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VIOLATIONS OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN VICTORIAN LITERATURE:

LABOUR AND EXPLOITATION IN 19TH CENTURY ENGLAND

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Abstract

La presente tesi magistrale propone di esplorare la rappresentazione e la denuncia della violazione dei diritti umani nella letteratura inglese del XIX secolo, soffermandosi sui diritti dei lavoratori e il loro sfruttamento. Dimostra, attraverso i romanzi di grandi autori, come la letteratura abbia rappresentato la coscienza critica della società di fronte alle ingiustizie sociali e alle violazioni dei diritti umani, indagando il ruolo della letteratura come specchio e strumento di critica sociale in un'epoca segnata da profonde trasformazioni economiche, sociali e politiche.

La narrazione letteraria diventa uno strumento per sensibilizzare l'opinione pubblica, per stimolare il dibattito politico e per influenzare le riforme, offrendo così un contributo fondamentale alla storia dei diritti umani fino ai giorni nostri.

Il primo capitolo offre un quadro storico sull'evoluzione del concetto di diritti umani, esaminando le radici e le teorie fondamentali nate nel contesto europeo, fino all'affermazione di principi di giustizia sociale. In questo contesto si approfondiscono le condizioni di vita e di lavoro della classe operaia durante la Rivoluzione Industriale, evidenziando l'emergere dello sfruttamento dei lavoratori e dei bambini, nonché le prime forme di organizzazione del movimento operaio e le battaglie per la tutela dei diritti, come il Chartismo. Il capitolo si conclude con una panoramica sulle riforme sociali e legislative che hanno segnato un passo verso il riconoscimento dei diritti dei lavoratori e dei minori fino alla Dichiarazione Universale Dei Diritti Dell'Uomo adottata Dall'assemblea Generale delle Nazioni Unite.

Il secondo capitolo si concentra su Charles Dickens, autore centrale della letteratura vittoriana e voce critica nei confronti delle ingiustizie sociali. Attraverso l'analisi dei suoi romanzi *Oliver Twist* e *Hard Times*, si evidenzia la rappresentazione dello sfruttamento minorile, delle condizioni precarie della classe povera e della disumanizzazione del lavoro nelle fabbriche. Dickens, con la sua capacità di narrare le contraddizioni della società industriale, denuncia l'ipocrisia delle istituzioni e la brutalità del sistema capitalistico, mettendo in luce temi di giustizia sociale, dignità umana e lotta alle disuguaglianze, invitando i lettori a riflettere sulla natura della società. Viene inoltre analizzata l'influenza che le sue opere hanno avuto sulla coscienza sociale dell'epoca e sul processo di riforma delle condizioni lavorative.

Il terzo capitolo analizza il romanzo *North and South* di Elizabeth Gaskell, il cui tema principale è la divisione tra Sud agricolo e Nord industrializzato dell'Inghilterra. La narrazione mette in luce le tensioni tra lavoratori e datori di lavoro, riflettendo sulle dinamiche sociali di un'epoca di grande trasformazione. Si analizzano il ruolo delle lotte operaie per la conquista dei diritti, nonché la complessa interazione tra morale individuale, responsabilità sociale ed esigenze economiche. Il

percorso dei personaggi permette di esplorare l'evoluzione della consapevolezza della dignità del lavoro e della necessità di giustizia sociale.

Il quarto capitolo estende l'analisi alla tematica del colonialismo e la rappresentazione del "non-English" nella letteratura di fine Ottocento, discutendo l'opera di H.G. Wells, in particolare *The Time Machine*, un romanzo distopico che riflette sulla divisione sociale e sullo sfruttamento attraverso la metafora del rapporto tra Eloi e Morlocks, interpretati come simboli di alienazione e oppressione. L'opera è letta come una critica profonda delle disuguaglianze sociali e delle conseguenze catastrofiche di un sistema economico e politico ingiusto. Inoltre, si esplora la rappresentazione degli "altri" nelle colonie britanniche all'interno della narrativa vittoriana, evidenziando come il colonialismo sia stato una forma di sfruttamento e violazione dei diritti umani estesa oltre i confini nazionali.

Chapter 1

The evolution of the concept of Human Rights

1.1 The birth and evolution of human rights

Human rights are universally recognized moral principles and norms that establish standards of human behavior and are often protected by both national and international laws.

On December 10, 1948 the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted and proclaimed in Paris, France, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The idea of creating a constitution for human rights developed shortly after the Second World War, especially after the events of the Holocaust. This document outlined a framework of rights that countries are encouraged to protect, setting also a global standard for human dignity, freedom and justice. It defines the aspirations of the international community to be guided by its 30 articles in national and international policy.

