



## Poverty and Deprivation in *Hard Times*: A Social and Literary Analysis of the Structure of Capitalist Exploitation

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### Abstract

This study aims to analyze the portrayal of deprivation and poverty in *Hard Times* by Charles Dickens, using a critical reading based on social and literary approaches. Published in 1854, the novel depicts the industrial society of Victorian England, where profit and utility often override human values. The research focuses on how Dickens represents the struggles of the working class through characters such as Stephen Blackpool and Rachael, highlighting the stark divide between the world of laborers and that of factory owners. It combines social analysis grounded in Bourdieu's class theory and concepts of capitalist exploitation with a moral critique of institutions of power and education. The study also examines the impact of the Industrial Revolution on family bonds and their disintegration, as well as the symbolic dimensions of time and place in shaping the image of poverty. Furthermore, it draws connections between Dickens's critique of 19th-century industrial life and contemporary poverty issues, using recent academic studies that reveal the persistence of exploitation and inequality. The findings show that Dickens goes beyond merely portraying the suffering of the poor he offers a reformist vision that calls for restoring human values and social solidarity. As such, the novel remains an important literary and social document, providing an early critique of capitalist industrial structures and inviting modern readers to reflect on the roots and enduring forms of poverty.

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### 1. Introduction

Charles Dickens was very interested in politics and social affairs, and his novels cover the middle and lower middle classes. *Hard Times* was aimed at calling attention to the social and economic pressures of poverty in the urban industrial world of England. *Hard Times* is the novel that most clearly asks to be read not as a mere fiction but as a commentary on a contemporary crisis. "It is, after all, *Hard Times* for These Times, and it is dedicated to Thomas Carlyle, the social thinker whose vision of a society of human connection influenced Dickens so profoundly in the 1840s and 1850s". Charles Dickens began writing the novel *Hard Times* in January 1854 and published it in July the same year in his weekly periodical *Household Words*. Sales increased despite the mixed response from many critics, such as F.R. Leavis, who "celebrated *Hard Times* as a moral fable, and this view of the novel has dominated critical response ever since" (Jordan, 67)

Charles Dickens is one of the most prominent novelists of the Victorian era, known for his ability to combine literary storytelling with deep social critique. From the start of his literary career, he focused on portraying the harsh realities faced by the poor and working class in industrial England a focus clearly seen in his 1854 novel *Hard Times*. The story is set in the fictional industrial

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city of Coketown, where factories dictate the rhythm of life, and the stark contrast between the lives of the working class and wealthy factory owners is unmistakable (Sen 45). The novel reflects a clash of values: on one side, the philosophy of utilitarianism, seeking to maximize production and profit; on the other, human values that call for empathy and solidarity.

In the nineteenth century, Britain experienced massive economic and social changes as a result of the Industrial Revolution. These changes created a large working class living under harsh conditions, struggling with low wages, long working hours, and the absence of health and social protections (Abuzahra and Imraish 210). In this context, *Hard Times* stands as a literary testimony to the suffering of this class, revealing through its narrative and characters both material poverty and emotional deprivation, which together form two sides of the same reality.

### 1.1. The Main Research Question This Study Seeks to Answer Is:

How does Dickens portray poverty and deprivation in *Hard Times*, and what social and moral dimensions emerge from this portrayal?

This question stems from the observation that Dickens did more than simply present the suffering of the poor from a human perspective. He also employed critical literary techniques that reflect a reformist stance, calling for a re-examination of the prevailing economic and social structures of his time. The study's aim is not only to analyze the literary text but also to connect it with the historical and social context in which it was produced, and to explore the extent to which these issues persist in the modern world.

The significance of this study lies in its focus on the interaction between literature and social reality. As a form of "social literature," the novel does not merely reflect reality but also creates a critical discourse aimed at change. Through characters such as Stephen Blackpool, a humble worker facing class injustice, and Mr. Bounderby, a figure who embodies industrial greed, Dickens presents a complex picture that exposes the dynamics of power and economics in Victorian society (Papadimos 5).

