

## Working Class Conditions in Charles Dickens's *Hard Times*

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### **Abstract:**

This paper explores the workers' financial, social and legal conditions in *Hard Times*. The setting (time and place) has a great significance in the novel that shows some aspects of the industrial circumstances of the early Victorian period. In the introduction, a brief biography of the novelist, Charles Dickens and then a historical background of the novel is given. The laborers and master are going to be highlighted as well as some other minor characters who have a direct relationship with them. Through the explanation of the setting, the circumstances of the workers would be understood well. The effects, nasty effects of the industrial revolution and how it changes the society. How is the daytime of the workers in the black merciless and big factories? What are the rights do they have and what do they lack? How law is oppressing these poor, hungry workers unjustly. The differences between the laborers and manufacturers in terms of working and living create a broad distance between these two classes.

**Keywords:** Factories, Industrial Revolution, Social Class, Social Conditions, Workers.

### **الملخص:**

تستكشف هذا البحث الأوضاع المالية والاجتماعية والقانونية للعمال في رواية هارد تايمز. للزمان والمكان أهمية كبيرة في الرواية حيث يظهر بعض جوانب الظروف الصناعية في العصر الفيكتوري المبكر. و في المقدمة نبذة مختصرة عن حياة الروائي تشارلز ديكنز ثم خلفية تاريخية عن الرواية. و سيتم تسلیط الضوء على العمال والأسيداء بالإضافة إلى بعض الشخصيات الثانوية الأخرى التي لها علاقة مباشرة بهم. ومن خلال تحليل النص سيتم فهم ظروف العمال والأثار السيئة للثورة الصناعية وكيفية تغير المجتمع. كيف هو نهار العمال في المصانع السوداء الكبيرة والقاسية و ماهي حقوقهم وماذا ينقصهم؟ كيف يضطهد القانون هؤلاء العمال الفقراء الجياع ظلما. إن الاختلافات المعيشية بين العمال ومالك المصانع من حيث العمل والمعيشة تخلق مسافة واسعة بين هاتين الفئتين.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** المصانع، الثورة الصناعية، الطبقة الاجتماعية، الأحوال الاجتماعية، العمال.

### **پوخته:**

ئەم تۆیزىنەمە بەدواداچۇن بۇ بارودۇخى داراىى و كۆمەلایىتى و ياساىي كرييکاران لە رۆمانى هارد تايمىس دەكتات. سىتىنېڭ (كەت و شۆئىن) گۈنگىيەكى گۈورىدى ھېيە لە رۆمانەكەدا كە ھەندىك لايىنى بارودۇخى پېشەسازىي سەرەتتىي ۋېكتورىيە نىشان دەدات. لە پېشەكىدا كورتەمەك لە ژىاننامەي رۆماننۇوس، چارلز دېكىز و پاشان پاشخانىتىكى مېزۇويي رۆمانەكە خراوەتىرۇو. لېرەدا تىشكى خراوەتە سەر كرييکاران و خاوهەن كارگەمەكان و ھەروەھا ھەندىك كارەكتەرى لاؤمكى دېكە كە پېيۇندىيەكى راستەمۇخۇيان لەگەللىاندا ھەمە. لە رېيگەمى رەوونكەرنەمە شۇينەكەمە، بارودۇخى كرييکاران و كارىگەرەيىمەكانى سەر بارودۇخىان، ھەروەھا كارىگەرەيە نەرىتىيەكانى شۇرۇشى پېشەسازى و چۈنەتى گۈرانى كۆمەلگا رەوونكەراوەتتۇھو. رۆژانى كرييکاران لە كارگە رەش و بى رەمە گۈورەكان چۈنە؟ ئەم مافانە چىن كە ھەيانە و لە چىدا بىيىشىن؟ چۈن ياسا بە نارھوا ئەم كرييکارە ھەزار و بىرىيەنە دەچەسوئىنەتتەوھ. جىاوازى نىيان كرييکاران و بىرەممەنەنەران لە رەووى كاركەرەن و ژيانەوە بۇشايەكى فراوان لە نىيان ئەم دوو چىنەدا دروست دەكتات.

