



# The Concept of Equality in Charles Dickens's *Hard Times*: A Critical Examination of Class, Gender, and Education

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**Abstract**— This paper is a critical re-evaluation of the complex inequalities as presented in Charles Dickens *Hard Times*, with an emphasis on class, gender and education in the cultural setting of Victorian Britain. A careful reading of the novel shows that Dickens was against the industrial capitalist system and dehumanizing effects on the working classes. Therefore, this study will challenge the sharp economic and social divide through questioning the characters of Mr. Bounderby and Stephen Blackpool, who represent the capitalistic exploitation and the state of labor in an industrialized economy, respectively. However, the gender relations are questioned, showing how the Victorian ideals limited the women to enclosed places and, at the same time, celebrated their emotional stability as a kind of passive rebellion. Such characters as Louisa Gradgrind, Sissy Jupe, and Mrs. Sparsit serve as key examples of emotional straitjacket and loss of agency imposed on women and, in such a way, reveal the general patriarchal system of the time. In the final part, the theme of educational inequality comes to the fore, especially when criticizing the utilitarian approach to education as a pedagogy of facts by Mr. Gradgrind. This system reinforces the current social order by not giving a chance to imagine and develop emotionally. *Hard Times* does not offer a clear blueprint of reform despite the fact that Dickens is categorical in his condemnation of the structural injustices of his time. However, the novel is a silent supporter of education philosophy promoting empathy and creativity as the qualities that are essential to address the established social divisions and imagine a more egalitarian world.



**Keywords**— Equality, Class Inequality, Education, Gender Roles, Charles Dickens, *Hard Times*.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Dickens, a nineteenth-century author, is generally considered one of the most important novelists of the Victorian age, whose unique style of narration and ability to highlight the social issues that dominated the modern Britain attracted a lot of attention. His fiction is based on his own experience: born in humble life, he was poor following the imprisonment of his father on a debt charge and had to join a factory at a tender age. These childhood deprivations influenced his subsequent work, as the issues of social and economic injustice became the focus of his narrative production.

Much has always been made of the synthesis of Dickens of sharp sarcasm and precise realism, a style that brings to life the social realities of the time in an

entertaining, but analytical text. He used a great number of rhetorical devices, juxtaposing accurate descriptions of everyday life with powerful symbols, the most obvious one being his use of Coketown as an allegory of industrial cruelty and dullness. His characters, too, are frequently caricatured and exaggerated and serve as a means of social criticism; Bounderby, an example, is a representation of class and capitalist hypocrisy. Even though his vocabulary is often impenetrable, his writing is full of detail and metaphor, so that places and characters remain vivid in the minds of the reader.

In *Hard Times*, Dickens offers a scathing critique of industrial society and the prevailing philosophies of the time, such as utilitarianism, which focuses on "facts" without regard for humanity. Set in the fictional town of

Coketown, Dickens reveals the deep divide between social classes and its negative impact on human relationships. Through characters such as Stephen Blackpool, Josiah Pounder-By, and Mr. Gradgrind, Dickens presents a complex picture of class conflict, highlighting how the industrial system empties life of moral values and the human spirit.

Therefore, This study provides an epistemic inclusion to existing scholarship on Charles Dickens's *Hard Times* about, in particular, the Victorian industrial society's construction of equality in structured class, gender, and education. Dickens's critics focus on the dehumanizing features of industrial capitalism and its representations through societies such as Coketown, with its exploitative working classes represented by Stephen Blackpool, whose capitalist infringer is Bounderby, who idolized his self-constructed story. Louisa Gradgrind and Mrs. Sparsit address women's position in the market-driven familial structure within these frameworks. Meanwhile, Sissy Jupe proposes a new model of empathy-oriented equality in contrast to the utilitarian, fact-oriented approach of Mr. Gradgrind, which is presented in the book. The traditional educational approach internalizes the social order instead of abolishing it. It reconditions society's members to be productive, thus leaving no room for emotional and cognitive advancements needed for self-identity-making and interrogation of social equality. Finally, the primary objective of this work is to determine whether Dickens envisioned social equality or its absence, with critique holding to the socio-critical approach with his views. The research thus interprets that, with literature, Dickens also advocates opposite ideological representations of the world and social structures, reinforcing inequalities with humanity at the core.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Charles Dickens's *Hard Times* (1854) offers a critical exploration of Victorian England's social inequalities, particularly those rooted in class, gender, and education. The novel critiques industrial capitalism, challenges traditional gender roles, and highlights the inadequacies of utilitarian education systems. Many Academic Scholars have been studying these subjects in the novel *Hard Times* for instance, Albert Jones argues that *Hard Times* critiques the dehumanizing effects of industrial capitalism, where workers are reduced to mere tools in the economic machinery (Jones 45). Similarly, Paul Zall highlights Dickens's depiction of factory hands like Stephen Blackpool, who exemplify the exploitation and lack of agency faced by the proletariat (Zall 78). However, while

