

**Dickens Fellowship-Spring Conference**  
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## The Muddled State of Education and Family Relationships in *Hard Times*

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### **OUTLINE:**

#### I. INTRODUCTION

Dickens shows the devastating effect that the muddled state of education has on the family, and, by extension, society itself. As Dickens' division titles for the three parts of the novel indicate ("Sowing," "Reaping," "Garnering"), Gradgrind will reap and garner what he sows. In this presentation, I will examine the kind of education that Gradgrind believes in and the consequences of this education on the Gradgrind family.

#### II. Education - the Gradgrind Way

- A. Facts, facts, and more facts
- B. People as objects or things (children=vessels, Gradgrind=cannon)  
Children as passive, teachers as aggressive, adversarial relationship
- C. Manner of teaching (coercive, interrogative, regurgitation of facts in isolation, independent thought discouraged)
- D. Books (things that stimulate the imagination) - they are a threat,  
"destructive nonsense"

#### III. Importance of the Imagination

- A. Fosters "gentleness," "mercy," (i.e. the good in people), ability to distinguish between right and wrong
- B. Gives people relief from the hardships of life
- C. Makes understanding and empathy toward others possible

D. Lack of imagination or failure to nurture it results in emotionally handicapped people, alienation, and dysfunctional relationships.

IV. Consequences of Gradgrind's education on family relations

A. His wife - a nonentity in the family, crushed by fact, sickly, has had headaches since her marriage, her refrain ("I'll never hear the last of it!")

B. His daughter, Louisa - apathy, tiredness, conscious of something missing in her life, self-sacrifice (or self destruction?), her refrain ("What does it matter?")

C. His son, Tom, Jr. - resentment, sullenness, no scruples, seeks revenge on his father through self-destruction, his nickname ("the whelp")

V. CONCLUSION

In *Hard Times*, Dickens shows the dangers of an educational system which emphasizes the memorization of facts to the exclusion of the imagination. Imagination makes a sense of fellow feeling and empathy toward others possible while also providing a means of relief from the harsh realities of life. Dickens shows that a restrained imagination will cause breakdowns in communication, an inability to understand others or think independently, and a failure to develop a sense of right and wrong. Gradgrind's misguided teachings bring about sickness and discord. Family members are alienated and there is no unity or cohesiveness. If we are to improve relationships and, by extension, society, we need to look at how we are educating our children. The concepts that Dickens writes about in *Hard Times* are just as relevant today as they were in his day.

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Quotes from *Hard Times* (New York: Norton, 1990):

1. Is it possible, I wonder, that there was any analogy between the case of the Coketown population and the case of the little Gradgrinds? Surely, none of us in our sober senses and acquainted with figures, are to be told at this time of day, that one of the foremost elements in the existence of the Coketown working-people had been for scores of years, deliberately set at nought? That there was any Fancy in them demanding to be brought into healthy existence instead of struggling on in convulsions? (24)

2. 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! (7)

3. ...a kind of cannon loaded to the muzzle with facts, and prepared to blow them clear out of the regions of childhood at one discharge. He seemed a galvanizing apparatus, too, charged with a grim, mechanical substitute for the tender young imaginations that were to be stormed away. (8)

4. We may assume that we are not singular in entertaining a very great tenderness for the fairy literature of our childhood. What enchanted us then, and is captivating a million of young fancies now, has, at the same blessed time of life, enchanted vast hosts of men and women who have done their long day's work, and laid their grey heads down to rest. It would be hard to estimate the amount of gentleness and mercy that has made its way among us through these slight channels. *Forbearance, courtesy, consideration for the poor and aged, kind treatment of animals, the love of nature, abhorrence of tyranny and brute force-- many such good things have been first nourished in the child's heart by this powerful aid.* It has greatly helped to keep us, in some sense, ever young, by preserving through our worldly ways one slender track not overgrown with weeds, where we may walk with children, sharing their delights.

... [A] nation without fancy, without some romance, never did, never can, never will, hold a great place under the sun. (my italics)

Charles Dickens, "Fraud on the Fairies," *Household Words*,  
October 1, 1853

5. Mrs. Gradgrind, a little, thin, white, pink-eyed bundle of shawls, of surprising feebleness, mental and bodily; who was always taking physic without any effect and who, whenever she showed a symptom of coming to life, was *invariably stunned by some weighty piece of fact, tumbling on her.* (17) (my italics)

6. You learnt a great deal, Louisa, and so did your brother. Ologies of all kinds from morning till night.... But there is something — not an ology at all — that your father has missed, or forgotten, Louisa. I don't know what it is. I have often sat with Sissy near me, and thought about it. I shall never get its name now. But your father may. It makes me restless. I want to write to him, to find out, for God's sake, what it is. (149-150)

7. They had been lectured at, from their tenderest years; coursed, like little hares. Almost as soon as they could run alone, they had been made to run to the lecture-room. The first object with which they had an association, or of which they had a remembrance, was a large black board with a dry Ogre chalking ghastly white figures on it.

