

Chelsea Miles

Sister Soper

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Utilitarian Schools and the Modern Essentialist Theory:

*Hard Times* for Victorian and Modern Day Students

The way to properly educate has been under debate for centuries. Many different theories have been introduced, tried, tested, and with some, have been put to rest. In the novel *Hard Times*, Charles Dickens satirizes an educational theory used by utilitarians. This idea was headed by James Kay-Shuttleworth and it focused on the student having a “clear perception of vivid conviction of every fact presented to its mind” (qtd. in Alton par. 14). The utilitarian school ideals are quite similar to the educational theory of essentialism that is present in public schools in the United States today. Although Dickens presented a commentary of the school system in the Victorian Era, his novel can also be used to argue against the educational theories used in public schools today.

To succeed in his satire on the utilitarian schools, Dickens used the characters of Thomas Gradgrind and the teacher McChoakumchild to show how extreme the philosophy of facts could become. The very first paragraph in *Hard Times* presents the main ideals of the utilitarian school. Gradgrind tells McChoakumchild to “teach these boys and girls nothing but facts”, because according to the utilitarian school ideals, “Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else” (9). Gradgrind and McChoakumchild idolize the idea of Fact based education and are repulsed by anything Fancy or of wonderment, as both of their surnames

would suggest; Gradgrind “grinds” the Fancy out of the students while McChoakumchild “chokes” it out.

Thomas Gradgrind’s educational beliefs about Facts vs. Fancy are prevalent today in public schools, except now the philosophy has a different name: Essentialism. William Charles Bagely, a former Secretary of Education in the United States believed that only “the essentials” should be taught to students (Ediger 268). He also argued against “teaching subject matter which does not contain precise, specific, and exact content” (269). With the recent emphasis on math and science classes, the extermination of art classes, and the strong use of standardized testing—in which students memorize a fact about a subject then spit it back onto a test—it seems as though Bagely and other government officials in the United States have taken a page out of Thomas Gradgrind’s educational philosophy book. Even the words Facts and Essentials are similar in definition and connotation.

For the utilitarians such as Gradgrind, there was a very specific reason to why they taught their students the way they did. Because of the major class differences in the Victorian Era, it was believed that the children of the lower working classes needed to be educated, not so they could bring themselves up out of poverty, but so they could better understand their place in the class system (Alton par. 10). It was because of this idea that Kay-Shuttleworth expected the children to learn “the ascertained truths of political science”, as well as other Facts that would help them understand their socio-economic positions and so they might not be taken advantage of by the upper class (qtd. in Alton par. 10).

Dickens took this idea and made it a reoccurring theme throughout his novel with Gradgrind’s ideas about how a child should be educated. Gradgrind tells McChoakumchild “You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts: nothing else will ever be of any

service to them” (9). Gradgrind’s opinion about education mirror Kay-Shuttleworth’s idea in that Gradgrind believes that the students in his school, who are of the working class, such as Sissy Jupe and Bitzer, only need to learn the Facts and not focus on the Fancy, as it isn’t going to do them any good from where they are sitting on the societal food chain.

Just as the utilitarian schools were set up to provide a fact based education for the children of the working class, the essentialist philosophy today has been the driving force behind No Child Left Behind, a government educational program that was put into place in the hopes of helping students who come from low socio-economic backgrounds get the education they deserve and rise up out of poverty. In theory, this is a major difference between the utilitarian schools and schools today as Kay-Shuttleworth did not expect his students to reach higher classes. While No Child Left Behind has helped some of these modern day students move up in society, just as the utilitarian school system helped Bitzer move up in the Fact based world of Coketown, most of today’s students that come from impoverished households are not receiving the education that has been promised to them, and they are still in the same position in society as they were before.

Although the utilitarian schools were originally for children from the working class, the character of Gradgrind is used to show how the utilitarian educational ideals could be forced into the lives of the middle and upper class as well. This is shown through Gradgrind’s implementation of his philosophy in the education of his own children, Louisa and Tom. Gradgrind wants his children to be the perfect models of the Fact based education that he has “coursed” them “like hares” and “trained to mathematical exactness” (16, 20), in the same way that he has coached McChoakumchild to educate the “reasoning animals” of the school (9). For Gradgrind, the world of Facts needs to reside within his children and squash any Fancy notions

that they may have running around in their head, because he believes that it is more practical and will benefit them more.

It is interesting to note that Dickens wasn't completely against the utilitarian philosophy. He did like the idea of having a school for the working class children. What he didn't like was "the neglect of imagination and Fancy and its elevation of the importance of Fact" (Alton par. 25). Dickens makes this point through Gradgrind's pride that his children have never "seen a face in the moon" (16), and is quite taken aback when he finds his children wrapped up in "idle imagination" while peeking in at Sleary's circus (26). This goes back to Gradgrind's insistence that Fact is the only important knowledge that a person needs, and that imagination and wonderment are not needed in an education.

This theory is being seen in public schools today when funding for art classes is being given to classes that are deemed more important and appropriate, such as math and science. This goes back to the belief that only the essentials are needed. The creative outlets that most students crave and thrive in are being taken away. Just as Mr. Sleary tells Mr. Gradgrind, "People must be amuthed...they can't be alwayth a-working, no yet they can't alwayth a-learning" (47), educators today worry that students are becoming too bogged down with learning Facts and being tested on them, because the "standards based curriculum neglects the kind of imaginative thinking that is natural to children" (Allsup 141).

This is seen in the novel when Sissy is reprimanded repeatedly for having too many Fancy thoughts, such as having a flowered rug when she is married or by thinking of how hard it would be for 25 out of a million people starving to death (17, 63). Gradgrind's response to Sissy's incessant failures in the Fact based system is that it "showed the necessity of infinite grinding at the mill of knowledge"; again, just as his name suggests, he seeks to "grind" the

Fancy out of Sissy. However, all this does to Sissy is make her “low-spirited, but no wiser” (63). It is the same with Louisa and Tom Gradgrind. Because they were not allowed to foster their imaginations and Fancy, they both suffer and become even lower in spirits than Sissy, as is seen in Louisa’s failed marriage and Tom’s criminal activity. Is it any surprise that these two children sought out Sleary’s circus, even if just to catch a glance? Is it any surprise that students today would need a break from the constant academia they face at school every day? The thoughts of these students might greatly mirror Louisa’s when she tells her father that she is “tired...of everything” (20).

Because of ignorance and avoidance by the upper class in Victorian society, Dickens used his novel to describe what the problems were in their society, in regards to how the lower classes were treated, in the hopes that change would be made (Alton par. 25). By writing about Thomas Gradgrind’s school of Facts and the education of his children, Dickens showed how the utilitarian schools of the time did not provide a meaningful and sufficient education; Facts were not enough—the Fancy was needed as well. It would be interesting to see what Dickens’s reaction would be if he were to walk into a public school in the United States today. The experience could provide him with just the perfect material to write a sequel to *Hard Times*.

Works Cited

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