Critical literature on *Hard Times* has taken different directions. Some scholars have focused on a Marxist reading of the text, viewing it as a clear rejection of capitalist values and the exploitation of the working class (Sen 48). Others have examined it from the perspective of cultural sociology, analyzing how the novel reveals forms of class dominance through symbols and everyday relationships (Recognizing Status 112). Additional studies have addressed the novel's moral and health-related dimensions, emphasizing Dickens's connection between poverty and the deterioration of physical and mental health, reflecting a comprehensive reformist vision (Papadimos 7). Moreover, recent research has explored the impact of the Industrial Revolution on family bonds in the novel, noting that economic changes not only altered work patterns but also undermined human relationships within the family (Abuzahra and Imraish 214). Contemporary environmental and political studies have also highlighted the spatial dimension in the novel, showing how Coketown, with its polluted industrial environment, symbolizes the erosion of spiritual values under the pressure of mechanical productivity (Bell 23).

Through these different perspectives, it becomes clear that

studying the image of poverty and deprivation in *Hard Times* is not merely a work of literary analysis it is also a window into the social and political structure of Dickens's time. This image remains highly relevant to our present reality, where patterns of exploitation and inequality continue to appear in new forms. Based on this, the present study seeks to provide a comprehensive reading of the novel, grounded in a critical framework that combines social analysis with literary critique. *Hard Times* is not just a dramatic story; it is a text rich with social and political meaning, in which Dickens clearly expresses his stance against the industrial system dominated by material values. From the very first lines, it becomes evident to the reader that the novel aims to critique the philosophy of "facts only" embodied by Mr. Gradgrind, who raises his children and teaches his pupils to view imagination as a waste of time, and to dismiss anything that cannot be measured or calculated as worthless (Sen 49). This way of thinking, which reflects the utilitarianism that dominated nineteenth-century Britain, was seen by Dickens as one of the root causes of poverty and deprivation, depriving people of the creative and human capacities they need to face life's challenges.

The fictional industrial city of Coketown, where the novel takes place, represents a miniature model of the Industrial Revolution's cities: gray buildings dominate the landscape, smoke fills the skies, and green spaces disappear symbolizing environmental decline and the retreat of natural beauty before the advance of factories (Bell 26). This spatial image is not merely a backdrop for the plot but an active element in shaping the novel's mood, where material poverty blends with environmental ugliness, and deprivation becomes a pervasive feeling affecting both body and soul. Through the character of Stephen Blackpool, an honest worker living a life full of hardships, Dickens presents a human example of the struggles of the working class. Stephen lives in extreme poverty and tries to fix his failed marriage, yet finds himself trapped in a rigid class system that prevents him from improving his circumstances (Abuzahra and Imraish 213). Despite his dedication to his work, the industrial system built on the exploitation of workers gives him no opportunity to achieve a dignified life. This contradiction between effort and lack of reward exposes the depth of the social injustice Dickens criticizes in the novel.

In contrast, we encounter character characters such as Mr. Bounderby, who boasts of being a "self-made man," while the novel reveals that he actually benefited from circumstances and privileges he never acknowledged (Papadimos 6). This character represents the archetype of the capitalist factory owner who builds his wealth at the expense of workers, justifying it with an individualistic narrative that credits success solely to personal effort, while ignoring the social and economic factors that give some people opportunities and deny them to others. Alongside its depiction of economic hardship, the novel also highlights the emotional deprivation that results from an upbringing grounded purely in material values. Louisa, the daughter of Gradgrind, embodies this aspect clearly. Raised by her father in an environment stripped of imagination and affection, she grows up unable to form healthy human relationships (Sen 50). This psychological deprivation, which parallels the material deprivation experienced by the working-class characters, suggests that poverty in the novel is not merely economic it also reaches into the spirit and heart.

Scholars who have examined these aspects of *Hard Times* argue that Dickens was fully aware of the intertwined material and non-material dimensions of poverty. As Papadimos notes, “poverty is not simply the absence of money, but the absence of the ability to achieve human dignity” (7). This deep understanding of poverty makes the novel a critical document that transcends its time and place, remaining relevant in different contexts where patterns of exploitation and inequality persist in new forms. From a theoretical standpoint, the novel can be read through a Marxist lens, where class struggles between the proletariat (working class) and the bourgeoisie (factory owners) are evident, and exploitation appears as a driving force of the plot. At the same time, analytical tools derived from Bourdieu’s cultural theory help explain how class structures are reproduced through education, values, and social symbols (Recognizing Status 115). This combination of economic and cultural analysis allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the novel’s image of poverty and deprivation.

