Hard Times Essay, Research Paper

The book Hard Times written by Charles Dickens is a story about a Lancashire Mill Town in the 1840?s. The novel is divided into three books. Dickens titles the books accordingly to prepare the reader for what is about to come, and throughout the novel he shows the effects of the education system, the setup of the caste system, and the Industrial Revolution had on society through this small town of Coketown. The main characters of the novel show the English caste system of the 19th century by showing how one influences the other and the amount of power the bourgeois now have in society. They own the factories. Therefore, they have the money and, because of the changes coming from the revolution, have some power in society. The titles of the three books, "Sowing", "Reaping", and "Garnering" shows significance in the way Dickens is trying to help the reader get an understanding of what is to come. Dickens shows the way the working classes are fighting for a say in the way they are treated at work by forming unions and how a bad negotiator can ruin things. He shows from the start that the education system is based on "fact" and not "fancy." The breakdown of the "fact" based education is shown when Gradgrind himself asked a question that is not fact based. In the end, the whole system of education is reversed and the "fancy" is fancied. The novel can be summarized as a book about two struggles. One struggle is between fact and imagination and the other is the struggle between two classes. Thomas Gradgrind, the father of Louisa, Tom, and June not only stresses facts in the classroom in which he teaches, but also at home to his family. He has brought up his children to know only the "facts." Everything is black and white, right or wrong with nothing in between. Gradgrind does not like the idea of going to the circus or having flowered carpet. Everyone knows a person cannot have flowered carpet. He would trample all over them and they would end up dying. The second struggle is between the classes is illustrated between Stephen Blackpool and Bounderby. Blackpool represents the working class and Bounderby the bourgeois or middle class. He is a warm-hearted man who feels he deserves this mediocre life. Blackpool was once an employee under Bounderby and was fired for standing up for his beliefs. He believed that the union was taking anything that was given to them because they could not expect anything better. Stephen stands up for his fellow workers asking for reform and this makes Bounderby mad so he fires Stephen. This was typical during the Industrial Revolution. The run down society Dickens speaks of is that created by the Industrial Revolution. The air is filled with smoke that the working class have to breath. The water is turning colors with pollution caused by the factories. The people who are most effected by this are people like Blackpool, the lower class. Dickens shows Stephen and Bounderby as a typical worker-employer relationship. Dickens shows the way in which the factories were run at this period. A person could lose their job simply by disagreeing with what he felt was wrong because the employer did not really care about the employee. This is the way the workers were treated with no respect. In contrast to the industrial revolution, it would be highly unlikely that a middle class citizen such as Bounderby to employ an aristocrat. The titles of the three books ("Sowing", "Reaping", and "Garnering") are named in a way of giving a special reference to the upbringing and the education of the children. The titles together show the basic plot of the story. "Sowing," suggests that in the 1st book the idea of the children being sown with facts and it also lays the foundation of the plot of the novel. They are being taught fact. Where 2+2= 4 and nothing else matters, there is no gray area. Everything is either black or white and nothing else. They are not taught emotion. The 2nd book talks of the reaping or harvesting. In this book, Dickens shows that whatever was sown in the first book, the consequences are now being seen. For example, Louisa Gradgrind Bounderby was sown with the seeds of Fact. She used facts to decide upon marrying Bounderby. It would help Tom out and get him a high position in Bounderby?s bank. We can tell that she did not want to marry Bounderby when she said, "There seems to be nothing there but languid and monotonous smoke. Yet when the night comes, fired bursts out, father!" This seems be symbolism to a negative view of marrying Bounderby. In other words, she is saying that there would be repressed feelings of passionate love and if this marriage would to happen and deny her the opportunity of love. She would be susceptible to being seduced. This almost happens with Mr. James Harthouse. Here Dickens is referring to the Bible where there is a concept of "whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap"(Galatians 6:7). Thus, being married to Bounderby, Louisa had harvested an unhappy marriage. The 3rd book, "Garnering", is about how characters are starting to pick of the broken pieces of their lives. Mr. Gradgrind starts to help his children put together pieces of their lives by promising to teach them the "fancy" or emotional side of life along with the "facts." The main characters in the story are representative of the 19th century caste system. The aristocracy is represented through Mrs. Sparsit and Mr. Harthouse. Mrs. Sparsit is motivated by an