

## ENGLISH: LIST 1

**'Hard Times calls for the humanising of social institutions in the name of our true nature.'**  
**Discuss.**

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In the novel 'Hard Times', Charles Dickens explores the dehumanisation, exploitation and mechanisation of the individual during that period, and the social institutions that reinforced that dehumanisation in the name of national prosperity. Dickens therefore criticises the common classroom, family unit and the constructs of society of that era, as an existence consisting of "nothing but facts" is diametrically contra to the human condition, resulting in devastating effects upon the individuals and masses of the novel. Dickens furthers his plea, presenting the readers with his ideal solution, represented by the circus, a microcosm of society in which the encouragement of individuality nurtures our true natures.

In the pertinent structure of the family, it is imperative that sincere, emotional interactions are encouraged for the mental health of the family members. Dickens uses the Stone Lodge and the Gradgrinds as an antithesis to this, as a dehumanised family that reaps the benefits that Gradgrind's philosophy has sown, an "unbending utilitarian" philosophy of "nothing but facts". Gradgrind is the meticulous overseer of the household, the "deadly statistical clock" that mechanises human development and "discourage(s) human interference". Consequently, life at Stone Lodge becomes automated and monotonous, where a dispassionate "kiss of congratulation(s)" is awarded when congratulations are due, not out of happiness or affection, but because that is what people do on celebratory occasions. Dickens implores through Louisa's upbringing in Stone Lodge, that the child in a compassionless home is forced to "strive against every natural prompting" in their heart, replacing "the spring and summer of (their) beliefs" with "frost and blight". Dickens further remonstrates that it is necessary to humanise family life, not only in the name of our true nature, but also because of the devastating effects it yields, as Louisa arouses great pathos due to her inability to cope with challenging experiences, unable to draw upon lessons taught to her as a child. Through her resignation to a loveless marriage, and mental breakdown after being seduced by James Harthouse, Dickens exhorts that the family unit must be rich with humane values for the sake of the healthy development of our emotional development.

However, Gradgrind's philosophy transcends family life, as his well-intentioned pedagogy results in the dehumanisation of a schoolroom of children, destroying everything fanciful within them. The archetypal schoolroom of industrial England that Gradgrind initiated in Coketown assumes children to be "empty vessels", malleable drones that were to be told what to think, that fact "is taste". Reflected in the setting, the school atmosphere is "plain, bare (and) monotonous". Dickens describes a factual education as rigid and relentless, where walls are never to be painted with "representations of horses" and no fancy: creativity, imagination or individuality is allowed to develop. However, Dickens demonstrates through the children, that this is not natural; these innocent children all chant "yes, Sir!" to everything fanciful, and only through reproaching those children, do they learn to oppose their innate desires and mould their values around facts and self-interest. Dickens shows great contempt towards M'Choakumchild's teaching methods, as his rigorous teaching of facts and statistics rob the children of their imagination, and "main...and distort" the "Fancy lurking within", highlighting that imagination and creativity are innate in children, and only by "murdering the" innocence of children, do they grow to become compassionless automations.

The authorial voice further urges us to educate children in a manner more conducive to developing children's natural disposition to fancy, as if M'Choakumchild might have "learnt a little less" as a child himself, "how infinitely better he might have taught". This demonstrates not only the apparent advantages to be evinced by a fanciful education upon children, but the ultimate effect of the opposite upbringing, producing an endless sea of adults "equally like one another", trapped in a monotonous life, desperate to escape and do what their heart desires.

Concurrent to Gradgrind's attempt to mechanise children, creating 'productive' members of society, is his attempt to categorise those adults and their entire lives "solely by pen, ink and paper", a "mere question of figures". Thus, society itself becomes a piece of machinery, ruthlessly moving forward with little regard towards the parts of which it is comprised. Consequently, the masses, the innumerable number of individuals who are all "pressing one another to death" are reduced to their needs and productivity, becoming "hands and stomachs" to those like Gradgrind, rather than individual souls that feel, suffer and want. Dickens pleads for social reform, as society cannot continue treating its workers like the "melancholy mad" machinery around them, demonstrating that this relentless monotony defies human nature, and invariably, human nature will survive against the power of the social institutions that seek to destroy it. Yet even the hands of Coketown defy Gradgrind's calculations, "persist(ing) in wondering", spending their free time nurturing their imaginations over their physical conditions.

Dickens therefore juxtaposes Coketown against its microcosmic counterpart, Sleary's circus, which is representative of how society must foster innate human needs such as individuality, community, affection and imagination. Dickens uses the community of Sleary's circus to present his own vision of society, painting an "embellished" picture of the circus folk and the values they embody; in the despondence that is Coketown the circus becomes a "refuge from what is sordid and bad". Dickens uses the circus as a microcosm of the way society should operate, and stipulates that there is so much more to the meaning of family than a mother, father and children; when Sissy has no parents to care for her, "Emma Gordon...would be a mother to" her and "Joth'phine...a sister to" her. Dickens therefore implores that our understanding of family becomes more humane, where roles such as mother and father transcend their biological definition in order to ensure society is more than just a "question of self interest". The circus also displays the encouragement of individuality within society, as each performer uses their individual talents and feats to perform their own unique acts, using their livelihood to actualise the escapist desires of the hands, to be who they truly want to be. It is for this reason that Dickens depicts the members of the circus with such veneration, as the culture in which they are immersed, nourishes their natural desires to wonder and want to express their own opinions.

Hard Times demonstrates that the emotional and recreational needs of the individual are innate, and can never be lost amongst facts and statistics. Therefore, without an upbringing and adulthood in which these needs are cultivated, despair drives the individual insane; it is for the reason that Dickens implores that all social institutions must encourage human needs, to encourage all the admirable attributes of humanity and ensure every individual's natural desires are nurtured.