Hard Times, Dickens's tenth novel, has generated the most varied response of all of his fictions. From the beginning, critics and general readers have charged the novel with oversimplification or sheer inaccuracy in its critique of industrialization and attack on the utilitarian preference for "facts" and statistics over "fancy" or imaginative play. Harriet Martineau complained that:

> its characters, conversations, and incidents, are so unlike life, – so unlike Lancashire or English life, – that the novel is deprived of its influence. Master and man are as unlike life in England, at present, as Ogre and Tom Thumb: and the result of the choice of subject is simply, that the charm of an ideal creation is foregone, while nothing is gained in its stead.

Others saw the depiction of "fancy," represented by Sleary's horse-riding circus, and Sleary's insistence that people must be "amuthed," a woefully inadequate alternative to the "hard facts" complex of industrialization and utilitarianism.

F. R. Leavis in 1947 rescued the novel from nearly a hundred years of such criticism in an influential essay that asserted that *Hard Times* was a "moral fable" and the only Dickens novel "possessed by a comprehensive vision", thus making its putative weaknesses (its method of character typing and its universalizing social critique) its greatest strength. Though some post-Leavis critics have continued to see the novel as the least successful of Dickens's fictions because of what is perceived as thin characters and reductive critiques, others have turned from the debate about the inaccuracy of Dickens's representation of industrialism in Bounderby, utilitarianism in Gradgrind, union organizers in Slackbridge, or the working class in Blackpool, to the rich patterns of theme and language and to the complexity and paradox in the novel.

Still the question of the novel's artistic success remains, for *Hard Times* tends to register low in lists of favourite Dickens novels. Given that all of his fictions contain flat characters, both as central and minor figures, and that he tends to criticize social institutions in a more or less simplistic way – the Poor Law in *Oliver Twist*, Yorkshire boarding schools in *Nicholas Nickleby*, the legal system in *David Copperfield* and *Bleak House* – why should *Hard Times* bear the brunt of complaints about Dickens's tendency to simplify, to allegorize, to sentimentalize?

Several factors account for this. Perhaps the most significant is the constraints to which Dickens submitted in order to publish the novel in weekly instalments in *Household Words*. Lacking the room provided by the expansive monthly format of 32 pages he had grown used to, he found the requirements of the much shorter weekly form irksome. A letter to Forster written during the composition of *Hard Times* leaves no uncertainty about Dickens's ordeal: "The difficulty of the space is crushing," he wrote. "Nobody can have an idea of it who has not had an experience of patient fiction-writing with some elbow-room always, and open places in perspective. In this form, with any kind of regard to the current number, there is absolutely no such thing". To Mrs. Richard Watson he complained: "the compression and close condensation necessary for that disjointed form of publication [weekly parts], gave me perpetual trouble".

The need for this sustained compression went against one of Dickens's principal narrative inclinations. Though he could show complex development within a single

character, he mainly achieved scope and profundity through a multiplication of characters, all embedded in an expansive variety of settings. If Dickens's social critiques were sometimes a little simplistic, his representation of them in most of his novels was not. He complicated his fictions through the multiplication of plots which commented on and sometimes critiqued the main plot. It is this expansive narrative quality of Dickens's work that gives us a sense of the plentitude of life and hence of realism in his novels.

Not only did the compressed format of *Hard Times* require Dickens to reduce the number of characters and plot strands that he usually introduced, it also demanded a simplification of the large philosophical system that structures the whole novel, a system usually labeled "utilitarianism," though Dickens never uses the word in *Hard Times* (it was first used in print by John Stuart Mill in 1863), or "Benthamism" after Jeremy Bentham who is most associated with the philosophy. Dickens's effort to expose the limitations of this philosophical system inevitably suffers from the strategy of condensation.

Utilitarian theory had many aspects, but, as represented in *Hard Times*, five are most in force. First is a general tendency to draw conclusions based on the characteristics of groups of people rather than to recognize individual differences – as when the hard facts men think of the workers in *Hard Times* only as "hands." In terms of human behaviour, this system of thought asserted that all actions were motivated by the desire to avoid pain and seek pleasure, and hence all people acted only in self-interest. In economics, it gave as the best system "buying in the cheapest market and selling in the dearest." Utilitarianism also argued for *laissez-faire* ("let it alone") in government, based on the belief that the economic system was naturally balanced and any intervention by government to address perceived ills would result in greater harm by throwing that equilibrium off balance. In education and the production of knowledge, utilitarianism favoured the practical, sometimes "fact"-based type (increasingly representing qualitative aspects of life quantitatively), sometimes with the unintended consequence of marginalizing, if not denigrating, emotion, particularly as connected to art. What disappoints some readers is that, in order to attack this system, Dickens seems to reduce his characters to types, both limiting the human interest and oversimplifying utilitarianism at the same time.

