



Hard Times (Illustrated)

Charles Dickens

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The Utilitarians were one of the targets of this novel. Utilitarianism was a prevalent school of thought during this period, its founders being Jeremy Bentham and James Mill, father to political theorist John Stuart Mill. Theoretical Utilitarian ethics hold that promotion of general social welfare is the ultimate goal for the individual and society in general: "the greatest amount of happiness for the greatest number of people." Dickens believed that in practical terms, the pursuit of a totally rationalised society could lead to great misery.

Bentham's former secretary, Edwin Chadwick, helped design the Poor Law of 1834, which deliberately made workhouse life as uncomfortable as possible. In the novel, this is conveyed in Bitzer's response to Gradgrind's appeal for compassion.

Dickens was appalled by what was, in his interpretation, a selfish philosophy, which was combined with materialist laissez-faire capitalism in the education of some children at the time, as well as in industrial practices. In Dickens's interpretation, the prevalence of utilitarian values in educational institutions promoted contempt between mill owners and workers, creating young adults whose imaginations had been neglected, due to an over-emphasis on facts at the expense of more imaginative pursuits.

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