Jones emphasizes systemic oppression, Zall focuses on Dickens's moral critique of both employers and workers.

Moreover, Mark Johnson further examines class conflict, noting that *Hard Times* portrays the middle-class industrialists as out of touch with the realities of working-class life (Johnson 72). Yet, Johnson also critiques Dickens for not offering practical solutions to these conflicts, suggesting that the novel's moralistic tone may oversimplify complex socioeconomic issues (Johnson 74).

In addition, the representation of gender roles in *Hard Times* has been a focal point for feminist scholars. Elaine Smith argues that Louisa Gradgrind's character reflects the limited opportunities available to Victorian women, particularly those in patriarchal, utilitarian households (Smith 45). Her emotional repression and eventual breakdown symbolize the detrimental effects of prioritizing logic over emotional intelligence (Smith 47). Dickens's critique of utilitarian education is central to *Hard Times*. Andrew Sanders observes that Thomas Gradgrind's fact-based pedagogy stifles creativity and emotional growth, ultimately failing both his children and his students (Sanders 92). This failure, Sanders argues, serves as a broader critique of Victorian educational reforms that prioritized economic productivity over individual well-being. In contrast, Philip Davis highlights Dickens's advocacy for a more holistic approach to education, one that balances knowledge with imagination (Davis 64). He emphasizes Sissy Jupe's role as a foil to the Gradgrind system, representing the potential of emotional intelligence to counteract rigid utilitarianism (Davis 66).

However, both Sanders and Davis overlook the implications of educational inequality for working-class children, an area that warrants further exploration. While existing academic research provides valuable insights into class, gender, and education in *Hard Times*, several gaps remain. Notably, there is limited analysis of the intersectionality of these themes—how class and gender inequalities compound educational disparities. Additionally, secondary characters like Rachael and Bitzer, who embody alternative perspectives on these issues, have received minimal scholarly attention.

## III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research employs Feminist Theory and Marxist Theory as analytic tools to investigate the novel *Hard Times* by Charles Dickens in terms of how the novel addresses the issue of gender, the struggle of classes, and social injustice. Feminism and Marxism are powerful ideological tools that guide socio-political discourse as well as literary studies. Feminism proposes the ideas of gender equality, puts women rights on the forefront, and

challenges the social structures that sustain patriarchy. Its criticism of the educational, labor and artistic representation institutions reveals the institutionalized marginalization of women (Tong 15).

Marxism also gives a critical lens that intersects with gender issues. The juxtaposition of the working-class experience described in *Hard Times* and Marxist studies of capitalism throws light on the way in which the novel presents a class-driven critique of social life. Specifically, Dickens brings to the fore the exploitative nature of the factory work in the nineteenth century, as well as the interplay of gender and social classes in the plot of the novel (Eagleton 59-60). As a result, a multilayered interpretation of *Hard Times* can be offered by the combined use of Feminist Theory and Marxist Theory, showing how Dickens represents the limited positions of women in the hierarchical order of classes, and how this order perpetuates social injustice.

#### IV. GENDER INEQUALITY AND THE LIMITS OF EQUALITY

During the Victorian era, gender roles were strictly defined, with society enforcing a clear divide between the responsibilities of men and women. Women were largely restricted to domestic duties, valued for their submissiveness and moral virtue, while men held authority in the public sphere, including politics and industry. This cultural system reflected the broader inequalities of the time, especially in areas like legal rights, education, and job opportunities. Charles Dickens, writing within this societal context, explores these gender disparities in *Hard Times*, using his female characters to critique the limited roles assigned to women. Characters such as Louisa Gradgrind, Sissy Jupe, and Mrs. Sparsit highlight the conflict between societal expectations and personal desires.