کلیله و شه: کارگهکان، شورشی پیشنهادی، چینه کومه‌لایتیهکان، بارودخی کومه‌لایتی، کریکاران.

## INTRODUCTION

Charles Dickens was born in a small house in Land part, Portsea, England, on February 7, 1812. Due to his father's imprisonment and familial financial problems, He was taken out of school to go to London for working in a Boot-Blacking warehouse. In 1927, he had to quit his study forever to work as an office boy, a freelance reporter, so that he can contribute to his family's income and this job was helpful for Dickens to become an author in the future. Milne states that Charles Dickens is regarded as one of the first great realist novelists and one of the most well-known and enduring authors of all time. (2009) He wrote classic novels like *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Oliver Twist*, *David Copperfield*, and *A Christmas Carol*. He wrote fifteen novels as all. Dickens established a weekly periodical called Household Words, on the 30<sup>th</sup> of March, 1850, and continued as the magazine editor till 1859. In April 1854, he began publishing his novel *Hard Times* in serial form until it was finished in August. In this novel, Dickens portrays the lifestyle of Stephen Blackpool as a worker who suffers from the industrial revolution. Dickens Died in 1970.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Gibson believes that *Hard Times* concentrates on morality in business and how the laborers deal with the working class. There is a sense of irresponsibility towards these lower creatures especially regarding the law case of the character 'Stephen Blackpool' when he is unable to divorce his wife due to the legal system of the industrial city. The novel criticizes the political system for creating a poor relationship between the two mentioned classes. It raises questions about the living standards of human beings. Dickens shows the legal, educational, and industrial institutions as defective since all the characters are colourless and dimensionless. The inhabitants of Coketown have shortages emotionally and sentimentally. (90-101)

Spector compares the lovers Rachael and Blackpool in *Hard Times* with the creation of the monster in *Frankenstein* in that the intention and aim of both cases are love and passion while the consequences of them turn up contradictory. The novel shows the upper class with the lower clearly while the middle class is not appeared or displayed and this negligence may refer to the differences and distances between the other two classes. The gap between the manufacturers and workers is highlighted which is why there is no range between them. (365-9).

## Problem Statement

Exploitation of the working has a long history. Hence, finding their issues and struggles will probably change the manipulative treatment by the factory and company owners.

## Research Question

What the struggles of the working class are specifically in the early Victorian period. How the Upper class or, in other words, the manufacturers treat the workers in *Hard Times*.

## Objectives

- 1- This study tries to figure out the social, economic, political difficulties of the working class in the Victorian age. The labours and their influence on the workers would be focused on.
- 2- It also finds out the impact of the industrial city of Coketown on the lifestyle of the workers and how it restricts their life. As a part of this industrial setting, the research will show the relationship between the upper class 'manufacturers' and the lower class 'labourers'.

## DISCUSSION

### The Working Class Conditions in *Hard Times*

In order to know about the hard times of the working class, it is worth investigating Charles Dickens's *Hard Times*, since this novel is written from a realistic perspective which shows the social, economic, political, legal conditions of the working class of his time. "In the decades following the time of troubles, some Victorian writers such as Charles Dickens, continued to make critical attacks on the shortcomings of the Victorian social scene" (Sampson). So, *Hard Times* was written in the time of England's industrial development, but Dickens still criticizes the dehumanizing conditions of laborers in the factories. Thus, he is still referring to the early period of the Victorian age when workers, who formed the biggest part of society, were in terrible conditions. The novel also presents the working class exploitation by employers in the new industrial cities of England. Thus, industrialism was threatening the workers in terms of changing them from normal human beings to 'Hands' that were used in big factories. According to George Ford and Sylvère Monod, "Indeed, in this book, Dickens simply intensified popular discontent; he proclaimed with his favorite ideal workman, Stephen Blackpool, that not only the relation between the employers and employees, but the whole constitution of industrialized society itself, was a hopeless "muddle," beyond the reach of human intelligence or human feeling to explain and to justify" (1966).