Recent studies on Dickens also emphasize the importance of the environmental aspect in *Hard Times*. The polluted industrial city is not merely a backdrop, but a physical manifestation of economic policies that prioritize production over human and environmental health (Bell 27). This dimension aligns the novel with concerns of contemporary ecocriticism, which sees environmental degradation as a form of structural violence that disproportionately affects the poor. *Hard Times* offers a holistic critique of the industrial system, blending economic, moral, and environmental criticism. Analyzing the portrayal of poverty and deprivation in this novel therefore requires a multidimensional approach bringing together history, sociology, and literary criticism to fully grasp the depth of Dickens’s message. This study aims to carry out such an analysis, drawing on a blend of rigorous academic sources and close textual examination to highlight how Dickens succeeded in making literature an effective tool for understanding and transforming social reality.

Social criticism in Dickens’s novels holds a central place in literary studies, and many scholars have considered *Hard Times* a complete model of this type of literature. In a study by Sen, the researcher points out that the novel can be read as “a protest against the industrial capitalist system” that drains human beings both spiritually and materially, replacing genuine human relationships with market logic (52). This interpretation aligns with a Marxist reading, which sees the text as a portrayal of bourgeois dominance over the proletariat, where workers are exploited and deprived of their rights under the guise of prevailing economic values.

From the perspective of cultural sociology, the article *Recognizing Status in Hard Times* emphasizes that Dickens does more than document the economic gap he also exposes the mechanisms of producing social status that perpetuate poverty across generations (116). The article explains that education in the novel, represented by Gradgrind, is not a tool for liberation but an instrument for reconstructing social classes in ways that serve the ruling elite. This analysis opens the door to understanding the novel as a work of cultural resistance one that challenges not only poverty as a material condition but also its institutional structures that ensure its persistence.

The study by Abuzahra and Imraish (2017)<sup>[1]</sup>, takes another direction, focusing on the impact of the Industrial Revolution

on family bonds in the novel. It shows that economic changes led to the disintegration of family relationships and the decline of shared values (215). In this context, *Hard Times* can be understood not only as an economic critique but also as a warning against the erosion of human connections under the pressures of production and competition. The moral and health dimensions of poverty also receive notable attention in academic studies.

In an article by Papadimos (2006)<sup>[5]</sup>, the struggles of poor characters in the novel are linked to the contemporary realities of urban poverty, especially regarding access to healthcare (8). The author notes that poverty in the novel goes beyond a lack of material resources to include exclusion from basic services reflecting Dickens’s comprehensive view of deprivation as a multidimensional phenomenon.

From an environmental perspective, Emily Bell, in *Recent Dickens Studies* (2023), highlights the symbolic significance of the industrial setting in *Hard Times*. Bell argues that Coketown is not merely a stage for the events but a physical symbol of the environmental and social destruction caused by industrial capitalism (29). This interpretation places the novel within the context of ecocriticism, showing how poverty and deprivation are also linked to the collapse of the surrounding environment.

All these previous studies make clear that *Hard Times* is a rich, multi-layered text that can be read through economic, cultural, moral, and environmental lenses. What distinguishes the present study is its aim to integrate these perspectives into a single analytical framework—one that connects material poverty with emotional and psychological deprivation, and with the social and economic structures that produce them. The study also places the novel in dialogue with present-day issues, showing that Dickens’s critique is not confined to the Victorian past but extends to contemporary forms of poverty, which are still governed by similar mechanisms, even if their appearances have changed. Building on this foundation, the present study offers a comprehensive reading of the novel, grounded in the analysis of key passages and a comparison of findings with the diverse critical approaches found in academic literature. The aim is to reveal how Dickens blended the art of the novel with a social message, and how he managed to portray poverty and deprivation not merely as an economic problem but as a profound human crisis one that makes *Hard Times* a living work, still relevant today.

## 2. Methodology

This study employs a critical analytical approach that combines textual analysis with social and environmental perspectives to understand the portrayal of poverty and deprivation in Charles Dickens’s *Hard Times*. In the textual analysis, the main characters such as Stephen Blackpool, Rachael, and Louisa are examined in terms of their actions, motivations, and relationships, in order to reveal how the novel depicts the struggles of the working class. The spatial description of Coketown is also analyzed as a key element in reinforcing the image of poverty and industrial ugliness (Bell 27). The social approach draws on Pierre Bourdieu’s concepts of social and cultural capital to explore how poverty is reproduced through education and prevailing values (Recognizing Status 116). These concepts are linked to the novel’s narrative, which exposes the power gap between workers and factory owners (Abuzahra and Imraish 215).

