

Educational Association

Hard Times: Dickens' excoriation of Victorian values and industrial society

A lecture by Dr. Richard Moore

William Elder Building, Castlegate

7th September 2018, 10 am to 1 pm



The study day will examine one of Dickens' shortest novels which is also one of the most powerful. We shall examine how the publication in weekly instalments affected the shape and progression of the work, with Dickens himself feeling 'crushed' by time-pressure. We shall also examine the style of the novel, which follows an 18th century ironical mode already favoured by Fielding and Swift in polemical works such as *A Modest Proposal*. Above all we shall consider the novel's importance as sociological fiction drawing on contemporary 'philosophies' such as Utilitarianism whereby everything – including the human being - is valued only in terms of its practical usefulness. We shall consider how this later fed into the reaction of the *Art For Art's Sake* movement and the rise of an *impractical* rather backward-looking Aestheticism.

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Dickens' writing of this novel had a precise stimulus – that of an increasing breakdown in industrial relations. Only days after making a start on it he made a flying visit to Preston which had been gripped by a bitter weavers' strike for four months. What Dickens saw prompted him to broaden the scope of his criticism to include the whole of industrial civilisation. This is all the more piquant because weaving symbolically suggests interlinking and threading together. In Greek myth Ariadne aids Theseus with the silken thread which will enable him to enter the maze and kill the monstrous minotaur. In Dickens' Coketown the thread to human interlinking is broken and the worst of the mill-owners are monstrous themselves.

The book is not a sociological tract, however, and we shall also consider its humour and the moving, if incomplete, central story of Stephen Blackpool, trapped in a hopeless marriage and a heartless factory system. Dickens, as so often, is on the side of the working man, though in the novel that figure is let down by the unions. The treatment is indeed harsher than elsewhere. In an account in his magazine *Household Words* Dickens describes a strike meeting he attended in February, 1854. Here he shows both workers and union leaders as patient, orderly and responsible. He maintains that workers 'have a perfect right to combine' and he advocates arbitration as the best way to solve the dispute.

The other big strand in the novel is the repressive upbringing and education of the Gradgrind family, a *motif* which enables Dickens to draw one of his most interesting heroines. Here and elsewhere against all the repression and negativity he sets one big symbol : the circus. This, for all its tawdriness and faults, shines out as a symbolic alternative of fun, joy and release. During the study day we shall not only consider politics and social issues but shall also look at the tremendous significance of the Victorian circus and folk-entertainment – an area which Dickens himself felt to be increasingly under threat.

The cost of the lecture is £9 including refreshments. All are welcome and no previous knowledge is assumed.

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