In 1950 Members of the Council of Europe used the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to draw up a treaty to secure basic rights both for their own citizens and for other nationalities within their borders. The Convention was signed in Rome in 1950, ratified by the UK in 1951, and came into force in 1953. Unlike the Universal Declaration, the European Convention of Human Rights contains rights which can be relied on in a court of law.

The Declaration is a foundation text in the history of human and civil rights, it consists of 30 articles and doesn't make any reference to a particular culture, religion, country or political system. Consequently, these rights are inherent and inalienable, they belong to every individual by virtue of being human: "all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights" regardless of characteristics like nationality, ethnicity, sex, language, religion, national or social origin or economic and social status (art. 1-2). Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person and "no one shall be held in slavery or servitude".

Human rights include the right to life and liberty, freedom from slavery and torture, while articles from 18 to 21 sanction the "constitutional liberties" and spiritual, public, and political freedoms, such as freedom of thought, opinion, expression, religion and conscience, word, peaceful association of the individual, and receiving and imparting information and ideas through any media. Moreover, they include freedom of opinion and expression, the right to work and education, and many more. Everyone is entitled to these rights, without discrimination.

When it comes to children, in 1989 the convention on the rights of the child (CRC or UNCRC) guarantees all children the same rights. The basic premise is that children (under the age of 18) are born with the same fundamental freedoms and inherent rights as all human beings, but with specific additional needs because of their vulnerability.

To be more precise, UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund) dreamt of a united nations system that includes not only economic and social rights but also political rights. And not surprisingly, still nowadays UNICEF plays a central role in the contemporary debate about exploitative child labour and children's rights.

Back in 1989 when the principal goal of the United Nations general assembly was the adoption of the convention on the rights of the child, this convention entered into international law only nine months after its adoption and has become the most ratified human rights treaty in history.

Article 32 of that convention requires signatory governments to accept the right of the child to be protected "from economic exploitation and from performing any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child's education or to be harmful to the child's health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development" (English, 1997, p. 434).

However, it is mandatory to trace a historical reconstruction of the concept of human rights. The concept itself had existed for centuries but it didn't have the same meaning it acquired in modern days. One of the key milestones is the signing of the Magna Carta on the 15th June 1215 in England by King John: it was a charter demanding specific liberties and still nowadays is considered a cornerstone of most modern juridical documents around the world, including the common law systems and the UK constitution. In particular Magna Carta established for the first time the principle that everybody had to be subjected to the law, including the monarch; it also extended the right to justice and a fair trial to all free men. The Magna Carta legacy can be seen in many later documents in English history as the English "Bill of Rights" signed in 1689: this document, following the Glorious Revolution, was more explicitly focused on individual rights and freedoms, including freedom from cruel and unusual punishment, the right to petition the King, and the right to bear arms.

By the 17th and 18th centuries, Enlightenment thinkers such as John Locke and Jean Jacques Rousseau began to expand and reflect upon the idea of natural rights, "rights that all people are born with" simply by virtue of being human; they argued that government should be established to protect these rights. To be more specific, the Enlightenment provided the philosophical foundation for modern human rights, and the concepts of liberty and equality became central to the development of modern human rights law.

The 18th century, which is remembered as the century of the revolutions, saw the proliferation of documents concerning human rights: the American Declaration of Independence, first signed in 1776, written by Thomas Jefferson and the United States Constitution, written by 55 delegates who attended the Constitutional Convention in 1787, both drew inspiration from the Magna Carta's principles of limited government and protection of individual rights.

Furthermore, the French Revolution was a critical point in the history of human rights. The declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen signed in 1789, inspired by Enlightenment ideals, laid out a vision of

universal rights and equality under the law. It affirmed the rights of individuals, including freedom of speech, religion and assembly, as well as protection from arbitrary arrest.

In the following century, with the industrial revolution, Europe witnessed momentous changes in the character and organization of labour, as the secondary sector expanded and more countries embarked on industrialization, which eventually led to an expansion of the tertiary sector as well. A new social class was born, the so called "working class". During the Victorian Era, many social categories had very limited rights: for example, women were largely excluded from political and economic life and their property rights were restricted upon marriage: men still held power upon them, dictating their roles in society by limiting their opportunities. Moreover, they did not have the right to vote, and their political participation was restricted. Another category that had to fight for their rights to be recognized was the workers: their rights were largely nonexistent, with harsh working conditions, long hours (from 10 to 12 hours or even more) and low pay prevalent in factories and mines; moreover, their workplaces were often unsafe.

In addition, children were exploited: the industrial revolution transformed Great Britain from a nation of agricultural villages into a nation of factory towns. Many of the social changes accompanying industrialization aroused the indignation of critics, historians and authors. Perhaps the most despised was the employment of children. Edward P. Thompson alleged that the exploitation of little children, on this scale and with this intensity, "was one of the most shameful events in our history" (Thompson, 1963, p. 349).