This research also adopts an environmental and moral perspective, informed by ecocriticism, to study the impact of the polluted industrial environment on residents' lives, and by the moral dimension that connects material poverty with the absence of basic services, including healthcare (Papadimos 8). The study relies on peer-reviewed academic sources, including published articles and specialized critical studies, to ensure reliability and analytical accuracy. This methodological framework makes it possible to present a multidimensional reading that reveals how Dickens portrayed poverty and deprivation as both material and moral crises.

### 3. Discussion

In *Hard Times* Dickens introduces a way to resist the humiliating effects of the Industrial Revolution by writing the novel for and about ordinary people. He also realizes that people need fantasy and fancy by reading books and by going to theaters and circuses. The novel is about the idea that there is more in life than pure facts to rely on. In *Hard Times*, Dickens clearly links poverty to the economic structure of nineteenth-century industrial capitalism. Coketown, with its factories running ceaselessly, serves as a model of a society ruled by productivity and profit at the expense of human well-being. The character of Stephen Blackpool embodies the devoted worker who faces the harshness of the system with no hope of improving his condition. As Sen notes, Dickens presents this system as a merciless machine that produces poverty as readily as it produces goods. (13) This is evident in the descriptions of the work environment, where workers are reduced to anonymous "hands" without identity a depiction that reinforces the point made in Recognizing Status in *Hard Times* about the industrial system's role in erasing individuality and perpetuating class divisions. In this context, poverty emerges as the natural result of an economic structure that recognizes only productive value, ignoring the human and social aspects of the worker. (Margrjet 2011)

Dickens's portrayal of poverty is not limited to its material dimension but extends to exposing the mechanisms of its reproduction through education and prevailing values. Education, as represented by Mr. Gradgrind, is based entirely on facts, with no regard for imagination or human values. This educational model, according to Bourdieu's analysis, entrenches class divisions by granting advantages to children of dominant classes while limiting opportunities for the lower classes (Recognizing Status 116). This is reflected in the trajectory of Louisa Gradgrind, who inherits from her father a rigid, fact-bound mindset that leaves her unable to make sound emotional decisions. This emotional deprivation is no less severe than material poverty; indeed, as Abuzahra and Imraish observe, Dickens integrates both material and psychological deprivation in his critique of industrial society (215).

Dickens also presents poverty as a moral and health crisis. The poor characters in Coketown suffer not only from a lack of money but also from the absence of healthcare and the deterioration of living conditions. As Papadimos explains, linking poverty with health deprivation makes the novel ahead of its time in addressing inequality in access to essential services (8). In the scene of Mrs. Blackpool's death, we see how health neglect caused by poverty leads to personal tragedy. These scenes echo Bell's observation that Dickens portrays Coketown as a stifling environment that directly contributes to the decline of residents' health (29).

Although environmental criticism emerged much later as an academic field, the novel offers early signs of the connection between industrial pollution and poverty. The dark atmosphere, smoke-filled skies, and polluted water all reveal that poverty is not merely the absence of resources but also life in a degraded environment. Bell's analysis makes it clear that this industrial setting is not a neutral backdrop but an active force in perpetuating deprivation, where poor environmental conditions worsen the economic and social struggles of residents (29). One of the most prominent dimensions of poverty in the novel is emotional and social deprivation. Characters from both the working and affluent classes suffer from isolation and a breakdown in human connections. Louisa, despite growing up in a comfortable household, experiences emotional coldness within her family. Stephen, on the other hand, endures a double hardship: oppression at work and the absence of emotional warmth. This aspect of deprivation aligns with Abuzahra and Imraish's view on the impact of industrial values on human relationships, where people are reduced to tools of labor and their feelings and psychological needs are ignored (215).

*Hard Times* also reveals poverty's function as a discourse of resistance. Dickens uses the text as a literary tool aimed at the Victorian reader, urging reflection on the social structures that produce poverty. As Sen argues, the novel's moral message lies in exposing injustice and calling on the reader to reconsider society's priorities (52). Thus, the text is not merely a depiction of deprivation but also a call to change it something that keeps it relevant even in the context of modern poverty.