There are, however, more positive consequences of the need to compress, one of which is a less-obtrusive narrative voice. The narrator's moral commentary usually comes in short bursts – "It was very strange that a young gentleman who had never been left to his own guidance for five consecutive minutes, should be incapable at last of governing himself; but so it was with Tom" (bk. 2, ch. 3) – or in resonant metaphors like the following: "Although Mr Gradgrind did not take after Blue Beard, his room was quite a blue chamber in its abundance of blue books" (bk. 1, ch. 11). In the latter example, the fused metaphor of Bluebeard/blue books is packed by the linking of wife-murder with the general tendency of utilitarianism to reduce human beings to objects or statistics, thus compressing into one figure several of the themes of the novel.

Because Dickens did not have the space to introduce into *Hard Times* a variety of characters or a number of different plots, the action is relatively abstract. It takes place in one industrial town among about a dozen representative people who do not change, with the single exception of Gradgrind, whom the narrator insists has a good heart, demonstrated by his taking the abandoned Sissy into his home against Bounderby's

strong objections, and who is thus able to be educated by experience. There are two uncomplicated good angels in the novel: Sleary, the owner of a horse-riding circus, and the circus girl Sissy Jupe, whose moral stature is indicated by her speech, which resembles that of a lady rather than that of the daughter of a stroller. One melodramatic "villain," the bored, aristocratic dandy James Harthouse, generates several of the plot conflicts. Two characters, Stephen and Rachael, whose realism is enhanced by Dickens's representation of their northern, working-class accent, typify the whole workforce of Coketown, and though we know Stephen is a loom weaver in Bounderby's factory, Dickens does not reveal what Rachael does or show where she works. One factory owner in a town of many factories also doubles as the town's banker (Bounderby), though we never see him at work in either place. The central philosophy of the system under attack is represented by Thomas Gradgrind, retired "from the wholesale hardware trade" (bk. 1, ch. 3), who has set up a school for the children of the town and has entered parliament as a member of the "hard facts" party (paralleling the "hardware trade"), thus combining in himself the industrial, educational, and governmental forces under the sway of utilitarianism.

Dickens portrays Gradgrind's home life on a similarly compact scale. Though Gradgrind has five children, the family is reduced to four, who seldom interact: Gradgrind, his wife, and Louisa and Tom. Two of his other children appear once under symbolic names (Adam Smith and Malthus), while Jane, the third child, plays a small role in demonstrating Sissy's good influence.

Dickens provides the reader, however, with one additional emotionally deformed child, Bitzer, and in his juxtaposition with Louisa and Tom, we can see Dickens's method of narrative multiplication at work even within the compressed scheme of *Hard Times*. Louisa, Tom, and Bitzer share the same education and all are damaged emotionally by it, but they develop differently. Tom and Bitzer show in simple terms the corrosive effect of the Gradgrind system of education by becoming complete egotists. But the form of this egotism is instructively different: Tom, untutored in ethics and morals, becomes a slave to instant gratification, while Bitzer, the school's star pupil, puts his learning to use only in the service of his future advancement. In this way, Dickens both keeps the coherence of his thematic structure and suggests variations and complexity.

Louisa demonstrates a further modification, even a contradiction, to the scheme. Like Oliver Twist, despite everything that has happened to her, she has an incorruptible core of generosity and love, "a starved imagination keeping life in itself somewhat, which brightened [her face's] expression" (bk. 1, ch. 3). Of course, she is more intelligent than Tom and Bitzer, and she is also her father's favourite child, which might suggest to us – post-Freud – a reason for this outcome. This core of goodness, however, by being untouched by anything in her education or environment, partially qualifies the novel's attack on the industrial/utilitarian complex. These incorruptible characters – and many other people in Dickens's novels – may be in miserable circumstances, but their essential goodness is never impacted by the conditions around them. As Raymond Williams said, there are in *Hard Times* two "incompatible ideological positions": one "that environment influences and in some sense determines character" and, second, that "some virtues and vices are original and both triumph over and in some cases can change any environment". Thus, through the narrative process

of multiplication, Dickens implies that the issue of social forces is not as simple as the rest of the novel suggests.

