. Picture from Bate's *The Song of the Earth*: The melancholy man in the landscape.

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