

**An Analysis of Thomas Gradgrind in
Charles Dickens' Hard Times**

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Charles Dickens, in his novel of social consciousness Hard Times, makes the reader aware of the social conditions of the industrial workers during the Industrial Revolution in England and the human drama that occurs on all levels of society from the aristocracy to the working class. The themes of utilitarianism, social reform, and educational methods are among the issues addressed in Dicken's novel. Several characters represent various aspects of English society in particular and human society at large in general and represent Dickens' exposure of social ills in hopes of ultimate reform. The character who best encompasses personal asceticism, utilitarianism, and the educational system of the times and the dry, factual approach to education is Mr. Thomas Gradgrind.

In the opening section of the book Thomas Gradgrind is described as a no-nonsense, practical and pragmatic person. In physical appearance he is described as having an "obstinate carriage, square coat, square legs, square shoulders" (p.47). His practical, no-frills approach to life and education was conveyed to his children by his method of dispensing only hard, cold facts. His severe, regimented method neglected the need for reflection and concepts involving art, beauty, and imagination. His sparse, no-frills life-style excluded such extravagances as dance, art, and music all of which he considered frivolous and superfluous. He considered himself as saving Sissy Jupe whom he rescued from what he considered was the decadence of the circus life and trained her in the proper, factual ways of society. However, as the novel and character of Gradgrind develops, he softens his beliefs and evolves from strict adherence to fact to the acceptance and realization of the necessity for imagination and experimentation, which, after all, is how facts are initially developed.

The joyless, rote memorization approach to education and life is also exemplified by Mr. Gradgrind. His approach to education is as colorless as his approach to life. The novel begins with the admonition:

"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!" (p.47)

He demands rote memorization of previously established facts, or the interpretation of data, which incidentally are the product of the imagination and experimentation that Gradgrind preaches against. The regimented, militaristic mentality of his educational techniques produces or attempts to produce the human equivalent of mechanical robots, the creation of emotionless and mechanical, trained human beings that never question or wonder about the workings of the universe: "Herein lay the spring of the mechanical art and mystery of educating the reason without stooping to the cultivation of the sentiments and affections. Never wonder. By means of addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division, settle everything somehow and never wonder." (p.89) In other words, in direct contrast to the philosophy of William Wordsworth and the Romantics, accept, don't question and never wonder why. Of course, all information or facts attained are a result of questioning the processes of nature. As any scientist would admit science is not a collection of facts it is instead an interpretation of data derived from and based on the results of experimentation.

Gradgrind as the embodiment of the philosophy of utilitarianism is evident in his essentially noble belief that, as stated in utilitarianism, all actions should promote the general good-- all else is frivolous. Anything other than the necessary is to be excluded. "Would you paper a room with representations of horses?" (p.51) he asks. The answer he expects to hear is negative since horses

are not seen on walls in actuality. He gives an interesting definition of taste when he says: "Taste is only another name for Fact." (p.51). He accepts only the literal, not the figurative. His democratic belief is in the greatest good for the greatest number and that an object or activity is valued only for its usefulness to society. Entertainment (such as the circus), art, literature, and music are non-utilitarian and are therefore superfluous and are to be excluded from human intercourse. This colorless approach to life is often used by dictatorial governments and is opposed to the humanist view of life. Even though, ideally, every action should ultimately promote societal good and happiness (according to utilitarianism an action is right only if it promotes happiness) this belief should not, of course, exclude pleasurable pursuits such as art, music, and literature since they directly promote human happiness and alleviate suffering. A dry, colorless and mechanically technical and sterile world void of freshness and imagination was not the intention of the proponents of utilitarianism such as John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Bentham. As the story evolves Gradgrind begins to acknowledge his error through his experiences especially with Sissy and his son Tom and daughter Louisa.

Gradgrind begins to realize through his experiences with Sissy and Tom and his observations of life in general that human beings are more than machines of utility and the heart is more than a mechanical pump necessary for the circulation of blood as analytically and matter-of-factly stated by Bitzer (p.303) reflecting Gradgrind's school of Fact and Josiah Bounderby's capitalistic philosophy of self interest. The heart's metaphorical association with love and compassion is finally recognized by Gradgrind as necessary for a full human existence. He realizes finally through a string of events that fact and fancy (or imagination) are necessary and complementary companions in human society.