For readers who have lost their ability to respond to allegory or "moral fable," *Hard Times* remains thin, thesis-driven, and didactic. Yet compression has its advantages as well as its limitations in *Hard Times.* For one thing, it gives the novel a thematic and narrative coherence that is powerful. As Leavis put it, "the intention is peculiarly insistent, so that the representative significance of everything in the fable – character, episode, and so on – is immediately apparent as we read". The only ambiguity in the novel is a moral one that sees Tom Gradgrind escape legal punishment for his robbery and incrimination of Stephen. Since this is achieved through Sleary's artistic sleights of hand, and Gradgrind is humiliated by having Bitzer parrot back to him his utilitarian ideas about self-interest, the message about the power of "fancy" is allegorically clear and simple. But Tom's escape is morally confusing; there is never any doubt on the part of the moral and ethical spokesman Sissy or anyone else that Tom should, as Gradgrind says, "be saved from justice" (bk. 3, ch. 7). And Dickens conveniently ignores the likely punishment of Sleary by Bitzer and Bounderby for his help in getting Tom away.

Dickens's need to compress had another positive effect, at least from our perspective, if not from that of his contemporaries. The near-allegorical nature of nearly all the characters and the simplification of the plot can be seen as enabling the dark ending of *Hard Times*, unique in Dickens's novels if we accept the second "happy" ending of *Great Expectations*. For, despite the wonderfully antic scenes involving Bounderby and Mrs Sparsit, the entertaining Sleary with his brandy-soaked, asthmatic lisp (a tick that is difficult for some readers to follow but which is also intended for comic purposes), and the sentimentality of Stephen's death, where everybody behaves bravely and selflessly, *Hard Times* is much darker than even the late dark novels *Great Expectations* and *Our Mutual Friend*. For example, one scene that readers might have expected to end sentimentally, Louisa's confrontation with her father at the end of book 2, fails to lighten the emotional devastation. The reconciliation of father and daughter was a frequently sentimentalized scene in melodrama which conventionally ended with an embrace between the two. But in *Hard Times* the scene contains no forgiveness, only Louisa's recriminations; her father is helpless in the face of her misery, and finally, as she collapses, she violently rejects his support. This reaction is later softened but neither Gradgrind nor Louisa ever recovers fully from it.

With the reader's emotions and attention primarily focused by the narrative structure on the allegorical thematic developments rather than engaged with characters as rounded human beings, *Hard Times* can betray the Victorian expectations of a "happy ending" for the central "good" characters, and let some of the "bad" characters go unpunished (Bitzer, for example). The more allegorical we experience Louisa to be, the more willing we are for her not to be rewarded and to accept her lonely end – husbandless, childless, a looker-on at life – as appropriate. Louisa, Tom, Stephen, Mrs Sparsit, Bounderby, and even Gradgrind end badly or sadly. What passes for a love plot (a standard, almost mandatory element in the Victorian novel) – Louisa and Harthouse – is frustrated. Only those outside the system, the circus people Sleary and Sissy, are free of the sadness, and Sissy's "happy" ending in marriage and motherhood actually has no effect on the dark colouring of the novel's closure because it is un realized. We don't know whom she marries or how.

The novel's single-minded treatment of its theme does not swerve at the end, implying instead that mistakes, however well intentioned, cannot always be rectified and human misery is not always remediable. Ironically, this dark ending makes *Hard Times* more realistic, precisely because of the novel's "fanciful" form of allegorical fiction. Despite Stephen Blackpool's unlikely but impassioned speech before his death in which he exhorts employers and employees to know each other better (a common Victorian, middle-class "cure" for industrial unrest, and what Dickens himself calls for in the article "On Strike" on the Preston weavers, out of which some of *Hard Times* grew), the novel does not end with any evidence that industrialists and workers might be brought together as Elizabeth Gaskell suggested at the end of her two industrial novels *Mary Barton* (1848) and *North and South* (which followed *Hard Times* in *Household Words* in 1854). Bounderby remains the self-satisfied and hard man he always was, despite the unmasking of his false self-myth of having been "born in a ditch," abandoned by his mother, and abused by his grandmother. (Bounderby, one of the hard fact men, is really the great fiction-maker in the novel, not just about himself but also about Mrs Sparsit's class superiority and about the "hands" only wanting gold spoons and turtle soup.) Stephen's sad fate can seem gratuitously punishing partly due to an under-motivated private promise he made to Rachael to avoid trouble. Stephen oddly interprets this promise as a prohibition against joining his fellow workers in supporting a union, but then he essentially breaks his promise by arguing with Bounderby and getting fired. This part of the novel is perhaps more confused than Dickens intended, for in a deleted passage Stephen's rage at the maiming of Rachael's little sister in an industrial accident frightens Rachael and causes her to ask for the promise (bk. 1, ch. 13).