Johnson states that *Hard Times* presents the circled economy of the production framework in its strong external framework that is focused on the competing methods of Mr. Gradgrind's utilitarianism and the circus's conventional humanism that encompasses and contains an internal center of smoke and fire spoken to by the stories of Stephen Blackpool, the laborer, and Louisa Gradgrind, the central female character. (1989) The use of "Muddle", clarifies the life of Coketown, as an industrial city, that does not let the whole society or the working class in particular enjoy a hopeful life. The city is polluted, laborers have little time to rest, the working hours are too long, and the wages are very poor. In addition, the court also wrongs the working class by not balancing laws between the poor and the rich as it will be shown in the following papers. Working in this industrial city has made the workers suffer from hunger and starvation. The family members in the industrial city are distributed to different factories mostly. They had to work all over the year except for the holidays. The crises of the period refer to the reactions of the workers who united in unions to ask for their rights. Dickens wrote *Hard Times* to criticize the big difference between the very rich people who live in big houses and have a good life and the very poor who have to work for a long time and in hard labor to earn their livings. "The inequality of Birth was nothing to it. For, say that the child of a King and the child of a Weaver were born tonight in the same moment, what was that disparity, to the death of any human creature who was serviceable to," (1981). The fear of the industrialization consequences

especially in the north of England is one of the main themes shown by Dickens in the novel. As it is described in *Hard Times*, Factories dominated the big industrial cities of England which gave a vicious image to those cities when the air was polluted and the cities were covered in black smoke. According to Sampson who states that the saying "Like people, like Government" alludes to the thought that over time any government capacities as an idealized representation of its populace, total with both their shrewdness and unwise. It is very apparent that in arranging to fathom the gigantic issue of organizing labor and overseeing the working lesson, individuals who essentially stand within the middle of the issue—those who perform and administer work—will do so. (2012) It is the government that shoulders the responsibility of arranging the problems of the society as it is affected by the new revolution of industrialism, there should be efforts to correct it. Although it is the government that should be blamed and directed towards solving the problems, the manufacturers are also can contribute or solve the problems themselves without any interference from authorities.

*Hard Times* takes place in the industrial city of Coketown. Dickens describes it accurately and portrays the negative aspects of it in the novel as the readers see it. The industrial city working system regulates and restricts the time of the workers in general society. It is a city of factories and long-time work. Coketown can be considered a real representative of industrial cities. As an industrial city, Coketown is pictured clearly in the novel. It is described as a hell-like place. Dickens portrays it as "a face painted in savage", apart from describing the appearance, Dickens shows the brutality of these industrial cities that is hidden behind this brutal face against almost all sorts of people. The city is covered with smoke and it is shown as a polluted city as a result of the industrial revolution that changed the cities from agricultural cities to industrial ones. Workers had to go to their work early before sunrise. Dickens seems to show his personal feelings towards the dangerous consequences of the factories that polluted society to a wide range.

"THE Fairy palaces burst into illumination before pale morning showed the monstrous serpents of smoke trailing themselves over Coketown. A clattering of clogs upon the pavement; a rapid ringing of bells; and all the melancholy mad elephants, polished and oiled up for the day's monotony, were at their heavy exercise again" (Dickens) This terrifying image has a real impact on the workers as they wake up before dawn while they have not taken enough rest or have not slept well for the night and should go back to the same tiredly work that they have been practicing a long time ago or since childhood. The metaphor of mad elephants is used due to the uncontrollable elephant when it becomes mad and how it destroys everything that comes his way. Coketown is also disastrous for workers who do spend most of their time in those factories that provide nothing except hard work.