The plot of *Hard Times* by Charles Dickens is based on wage labourers who are involved in productive work but they do not have access to means of production. These employees receive wages that do not match the contribution they make to the economy hence undergoing massive exploitation. This unfairness creates frustration to the labour force and increases their sensitivities towards economic inequality. The growth of industry in the fictional town of Coketown at the same time increases the existing social stratification. Conflicts arise between the working and the owning classes, with factory owners focusing solely on profit and paying little attention to the skills of their workers, their feeling of dignity and their material needs. In line with this, the workforce is more aware of exploitation and they mobilise to fight the system

that oppresses them. As a result, rebelliousness or at least increased awareness of injustice becomes a recurring thematic motif in the novel. The image of these class conflicts as described by Dickens provides a clear picture of the situation in Victorian England. His description of life in Coketown throws light on the emotional and the economic misery of the people at the bottommost of the social ladder. He gives the working classes a voice of their own through characters like Stephen Blackpool, and this is in the need to establish their humanity. Though the novel does not make an explicit appeal to revolution, it makes it clear that only a direct confrontation with the system would allow any real change. Therefore, *Hard Times* is the symbol of the rising social awareness and the moral awakening of the era of industrial capitalism, as well as a deepening social polarization.

#### V. EMOTIONAL SUPPRESSION AND GENDERED EXPECTATIONS

In *Hard Times*, Louisa Gradgrind is a different kind of character as she is one of the most emotionally complex and maturational characters in the novel. Having been born in a family where emotion is synonymous with intellectual inferiority, she grows up with a creed of rational self-control foisted on students and children by her father. Such training transforms the childhood of Louisa into an appearance of a controlled, fact-based environment where the use of the imagination and spontaneous emotion is forbidden. Yet, despite being a product of this cold educational philosophy, Louisa eventually begins to question and resist it. Her transformation is gradual—sparked by internal conflict and external experiences that challenge the worldview imposed on her. Significantly, her rebellion becomes the catalyst for Mr. Gradgrind's own self-reflection and eventual ideological shift. As Toman notes, Louisa's development marks a move “from overemphasis on ‘reason’ toward a more balanced perspective” (Toman 199).

Louisa's environment and social class heavily influence her path. Raised in a world of privilege but emotional emptiness, she learns early on to suppress her desires. Her upbringing leaves her ill-equipped to experience or understand emotional intimacy. This emotional void becomes evident when she passively agrees to marry Bounderby, a man she neither loves nor respects. Her reply to her father's suggestion of marriage—describing it as smoke that may flare into fire—reveals her internal detachment and emotional numbness. She consents not out of affection, but because she has never been taught to value or recognize love. In this way, Louisa becomes a representation of how patriarchal systems

silence women's voices and deny them agency. She is expected only to conform—to be an obedient wife and dutiful daughter—without room to question or feel.

Victorian society, as Dickens presents it, enforces strict gender expectations. Women were expected to remain passive, obedient, and emotionally reserved, a condition Louisa exemplifies early in the novel. Dickens describes the children in Gradgrind's school as showing "jaded sullenness," but Louisa's face, in particular, is marked by a subdued sadness and a starved imagination. She is not allowed to "fancy," to dream or feel freely, reflecting a broader cultural pressure to suppress feminine expression. Louisa's silence, her resignation, and her emotional vacancy mirror the societal restraints placed on women during Queen Victoria's reign. As Seidman notes, Victorian ideals discouraged any acknowledgment of women's emotional or sexual desires, confining them to roles centered solely on reproduction and obedience (Seidman 47).

The pivotal shift in Louisa's character occurs when James Harthouse expresses romantic interest and subtly invites her to escape with him. Rather than following impulse, Louisa turns to her father, seeking clarity and support. Though confused about her feelings, she senses that something is deeply wrong with the path her life has taken (Thoroddsen 15). Her decision to confront her father represents not only a personal turning point but also a symbolic rejection of the ideology that shaped her.

According to Bodenheimer, Louisa's confrontation with her father marks a critical moment of emotional awakening: "her suppressed powers of feeling take shape... through which she can exert any influence over her father" (Bodenheimer 205). At the novel's beginning, Louisa is chastised for indulging in emotion and imagination. By the end, the power dynamic shifts—she becomes the one to question, criticize, and reflect. The confrontation reveals how far she has come: she no longer blindly accepts her father's philosophy but instead challenges it with courage and clarity. This scene not only shows Louisa's personal growth but also acts as the emotional climax of the novel's central relationship—between father and daughter. Bodenheimer emphasizes that the heart of *Hard Times* lies in this transformation, where the once-passive Louisa emerges as a fully realized, emotionally aware woman.