A third way that compression has a positive effect on *Hard Times*, and one that several late twentieth-century critics have chosen to address, is the way in which figures of speech are deployed. Of course, all of Dickens's novels are rhetorically rich, but in *Hard Times* metaphors, through repetition, are compacted into symbols that can express emotion and comment in a single figure, a technique Dickens calls in *Hard Times* striking "the keynote" (bk. 1, chs. 5, 8).

For example, the keynote in the description of the factories is both a synecdoche and a metaphor and, through repetition, a symbol: the movement of the piston of the steam engine is referred to several times as that of "melancholy mad elephants" and the smoke from the chimneys as "monstrous serpents" (bk. 2, ch. 11). The metaphor of "fire" is then developed symbolically in reference to Louisa who looks into the fires at home in an effort to understand her emotional devastation and culminates when, in her discussion of Bounderby's marriage proposal with her father, she warns, speaking figuratively about herself, though her literal-minded father cannot understand the figure: "There seems to be nothing there, but languid and monotonous smoke. Yet when the night comes, Fire bursts out, father!" (bk. 1, ch. 15). Through this compressed symbolic pattern, Dickens achieves an almost lyrically poetic style.

Other types of figures are similarly rich through compression. The narrator's comments are heavily inflected with biblical references which introduce a moral and ethical commentary on the philosophy of Coketown. Other webs of figures are drawn from natural processes and also from fairy tales and nursery rhymes, the very literature that the little Gradgrinds have been denied by their father's system of education, both of which symbolically oppose the mechanistic and fact-based system of Coketown. For

example, the names of the three major divisions of the novel that Dickens introduced in the book version, “Sowing,” “Reaping,” and “Garnering,” come from an alternative system to that which dominates the novel: the natural cycle of nature as opposed to the artificial clock time that governs factory work. Further, the figures of agrarian fertility are unusually coherent and comprehensive in *Hard Times*. As Philip Collins noted, a flower motif begins in the opening scene where Sissy Jupe is humiliated by Mr M’Choakumchild for preferring carpets with flowers on them when “in fact” we do not walk on flowers; this is picked up later when we learn that Josephine Sleary does a “Tyrolean flower-act” in the circus (bk. 1, ch. 3), and then again in the scene of Tom’s tearing apart roses, while discussing Louisa with Harthouse (bk. 2, ch. 7). In the confrontation with her father at the end of book 2, Louisa cries out “What have you done … with the garden that should have bloomed once, in this great wilderness here!” (bk. 2, ch. 12).

Another set of references from the natural world that turns into a symbol begins with Sissy’s inability to provide the required definition of a horse supplied by Bitzer: “Quadruped. Graminivorous. Forty teeth, namely twenty-four grinders, four eyeteeth, and twelve incisive” (bk. 1, ch. 1). The public house where the circus folk stay in Coketown is called the Pegasus Arms, and Mr E. W. B. Childers is described as a Centaur. At the end of the novel, the initial scene between Sissy and Bitzer is neatly reversed when Bitzer’s effort to capture Tom is frustrated by Sleary’s ability to manoeuvre a trained dancing horse. In all these cases, the symbolic references tighten the narrative at the same time as they expand the thematic meaning in a minimum number of words.

Perhaps the most remarkable metaphor – what the narrator calls “an allegorical fancy” (bk. 2, ch. 10) – is Mrs Sparsit’s staircase, the elaborate metaphoric structure she builds in her mind to represent Louisa’s slow movement toward adultery with Harthouse. Through this metaphor, Dickens is able to condense his narrative impressively because he does not have to detail the scenes by which Harthouse’s attempted seduction takes place. Instead, Louisa’s descent, though punctuated by a few scenes between Harthouse and Tom and a couple between Harthouse and Louisa, is mainly seen – and misread by Mrs Sparsit – through her references to the staircase.

The compression of the novel has encouraged a focus on the novel’s industrial and utilitarian themes. Dickens himself prompted this concentration by dedicating the first book edition of *Hard Times* to Thomas Carlyle, author of the social critiques, *Chartism* (1839) and *Past and Present* (1843). Writing to Carlyle, he explained: “I know it contains nothing in which you do not think with me, for no man knows your books better than I”. There is, however, a third theme in the novel, what I have called, in another context “the marriage and divorce theme,” which is also woven into the text through two characters who also carry the industrial/utilitarian and education themes.