The use of "Hands" in *Hard Times* refers to workers who work in the factories as they have not any other functions in society except to do their work simply. The "hands" are portrayed as emotionless workers, and they are used only as means for the manufacturers. The power of these workers is restricted in their hands. (48-51) "among the multitude of Coketown, generically called 'the Hands,' - a race who would have found more favor with some people, if Providence had seen fit to make them only hands, or, like the lower creatures of the seashore, only hands and stomachs" (49). They work for a long time, from early morning till late time in the evening, and receive little wages. They cannot write or read and if they have it, it will be a little bit useless. Their hope to improve their situations was difficult because if anyone raises his voice to complain about his condition, he might

be dismissed from his work and then joining another factory would be very difficult. The hard work in the company of Mr. Bounderby leads the “Hands” to make a union to raise their voices to criticize the bad living quality and they think that they have been treated as slaves in the factory. Although the term “Hands” is used for the workers in general, Stephen does not join the workers in their combination. In book two, chapter four “Men and Brothers”, workers are trying to unite to demand their rights, but it is fruitless when they are confronted by the cruel, strict, and self-interested manufacturer, Bounderby.

Through the character of Stephen Blackpool, Dickens portrays the status of the laborers of northern England at the beginning of the Victorian age. Although Dickens is not from the working or lower class, his concerns for the laborers and their bad situations move him to arise the idea of revolution among this class through his fictional character Slackbridge. While Slackbridge addresses the “Hands” whom he calls “ironhanded” in the novel, Dickens addresses the real industrial society of England to shrink the atrocity against the working class. He triggers them to make a revolution and uses “Oh, my friends” repeatedly, to show his sympathy towards them. The hardship of the workers is gathered in the character of Stephen Blackpool. He shows the misery of the English people as they are the most affected part of the world by the industrial revolution and it is because England is the first industrialized country in the world. Mohajan states “England is the first country where industrial related productions have commenced.” (2)

Stephen Blackpool is a real victim of industrial society. He is adopted to this hard life that he never thinks of a better life. He is forty, but he looks much older. (52-4) It shows the hard times that he has been passing through in his career as a worker. He is even called by his friends “Old Stephen” and is also defined as a good power-loom weaver. Stephen looked older, but he had a hard life. Stephen loses his friends when he does not accept to join the union that has been made in the factory of Josiah Bounderby to raise their voices against their master. They simply demand their rights and they do not want to be treated like slaves. Blackpool’s refusal to join the union may come as a result of his fear of losing his labor. And then, he loses his job because he does not say anything about the laborers and refuses to spy on them in front of his master, Bounderby. In the part of “No way out”, Dickens shows Blackpool’s poor characteristics as a worker who is surrounded by problems and cannot get away from these problems. Dickens victimizes Stephen’s death in such a catastrophic way that he falls into a pit and then dies to draw the reader’s attention to empathize with the workers’ conditions. He does not have his own house to live in, instead, he lives in a small room that he rents from a woman and is located above a shop in a dirty district of the city of Coketown where the houses are very small. (49) This image of Stephen’s lifestyle shows the bad situation of not only Stephen but all the working class of that period. By the name “Blackpool” of the working-class character, Dickens refers to the workers’ black life that they cannot even entertain or see other places other than the polluted Coketown and the factory they work in and that is because of the continuation of the work that they must work forever. (50-4) It is hard for Stephen to walk plainly with Rachael whom he loves dearly because he has already been married to another woman. He suffers from the bad treatment of his wife when she sells all his house’s furniture to buy alcoholic drinks. He has been paying her for almost five years to stay away from him. Stephen is shown as one of the working-class characters of high morality. After Stephen is dismissed from the factory, Louisa comes to help him and she offers to

give him some money but he refuses, instead, he takes two pounds as a debt and promises her when he will get money, he will pay them back for her. He strives for his faithfulness and virtue. For his bad luck, Blackpool is also accused of the bank robbery but finally, he is revealed to be innocent.