## VI. SYMBOL OF COMPASSION AND EMOTIONAL EQUALITY

In *Hard Times*, Charles Dickens uses Sissy Jupe as a symbol of compassion and emotional equality, contrasting sharply with the rigid, utilitarian principles represented by

characters like Mr. Gradgrind and Mr. Bounderby. Sissy's upbringing in the circus, a place filled with creativity and emotional expression, distinguishes her from the emotionless, fact-driven atmosphere of Coketown. Through Sissy, Dickens critiques the dehumanizing effects of industrialization and utilitarianism, which disregard emotional intelligence and human connections. Sissy's empathy and emotional sensitivity challenge Gradgrind's educational system, which values facts and logic over emotions (Jones 76).

Sissy represents a different kind of equality—one that is based on emotional understanding and empathy, rather than intellectual achievement or social standing. Her character illustrates that human worth cannot be measured by material success or intellectual capability, contrasting sharply with Gradgrind's focus on statistics and productivity. By bringing Sissy into the Gradgrind household, Dickens reveals the flaws in a system that dismisses compassion and emotional intelligence. Her interactions with characters like Louisa Gradgrind emphasize the importance of emotional well-being for a fulfilling life (Zall 124).

The unwavering commitment to her values by Sissy is in sharp contrast with cold-blooded reasoning of characters like Mr. Gradgrind. Her predilection to the softness of everything points to a receptivity to the gentler aspects of life. This weakness is used as a strength: fighting against the uncompromising cruelty of the environment, Sissy creates the relationships of depth and community in the mechanistic society. Thus her personality is a bipolar construct of power and weakness. Sensitiveness and gentleness are signs of long-term inner strength, and an obsession with softness is interpreted as a possible liability in a strictly utilitarian system. Dickens finally sets Sissy as a sort of opposition to the ideological conventions of the time, proving that empathy and emotional attachment are valid forms of power, even though they are considered as weaknesses in the traditional social framework.

In the plot structure of the *Hard Times* by Dickens, the figure of Sissy Jupe serves as an instrument of the writer to criticize the industrial order, which in the desire to achieve efficiency, does not take into consideration the emotional aspect of human existence. Her depiction as an agent of mercy reveals the flaws of this kind of society and highlights the need of emotional insight in addition to intellectual reasoning in order to achieve true equality. Sissy clarifies that compassion, emotional richness, and personal contact are essential to the establishment of a stable and fair social order. Therefore, her existence makes the value of emotional intelligence, a skill, even more prominent, as both the personal and societal balance rely



on it. By her, Dickens creates a vision of the future where the central role in the language of relationships and social interaction will be played by the idea of compassion and, thus, provide the stark contrast to the cold rationalism of the industrial age.

Despite her modest position, Mrs. Sparsit subtly wields influence over Mr. Bounderby. Though he often brags about his humble origins, he never fails to emphasize Mrs. Sparsit's aristocratic connections. This contradiction is especially clear when he scolds Sissy Jupe for not showing deference to Mrs. Sparsit, declaring, "I come from the scum of the earth," but insisting that Sissy treat Mrs. Sparsit with the utmost respect (Dickens 50–51). Mrs. Sparsit, in turn, plays the role of the dignified lady, responding with what Dickens ironically calls "state humility," signaling that she is very aware of her own social standing and influence over Bounderby. Her quiet control becomes even more apparent when Bounderby prepares to inform her of his marriage to Louisa. Nervous about her reaction, he goes so far as to arm himself with smelling-salts. This reaction reveals how much weight her opinion holds for him. Yet when he finally announces the engagement, she responds with calm condescension: "I hope you may be happy, Mr. Bounderby. Oh, indeed I hope you may be happy, sir!" (Dickens 104). Her composed response unsettles Bounderby more than any dramatic reaction might have. This moment illustrates the unspoken authority Mrs. Sparsit holds—a power grounded not in her position, but in her presence and lineage. Even when Bounderby no longer needs her services at his home, he arranges for her to stay in a comfortable apartment at the bank, maintaining her standard of living. Her acceptance is equally measured, reinforcing the idea that Mrs. Sparsit, though diminished in role, still carries the symbolic weight of her class and commands respect through subtle means.