When the theme of divorce is mentioned at all, it is usually with reference to Dickens’s marriage and the concurrent debates in parliament about a proposed reform of the divorce laws, which was subsequently passed in 1857. But matrimonial issues are an integral thread in the novel, and linked in their symbolic reference to procreation with its three major parts: Sowing, Reaping, and Garnering. More importantly, the structure of these three parts points directly to Louisa’s marriage story – “Sowing” ends with Bounderby’s proposal, Louisa’s painful interview with her father about the

proposal, and then her marriage. “Reaping” ends with her running away from her near seduction by James Harthouse and her flight from her husband’s house to return to her father’s, which she never again leaves, and at the end of “Garnering” the narrator summarizes briefly the rest of her solitary life. Thus, it is Louisa’s marriage story that partially shapes the narrative.

Just as all institutional relations have been corrupted by the industrial/utilitarian complex in Coketown, so have all personal connections, as figured in *Hard Times* by the institution of marriage, which Tony Tanner has called “The structure that maintains the Structure”. All the Coketown marriages are bad, most abusively so (Sissy’s notwithstanding), and none of them is repaired. All are corrupted by the lack of imagination and human compassion that has warped the lives of the children of Coketown. Mrs. Sparsit was forced into a marriage with a young wastrel who left her without a penny when he died; Mrs Gradgrind has been driven into semi-imbecility by always being repressed by her husband (as she puts it, “whenever I have said anything, on any subject, I have never heard the last of it” [bk. 2, ch. 9]), and dies without even a right to her own pain (“there’s a pain somewhere in the room … but I couldn’t positively say that I have got it” [bk. 2, ch. 9]). Louisa, not unlike Mrs Sparsit, has been handed over to her father’s best friend and manipulated into accepting the transfer by her selfish brother. Though the details of her married life are omitted, and we never in fact know what she really feels for her would-be seducer Harthouse, nor even what she thinks about her marriage, the reader knows without question, as with nearly all events in the novel, that this marriage is an abomination.

The keynote of bad marriages, however, is that of Stephen Blackpool, whose marriage to a drunken and seemingly criminal wife introduces the discussion of the need for affordable divorce, though none of the marriages, except perhaps Stephen’s, actually would have qualified for a divorce that would have allowed remarriage. (Bounderby is quite within his legal rights to demand that Louisa be home by noon the next day or he will no longer support her.) Divorce at the time Dickens was writing *Hard Times* was difficult to achieve (there had been only just under a hundred full divorces since 1801 and only four by a woman). The only grounds for divorce was adultery, and for women the husband’s adultery had to be compounded by some other offense – incest, rape, sodomy, bestiality, or extreme cruelty. It took three separate court actions to complete, the last one the passing of a private bill in the House of Lords.

But Stephen’s need for a divorce stands in for Louisa’s, another efficient compression in the novel, for the narrative links the two characters through Tom’s betrayal of them both, and in terms of plot through Louisa’s unconscious role in raising the suspicion that Stephen robbed the bank. Both are victims of the industrial/utilitarian complex and the marriage laws. Louisa’s descent down Mrs Sparsit’s staircase to a “dark pit of shame” (bk. 2, ch. 10) is figuratively completed when Stephen falls into the Old Hell Shaft.

Thus, marriage and divorce are linked to the industrial and education themes in *Hard Times* through both Stephen and Louisa, even as the industrial and education themes are linked symbolically by the friendship of Gradgrind and Bounderby. Gradgrind’s daughter Louisa’s marriage to Bounderby solidifies the connections between the men – and between the themes – even as Stephen’s relationship to Bounderby as his employee links, through his seeking help from Bounderby for his bad marital situation, these themes to marriage and divorce. The novel as a result is balanced with

Gradgrind/Bounderby (and Bitzer) on one side against Louisa/Stephen (and Sissy) on the other. Tom and Harthouse are the opponents to Louisa and Stephen's search for happiness, and Sleary is a symbolic but actually somewhat impotent helper.

This schematic structure in its simplicity may seem a weakness to twenty-first century readers. But the issues that it articulates so efficiently, coherently, and powerfully are still very much a part of our lives: repression and abuse of children, the unintended consequences of abstract theories of child-rearing, the persistence of unsafe and unrewarding work, education made dull and useless by rote and drill, social and political decisions based on general ideological principles rather than on individual human needs, mistaken and mercenary marriages and their consequences, and the healing power of love and pleasure and art. The clarity and intensity of these persistent human issues continue to resonate in *Hard Times.* For while we must be amused, we must also be reminded again and again of the universal human needs for art and play, for moral virtues and compassion not only in personal relations, but also in the workplace and in government, and, above all, for the imaginative power to understand and sympathize with the lives of others, a power that literature like *Hard Times* always gives us.

Source: Anne Humpherys, "*Hard Times*," in *A Companion to Charles Dickens*, David Paroissien, ed. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008.