### 4. Images of Deprivation and Poverty in the Novel

In *Hard Times*, Charles Dickens employs multiple narrative and descriptive techniques to create a comprehensive portrayal of deprivation and poverty. These depictions do not merely present material misery but also encompass psychological, social, and environmental dimensions, giving the text a semantic depth that goes beyond straightforward social criticism. One of the most striking images appears in the depictions of Coketown itself. The city is described as a stifling space, immersed in industrial smoke, devoid of color and life. The houses are uniform, the streets are crowded, and the air is so polluted that breathing becomes a daily burden. This bleak environment is not just a backdrop but a physical reflection of the constrained lives of workers, as Bell observes (29).

On the human level, the character of Stephen Blackpool stands as a central symbol of honest poverty that is, poverty caused by circumstances rather than personal failure. His simple appearance, complicated emotional life, and ongoing struggle to maintain his dignity all reflect the image of a worker with no control over his fate. His refusal to join the strike reflects his awareness of his limited power, which Sen identifies as revealing the working class's dilemma between surrender and resistance (51). Images of deprivation also emerge in the lives of women in the novel, such as Rachael and Louisa. Rachael represents material poverty paired with moral integrity, while Louisa represents emotional deprivation despite having money and social status. This parallel between the two characters highlights that poverty is not exclusive to the working class but can also appear as a loss of meaning or the absence of human connection, as noted by Abuzahra and Imraish (215).

There is also a powerful depiction of poverty as an inherited condition passed down through generations via education and values. Children in Gradgrind's environment grow up on "facts" alone, deprived of imagination and empathy, which limits their ability to transcend their social class. This reflects the argument in *Recognizing Status in Hard Times* about the role of education in perpetuating class divisions (116). Finally, Dickens presents poverty as a collective, not merely individual, condition. The scenes of workers gathering outside factories, the weary faces in the streets, and the crowded neighborhoods together create a visual and moral tableau urging the reader to recognize poverty as a structural problem, not just a series of personal tragedies.

## 5. Conclusion

Charles Dickens's *Hard Times* demonstrates that poverty and deprivation are not isolated or temporary economic setbacks, but rather the outcome of a deeply entrenched network of industrial, educational, and environmental forces that reinforce each other to perpetuate social inequality. The novel illustrates that these forces are systemic, embedded in the very structures of Victorian society, and resistant to change without conscious intervention. Through the industrial setting of Coketown its uniform brick houses, soot-covered streets, and factories that operate relentlessly Dickens constructs a symbolic and physical representation of a society where human value is measured by productivity alone. Characters such as Stephen Blackpool embody the working-class struggle, revealing how honest, hard-working individuals can be trapped in cycles of economic hardship without the means or opportunity to improve their condition. At the same time, Louisa Gradgrind's emotional emptiness reflects another form of deprivation—one that affects even the privileged, where wealth and status cannot compensate for the absence of compassion, emotional connection, and moral guidance.

By linking environmental degradation to human suffering, Dickens anticipates themes central to modern environmental justice. The polluted air, toxic water, and stifling industrial landscape of Coketown are not just backdrops; they actively worsen the health, dignity, and prospects of its inhabitants. In parallel, the novel critiques an education system built solely on factual accumulation and rigid utilitarian principles, echoing Pierre Bourdieu's argument that such a system reproduces class hierarchies rather than dismantles them. In Dickens's view, this mechanistic schooling deprives children of imagination, empathy, and the intellectual tools needed to challenge the injustices of their social order.

Ultimately, *Hard Times* is not only a narrative of suffering but a literary act of moral engagement. Dickens wields fiction as a tool to expose the moral failings of industrial capitalism and to challenge his readers to reconsider their role in either sustaining or dismantling oppressive systems. The text urges a shift toward a more humane society one that values individuals not merely for their economic utility but for their intrinsic worth as human beings.

Even today, the issues Dickens raises remain strikingly relevant. The tension between economic progress and persistent inequality continues to shape modern societies, where rapid industrial or technological growth often coexists with environmental harm and social exclusion. In this sense, *Hard Times* transcends its Victorian context, offering a timeless reflection on the need for systemic reform,

compassionate governance, and a reimagining of progress that does not leave the most vulnerable behind.

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