## VII. EQUALITY IN EDUCATION: DICKENS'S AMBIGUOUS SOLUTIONS

Dickens also argues that a system of education that is so strictly geared towards utilitarianism increases both social and educational injustices. Albert Jones notes that the sole focus on facts alienates people to their humanity and makes them into a part of an industrial machine (Jones 112). The unwavering uniqueness of Sissy and her ability to serve as an example of positive behavior in the Gradgrind environment serves as a sharp criticism of the strictly factual model of teaching. Her character symbolizes the transformative power of a holistic education that integrates emotional and imaginative growth.

Sissy Jupe's character stands in direct contrast to the educational philosophy championed by Mr. Gradgrind, who asserts that "Facts alone are wanted in life" (Dickens 3). In the didactic system of Gradgrind utilitarian atomism, Sissy is the ideal of the opposite of pure logic: emotional intelligence, sympathy and creativity, qualities that reformulate and refine, not authorize, the concept of human good.

. As Anshu Galgal observes, Sissy's instinctive grasp of human feelings starkly opposes the mechanical mindset embraced by figures like Gradgrind and Bounderby (Galgal 155). Raised in the world of the circus Sissy brings a tangible feeling of warmth and sympathy into the Gradgrind home, and especially with Louisa. By her appearance, Dickens tries to tell that imagination and emotional sensitivity are inalienable parts of a truly holistic education. In *Hard Times*, Sissy is described as having affective vitality, good nature, and free will, which is too in contrast with the cold and joyless characters of Louisa, Bitzer, and Tom Gradgrind. The circus artists, with their swiftness and their expressive ability, symbolize the life full of energy and imagination. Their acts, especially those to do with riding horses, do not only mean physical skills, but also signs of human vitality and meaning. These performances are not only intended to entertain the audience but also to confirm important emotional and spiritual aspects of life which utilitarianism tends to overlook.

Dickens's admiration for the circus community is evident throughout the novel. He portrays them as embodying virtues often missing in industrial society—creativity, empathy, and human connection. Unlike the Gradgrind system, which measures progress in terms of utility and control, the circus emphasizes imagination and emotional development. The tragic failure of Louisa's marriage to Bounderby illustrates the shortcomings of a life devoid of feeling. This failed relationship, along with Gradgrind's own eventual emotional collapse, underscores the novel's central message: that a system built purely on facts and logic cannot sustain human life. As Galgal argues, the downfall of both Louisa and her father reveals the inherent flaws in utilitarian ideology (Galgal 57). In the end, it is not rationality but compassion and emotional depth—as embodied by Sissy—that offer the possibility of redemption and renewal.

## VIII. CONCLUSION

The summarize the key findings concerning class, gender, and education in *Hard Times* and reflect on Dickens's portrayal of equality. Moreover, the discuss the novel's relevance to contemporary debates on social

justice, education, and gender equality while discovering potential directions for further research the analysis of *Hard Times*, that have found that Dickens offers a powerful critique of social inequalities rather than an idealized vision of equality. His portrayal of rigid class structures, limited educational opportunities, and gender disparities exposes the harsh realities of Victorian society. The novel by Dickens is an illustration of how the working class was being exploited, how an education system based on the principles of utilitarianism lacked, and how the roles of women were very limited. All these motifs combined show that economic and social systems are designed to ensure that inequality remains systemic rather than providing genuine social mobility. An overall assessment of the portrayal of injustices of equality in Dickens shows that the text lacks a comprehensive programmer towards the realization of fairness. Instead, it is more of a critique of industrial capitalism and its dehumanizing effects. The characters, especially those who are placed in the working community, are mostly entrapped with the system, and they face fewer chances of liberation. As a result, the story develops a cutting-edge criticism of rooted inequalities that hinder achieving equality. To conclude, is an important piece of literature that reveals the social injustices of the past era and allows thinking about social problems of modern society. The depictions of class struggle, gender conventions, and learning that Dickens creates still ring true, and thus this criticism is a useful addition to the contemporary discussions of equality and justice. Therefore, it is reasonable to make a comparison of the way Dickens treats the concept of class, gender, and education in and the other three works, *Oliver Twist*, *Bleak House*, and *Great Expectations*.

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