underlining jealousy towards Bounderby; she works for him, throughout the book. During this time in history, there was a conflict of power going on. The middle class was gaining it and the aristocracy was losing it. Mrs. Sparsit despises Bounderby and his philosophy that he is a “self-made man.” Mr. Harthouse lives the life of a typical aristocrat. He lives the idle life, only moving to Coketown to find something to occupy him. He tried to steal Louisa away from Bounderby. This shows that Harthouse still felt that the rules didn’t apply to him being aristocratic. Bounderby, Thomas Gradgrind, Tom Gradgind, and Louisa Gradgrind represent the middle class. Bounderby is the typical successful middle class citizen of this time. He has a lot of wealth and influence and he does not care about his employees. The father, Gradgrind, is driven by a firm belief in his educational system. Therefore, pounds facts into his children. Tom Gradgrind is later revealed as very weak and becomes a person only interested in what he can get no matter how it affects other. He is heartless. Louisa is a poor girl trapped in the middle. Both her father and brother push her to marry Bounderby. She only does this to make them happy, but we see throughout the book that she has an interest in the fancy side of life. Sissy Jupe and Stephen Blackpool represent the lower class. Sissy Jupe is orphaned at the beginning. Blackpool is a worker for Bounderby. Both are very uneducated, but very compassionate people. Blackpool and Jupe show throughout the book the typical lower class citizen. They were very compassionate towards their fellow man and help whenever they could. In looking at the aspects of the 19th century. Dickens gives a description about how the “hands", or the workers, were being mistreated and that there was little hope that they would be helped. Dickens? views towards unions at this time are that they were just as corrupt as the employers. Slackbridge is one of the union agitators. He claims to be for the union, but Dickens describes him as a false prophet. He was not a very good negotiator for the union. Even his name suggests that he is a very poor “bridge” between the workers and the owners. Slackbridge takes whatever is offered and that is not much at all. The Gradgrind education system backfires on Gradgrind himself. This is seen through an ironic situation between him and Bitzer, Bitzer was an excellent product of the "system." Bitzer had stopped Gradgrind?s son Tom from leaving town. Tom had been caught stealing money from Bounderby?s bank. By this time Gradgrind has become a more emotional man, torn down by the constant failure in life by his own children. In an effort to save Tom from any jail time, he was planning to send Tom away from town. The emotions felt by Gradgrind become too much for him and in a "broken down and submissive" manner asks Bitzer, "have you no heart." Bitzer replies. "No man, sir, acquainted with the facts established by Harvey relating to the circulation of the blood can doubt that I have a heart.” The irony is that Gradgrind taught Bitzer to think in this manner. Bitzer uses facts to undermine a question clearly related to compassion, which Bitzer does not have. Gradgrind would have answered the question the same way at the beginning of the novel. Toward the end of the book, fact and fancy became reversed. Why was that? It was because of the realization that the Gradgrind education system failed. Teaching only facts was not the best way of eduacating the children. Gradgrind himself figures this out when he sees his own children failing at life. Dickens illustrates that the education system of this time was educating people to not think on their own. Their imaginations were suppressed and that it also was not interested in making well-rounded students, but denying children their childhood. The significance of the ending being in the circus is that is the complete opposite of everything that was being taught at the beginning. The institution of the school of fact is totally gone. A new way of looking at life has arisen. Facts can no longer the only thing in life. The necessity of compassion, love, and understanding are now shown to be of more importance that learning facts alone. The entire Gradgrind system of facts proved to be a failure, and Gradgrind learns that emotions and imagination are the controlling forces in everyone’s life. Gradgrind is filled with repentance for ruining the lives of his children, as he decided to make “his facts and figures subservient to Faith, Hope, and charity.” In Dickens three books in the novel, we are shown the effects of the education system, the caste system, and the Industrial Revolution had on society through this small town of Coketown To me the book was a good portrayal of what life in the 19th century would have been like. The breakdown of society from a single towns standpoint through the eyes of Dickens is amazing. In my opinion, I felt that the voice of Gradgrind had the most impact throughout the novel. As the novel progresses, so does the attitude of Gradgrind. He slowly faded away from his idea of education of nothing but fact, to completely abandoning that philosophy and promises to intertwine the two. Also, he showed that he was a stronger man, by standing up to Bounderby when Louisa came home. He allowed her to stay and Bounderby divorced her. Gradgrind did this out of love and with no concern about what Bounderby thought or would "say" about it.