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Survey of English Literature 2

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### America's Account for the Artistic

It is clear from the melancholy, smog-coated characters and tales found within Charles Dickens' *Hard Times* that those who were not dripping with money in nineteenth-century England were indeed subjected to substantially "hard times" themselves. Dickens' fictionalized version of the real oppressive conditions in the industrializing country provides a critique of a thought process found within its schools and early industries—a kind of thought process that views the world as necessitating only statistics and facts and work done by "hands," leaving little room for compassion, imagination and real human heart. This, in the novel, is the philosophy of the Gradgrind family. This notion is challenged by the Sleary and Jupe families, who teach their children and employees to believe in fancy, delight, and beauty instead. In the modern America I've witnessed, school creeds and workplace advertisements make it seem as though Gradgrind sort of thinking has disappeared, and here you can "be anything you want to be," unafraid to dream bigger, reach higher, explore your passions, and everything else propagated on billboards and "We're Hiring!" flyers. And largely, this is the case—but in terms of the straightforward, statistical way students and workers are often still evaluated in my experience with the system, there is more work to do to achieve true Sleary/Jupe thinking. While America is open to the Sleary/Jupe philosophy by encouraging the subjective and imaginative individual in theory, its education and workplace structures still rely on hard facts and reason when it comes to evaluation, making the philosophy a work in progress.

Within the first few paragraphs alone of *Hard Times*, Dickens gives a lengthy introduction to the philosophy of Thomas Gradgrind, and how it affects not only the way he raises his own children, but how it results in a school system and city structure relying on the utilitarian “facts-only” way of learning and living. Gradgrind instructs to his schoolteachers to “teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life” (Dickens 9). In Gradgrind’s life, there is room for nothing that isn’t rational, factual, and otherwise centered upon the mind instead of the heart. It is this philosophy that causes young Sissy Jupe, a student at the school, to be reprimanded for imagining things like “a carpet having a representation of flowers upon it” (13), and it is this philosophy that ultimately renders Gradgrind’s daughter Louisa unable to comprehend “the graces of [her] soul” (208) or “the sentiments of [her] heart” her father taught her to stifle. Likewise, Gradgrind’s way of life is reflected outward in his society, and even in his city, Coketown, as citizens “saw nothing in Coketown but what was severely workful” (28). The entire workplace is made of “fact, fact, fact, everywhere in the material aspect.” The Gradgrind philosophy, in this era and society, dominates completely.

And yet, there are those who reject the town’s reliance on fact, who recognize that although the Gradgrind method of living may result in intelligence and productivity with the community, it saps that which is so beautiful and essential to human nature: fancy and imagination, the dominating philosophy of the circus family Sissy Jupe belongs to. Whereas the other children in her class can recite strings of numbers and definitions, Sissy prefers to “fancy” (14) flowers and horses and disregard the proportion of “millions of inhabitants” against “only five-and-twenty” (60) people who are starved to death every year in favor of having compassion for the hungry instead: claiming “it must be just as hard upon those who were starved, whether the others were a million, or a million million.” For she, unlike Gradgrind’s children, has been

raised by a colorful performance group whose main idea is that “people must be amused” and “they can’t be always a working” (45), as circus member Sleary puts it to Gradgrind himself. Without imagination, pleasure, and fun, there is no true happiness within the workplace, and even though Sissy claims she is “stupid” (59) because she cannot easily learn facts in school, she is the only one by the novel’s close who brings true joy to the smaller Gradgrind children—namely Jane, who remarks her beaming face “must be Sissy’s doing” (215)—and comforts Louisa when her “facts only” upbringing brings her to confusion and misery. Dickens suggests through his use of Sissy and Sleary’s characters that fact is no substitute for imagination, and to provide students and workers with pleasure leads to a much higher quality of life.

In America today, it might appear on the surface that society has long since abandoned any traces of a rigid Gradgrind-esque system within schools and workplaces—and while I can affirm from personal experience that the era of asphyxiating human creativity and joy has thankfully disappeared, visible traces remain of the demand for facts and statistics, as I have witnessed them still in the process of being stamped out. In the education system today, schools advertise themselves as praising the individual imagination, and fostering every child’s dream, which can be seen in the manner that classrooms are conducted—my own included. I was encouraged from to discover at an early age my passions and dreams, and in elementary schools, often was able to chase them in the forms of art projects, writing exercises, and speculative thinking—all which are outside of hard reason, and what cannot be seen “in fact.” This is a far reach from the classroom Gradgrind instructs, where children are addressed as numbers and no form of creativity is expressed. In my American classroom, Sissy Jupe would have been free to explore her desires and fancies through a number of school activities. However, at the same time, the primary measure that my classes were evaluated by is testing of facts. I was required to

memorize and recite information in a standardized way, with only a few classes praising my ingenuity, such as art or writing classes, which are designed to evaluate on a more subjective basis. But still, as much as my classrooms tried to encourage spontaneity and creativity, at the end of the day, every student still received statistical scores and grades that decided how well-suited they were for the real world. The school system I was in definitely allowed for a Sleary/Jupe philosophy under its roofs, but as long as students are drilled for facts on tests and evaluated on a numerical and letter basis, hints of Gradgrind and Coketown still linger among us.

Even once students graduate and enter the real world as adults, they are presented with a society eerily similar to the educational environment they just came from—much like how Coketown “had no greater taint of fancy in it” (27) than the Gradgrinds and their educational system themselves. Many American adults I personally know, such as my parents, are able to follow their dreams and passions and experience joy in every day of their work, but even for those like them, who are happier in their professions than they would be anywhere else, there is always the looming reality of evaluation—by a boss, by colleagues, and by their chosen workplace as a whole. This is nowhere near the way the “hands” of Coketown were expected to achieve the highest possible rates of production without any regard for their personal lives or enjoyment, and is in fact much closer to the way Sleary encourages fun and whimsy to all the circus workers, but there is still a sense of analytical order among my family’s jobs. A certain output is expected from my father as a monetary advisor and my mother as a middle school teacher, their effort is judged by the value of the work they produce and rewarded in pay raise or reduction, and in most cases, if too much time is spent on delight instead of productivity, they risk being reprimanded or let go. Just like within schools, there is certainly a presence in the American workplace I’ve witnessed of a Sleary or Jupe-like appreciation for synthesis and

emotion, and most employers truly value the individual employee, but there still yet remain traces of the Gradgrind necessity for hard data that have not been completely erased yet.

For the most part, I've seen that America has swapped out the industrial utilitarianism of Gradgrind's time with a school system and workplace model more progressive and open to the individual human spirit, even if students and employees are still ultimately judged on their output and knowledge. But it might not be too necessary for future changes to be made—after all, without some semblance of order and structure, without facts learned by students or work done at jobs, society would not be able to maintain itself in a stable way economically. And to a certain degree, that sort of thought process will always be necessary to ensure the security of individuals who rely on information and productivity to make a living. However, if the Sleary/Jupe allowance for laughter, imagination, and desire is not made in more modern places, “making a living” will mean nothing more than surviving instead of truly *living* and enjoying experiences the way Sissy Jupe does. And thankfully, in the end, at least my corner of America has shown it is willing to give its people the delight they deserve in a much larger way than it might have two centuries ago.

Works Cited

Dickens, Charles. *Hard Times*. Ed. F. R. Leavis. London: Penguin, 2012. Print.