The other character who belongs to the working class in the novel is Rachael. She has almost the same circumstances as Stephen, but she works in another factory not that of Bounderby. Her time working is the same as Stevenson's. Every day, when the factories are shut off, she comes out to the streets of Coketown at the same time. She is always afraid to be seen with Blackpool because he is married. She is the childhood friend of the drunken wife of Blackpool and because of her, Rachael cannot marry Blackpool. Her faithfulness and virtue are seen as she saves the life of Blackpool's wife when she tries to suicide by drinking poison. It is obvious that by the death of Blackpool's wife Rachael gets the right to get married to Stephen whom she loves, but her virtue does not allow her to let that happen. In the Reaping and Garnering parts of *Hard Times*, Dickens shows Rachael as a miserable, but good character. She is so tired from work, but when she thinks that Blackpool's wife requires her hand, she stays awake at night to serve her. When Blackpool is accused by Bounderby of the robbery, it is Rachael who tries to fix his image and sends him a letter to come back to Coketown, but on his way to Coketown Blackpool falls to an old mine pit and then dies. After Stephen's death, Rachael dedicates her free time to take care of his wife. (230-34)

In the second book, Dickens titles one of the chapters "Men and Masters" and through this chapter, he shows the struggle between two different social classes that are the laborers and manufacturers. Mr. Bounderby asks Blackpool to say something about what he calls the "Hands", he means the combination that is about to be made by Slackbridge, and Blackpool answers that he has nothing to say about it, but he declares that there is something wrong with the town and with the life of people. There is a chaos in the society that should be arranged.

The powerless Blackpool hesitates but, at the same time informs his master that people have to work from childhood till they die and there is not any improvement in their lives. Blackpool wonders why masters or manufacturers are always right and why workers are always wrong. He criticizes the bad conditions of the inhabitants of Coketown. When he talks about the workers, he refers to them as people and it shows that the majority of society is from the working class. The Laborers work just to get a living. So, life seems too difficult for the working class. It is obvious that he dares not to speak apparently and when he speaks, he sacrifices his job for the objection. Mr. Bounderby as a manufacturer does not accept his complaints and then dismisses him from his factory. This shows the restrictions on the laborer's freedom that they are not allowed to demonstrate against their masters to improve their lives and that is clear when Bounderby says that he will accuse the Slackbridges (Slackbridge is the orator of the workers) because they have been demonstrating for a better life but on the expense of the master's interests. "We will make an example of half a dozen Slackbridges. We'll indict the blackguards for a felony, and get 'em shipped off to penal settlements" (Dickens). It is as if they have done a big crime according to the perspective of Bounderby as he wants not to just dismiss them but also to imprison them.

The difference between classes in *Hard Times* is seen clearly in the dialogue between Blackpool and Bounderby. Blackpool seeks advice from Bounderby to divorce his drunken wife who comes back to his room after five years, he takes only a piece of bread for his lunch break and goes to

Bounderby's home, but when he reaches there, Bounderby is having a rich meal. By showing different kinds of meals of different classes, Dickens shows the real life of the time. These differences among the different classes are seen deeper when he asks him to help him get rid of his wife. Bounderby gets angry because of Blackpool's demand for separation from his wife and Bounderby tells him that he cannot have any kind of separation or divorce. To show his hatred for the injustice law for the rich and the poor, Dickens creates the condition of Blackpool who cannot divorce his wife who because of his financial status. The laws were constituted in such a way that the lower or the working class could not afford the laws' fees or penalties, especially the divorce law due to the great amount of money they require. Blackpool suffers the freedom of choice, he cannot divorce the woman whom he disliked and cannot have Rachael whom he loved dearly. The novelist shows a harsh image of the legislation system of his time. There is such legislation. Stephen made a motion as he calmed down and maintained his level of concentration. However, it isn't at all for you. It is pricey. It costs a lot of money. How much might that be? Stephen calmly questioned. Why, to be able to remarry, you would need to obtain an Act of Parliament. This would cost you (if it was a case of exceptionally plain cruising), I believe between a thousand and fifteen hundred pounds and require you to appear in court before the House of Rulers, a Common Law court, and the Doctors' Commons." (Dickens).