Not that they knew, by name or nature, anything about an Ogre. Fact forbid! I only use the word to express a monster in a lecturing castle, with Heaven knows how many heads manipulated into one, taking childhood captive, and dragging it into gloomy statistical dens by the hair. (12-13)

8. ... struggling through the dissatisfaction of her face, there was a light with nothing to rest upon, a fire with nothing to burn, a starved imagination keeping life in itself somehow, which brightened its expression. Not with the brightness natural to cheerful youth, but with uncertain,

eager, doubtful flashes, which had something painful in them, analogous to the changes on a blind face groping its way. (15)

9. "Oh yes! As dearly as he loves me. Father loved me first, for her sake. He carried me about with him when I was quite a baby. We have never been asunder from that time."

"Yet he leaves you now, Sissy?"

"Only for my good. Nobody understands him as I do; nobody knows him as I do...." (48-49)

10. I would advise you...to consider this question, as you have been accustomed to consider every other question, simply as one of tangible Fact. The ignorant and the giddy may embarrass such subjects with irrelevant fancies, and other absurdities that have no existence, properly viewed — really no existence — but it is no compliment to you to say, that you know better. 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? In considering this question, it is not unimportant to take into account the statistics of marriage, so far as they have yet been obtained, in England and Wales. I find, on reference to the figures, that a large proportion of these marriages are contracted between parties of very unequal ages, and that the elder of these contracting parties is, in rather more than three-fourths of these instances, the bridegroom. It is remarkable as showing the wide prevalence of this law, that among the natives of the British possessions in India, also in a considerable part of China, and among the Calmucks of Tartary, the best means of computation yet furnished us by travellers, yield similar results. The disparity I have mentioned, therefore, almost ceases to be disparity, and (virtually) all but disappears. (76-77)

11. ...(S)he was impelled to throw herself upon his breast, and give him the pent-up confidences of her heart. But, to see it, he must have overleaped at a bound the artificial barriers he had for many years been erecting, between himself and all those subtle essences of humanity which will elude the utmost cunning of algebra until the last trumpet ever to be sounded shall blow even algebra to wreck. The barriers were too many and too high for such a leap. With his unbending, utilitarian, matter-of-fact face, he hardened her again; and the moment shot away into the plumbless depths of the past, to mingle with all the lost opportunities that are drowned there. (77-78)

12. ...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?...

You have been so careful of me, that I never had a child's heart. You have trained me so well, that I never dreamed a child's dream. You have dealt so wisely with me, father, from my cradle to

this hour, that I never had a child's belief or a child's fear. (79)

13. How could you give me life, and take from me all the inappreciable things that raise it from the state of conscious death? ...

Would you have robbed me — for no one's enrichment — only for the greater desolation of this world — of the immaterial part of my life, the spring and summer of my belief, my refuge from what is sordid and bad in the real things around me, my school in which I should have learned to be more humble and more trusting with them, and to hope in my little sphere to make them better? (161)

14. I wish I could collect all the Facts we hear so much about ... and all the Figures, and all the people who found them out--and I wish I could put a thousand barrels of gunpowder under them and blow them up together. (43-44)

15. It was very remarkable that a young gentleman who had been brought up under one continuous system of unnatural restraint, should be a hypocrite; but it was certainly the case with Tom. 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. It was altogether unaccountable that a young gentleman whose imagination had been strangled in his cradle, should be still inconvenienced by its ghost in the form of grovelling sensualities; but such a monster, beyond all doubt, was Tom. (101)

Additional Quotes:

16. ...[E]ach teacher should throw the whole of his individuality into his work; to think out for himself a system that shall be himself; that shall be animated by his heart and brain, naturally, and in every part; that shall beat as it were with his own pulse, breathe his own breath, and, in short, be alive.

Henry Morley, "School Keeping," Household Words, January 20, 1854

17. I don't like that kind of school...where the bright, childish imagination is utterly discouraged, and where those bright, childish faces, which it is so very good for the wisest among us to remember in after life, when the world is too much with us early and late, are gloomily and grimly scared out of countenance; where I have never seen among the pupils, whether boys or girls, anything but little parrots and small calculating machines.

Charles Dickens, Speech to Warehousemen and Clerks's Schools, November 5, 1857

18. We may assume that we are not singular in entertaining a very great tenderness for the fairy literature of our childhood. What enchanted us then, and is captivating a million of young fancies

now, has, at the same blessed time of life, enchanted vast hosts of men and women who have done their long day's work, and laid their grey heads down to rest. It would be hard to estimate the amount of gentleness and mercy that has made its way among us through these slight channels. Forbearance, courtesy, consideration for the poor and aged, kind treatment of animals, the love of nature, abhorrence of tyranny and brute force—many such good things have been first nourished in the child's heart by this powerful aid. It has greatly helped to keep us, in some sense, ever young, by preserving through our worldly ways one slender track not overgrown with weeds, where we may walk with children, sharing their delights.

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