Although he is not allowed to divorce his wife due to his social class, it costs a great deal of money that he can never have it. It is only the lords who can divorce and get married again. Blackpool's faithfulness and good character contrast with Bounderby's selfishness. Stephen goes to Bounderby so that he may guide him to find a way out to get rid of his wife, but Bounderby disappoints him with a strict answer that he is from the lower class and such a decision is impossible. According to Rathee, Mechanical moguls like Mr. Bounderby have gotten the thought of producing benefits that he sees as indeed the most minor demand by the laborers to progress their loathsome parcel as an outlandish endeavor to be nourished "with a brilliant spoon." Finding a way to anticipate these "hands" from climbing the social and financial stepping stool and keeping them tied, by any implies fundamental, to a terrible subhuman presence appeared to be Bounderby's fundamental point in life. Since it is all of these qualities in his possess town, he considers that plant labor is the "pleasantest," "lightest," and "best paid" work. Due to his silly insatiability, he and the other process aces see indeed the "smoke serpents" radiating from the plant as profitable images of victory, cash, and physical well-being. (2012) Here, Rathee believes that Bounderby's sole aim is preventing the workers to climb the social and economic ladder. It seems that Bounderby's concerns are not because of the workers themselves, but it is because he is afraid of the reform or strike or any kind of union made by the workers to demand their rights. After all, it would be at the expense of his interests. They demand better wages, which decreases Bounderby's factory profits. According to George Ford and Sylvere Monod, Mr. Bounderby is shaped as a frightening figure instead of a good model, and Blackpool is shown as a perfect character in the state of a sincere worker. (1966)

The above quote shows that these critics think that Dickens exaggerates so much in portraying his fictional characters by making Bounderby such a monster and Stephen a perfect dramatic character. It is true to some extent when Dickens tries to gather all the bad characteristics of masters in Bounderby; for example, as a manufacturer, Bounderby gives little wages to the workers and they should work for long hours when they demand their rights, they are dismissed, and Bounderby also

does not show any mercy for Blackpool when he asks to divorce his wife. Links says that Dickens satirizes the business owners of the town with harsh incongruity and the syntactic repetition of "They were ruined, ". These business owners care far more about their interests than the lives and general welfare of the residents. (1969) At the same time, Dickens gives all the good characteristics of workers to Stephen Blackpool; for instance, he is faithful that he does not spy on his fellow workers while satisfying his master and is good in his favor. He dies in such a dramatic way, as it is mentioned before, that the reader may empathize with him.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, The early Victorian period is characterized by long hours of working and hard work as it is shown in *Hard Times*. Here, Dickens portrays the gap between the working class and their masters. Stephen Blackpool and Rachael are two workers who suffer from the boundaries of the social and economic system as they cannot get married due to the legal system of Coketown. Blackpool is unable to divorce his wife as well since he needs a good financial support. Mr. Bounderby as a factory owner is presented as a hard-hearted man who manipulates the workers for his own interests. The working class is degraded and inferiorities within the novel as they are referred to as Hands. As Blackpool rejects inferiority, he is dismissed from work. The industrial city of Coketown is polluted both environmentally and socially. There are smokes all over the city that covers all the buildings. The social ties are also dysfunctional due to the hard life that people have. Blackpool's wife is an example of this bad relationship when she increases her husband's anguish by her appearance and misdeeds. The destination of Blackpool and Rachael are perishing while the manufactory owner Bounderby grows and develops financially and hierarchically in the society.

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