It goes without saying that the child labour issue is a human rights violation. They were forced to crawl into dangerous and unguarded machinery, and orphans, who were sent from workhouses especially from Southern England, were apprenticed to factory owners, supposedly to learn the textiles trade.

Even though the working class was the engine of the new economic power in England, they still had to fight to see their rights recognised as they were still lacking representation, since the electoral system was unfair and unrepresentative.

The situation started to change during the second half of the 19th century thanks to the birth of the labour movement, together with social and political reforms which granted or started to grant workers basic human rights.

1.2 Workers' rights in the 19th century

1.2.1 Historical context: the Victorian Age

The Nineteenth century was a period characterized by many social, political and cultural changes in England; it is also remembered as the Victorian age, corresponding approximately to the period of Queen Victoria's reign, from 20 June 1837 until 22 January 1901.

The Victorian Age was a paradoxical era: a time of progress and conservatism, wealth and poverty, empire and resistance. It laid the foundations of the modern British state and society, shaping attitudes, institutions, and global relationships that extended far beyond the death of Queen Victoria in 1901.While often remembered for its prudishness and imperial arrogance, the period was also a time of dynamic change, where the seeds of modern democracy, industry, and social justice were sown.

The Victorian age can be divided into three period: early Victorian period (1837-1851), mid-Victorian period (1851-1870) and late Victorian period (1870-1901).

The early Victorian period saw expansion in industrial technology and a phase of economic depression and bad crops which generated discontent among the working classes. Consequently, the crisis led to two important political tendencies: the birth of Chartism and the campaign for free trade.

Chartism was a workers' movement which asked for a charter of social reforms. In 1838 the workers drew up a "People's charter" a petition in six points demanding universal suffrage, vote by ballot, annual parliament and payment for its members, abolition of the property of qualification and equal electoral districts. The chartist presented their petitions to the house of commons three times, in 1839, 1842 and 1848, but each time they were rejected.

While the campaign for free trade called for the abolition of protectionist measures to allow complete freedom of trade, this demand coexisted with an increasingly extensive body of legislation regulating how manufacturers and industrialists conducted the commercial aspects of their businesses, revealing a fundamental tension between the ideal of economic liberalism and the practical need for regulatory control in a rapidly industrializing society. These measures concerned such matters as insurance, company law, patent law, and contract law. From the 1840s entrepreneurs were increasingly drawn to 'free trade' as a means of accelerating Britain's growing industries, and lobbied Parliament for the lowering or repeal of the many protectionist import and export duties on manufactured goods.

The mid-Victorian period was an age of relative stability except for conflicts abroad, including the Crimean war, and the Indian rebellion, the latter eventually leading to the abolition of the East India Company and the government of India was transferred to the Crown. In 1876 Queen Victoria would become the Empress of India. By the end of the century the British empire would cover a quarter of

the earth's surface including Canada, Australia, New Zealand, India, parts of Africa and the Caribbean; the British empire became the most powerful empire in the world.

However, the British empire provoked many political conflicts and tensions, for example, in Ireland the Home Rule party sought political independence and presented two "Home Rule" bills; both were rejected by members of parliament, who feared that a more independent Ireland could be a threat. Britain was also engaged in numerous conflicts to maintain or expand its power and influence, especially in Africa and Asia. On the whole, the Victorian age was an age of prosperity, progress and social advancement on the one hand, and of poverty, injustice and social unrest on the other, in fact "the real difficulty in talking about the Victorian age is not so much to get clear of all trails of deliberate malice as to avoid the foreshortening which affects all historical judgments" (Woodward, 1949, p. 53). This era was one of the most transformative in British history as many major changes had taken place, colonial power and economic progress brought wealth to the middle and upper classes, while a large lower middle class emerged. "The Victorian era saw the growing importance of middle class, who became an important cultural influence, therefore a middle-class lifestyle developed and influenced society as a whole" (Houghton, 2008). The middle class was obsessed with gentility, respectability and decorum, which distinguished them from the lower class, and it tended to become more and more powerful at the more quotidian level of manners and mores and social habits. For this reason, the Victorian Age is often associated with a sense of moral responsibility and with strict social codes and norms; Victorians supported personal duty, hard work, decorum, good manners, discipline, morality, respectability and chastity as values to be applied to every field of English society.

Therefore, the Victorian era was characterized by a class-based society, where the middle class became more influential and powerful. Besides, an increasing number of people gradually gained the right to vote, allowing for broader political participation and a more representative democratic system.

More specifically, the structure of Victorian society was defined by a rigid and hierarchical class system. At the top was the upper class, composed primarily of aristocrats and hereditary landowners. This group held significant political influence and economic power, often passed down through generations, and maintained an exclusive social status through wealth, lineage, and access to elite institutions.

Beneath them was the middle class, a broad and increasingly diverse group that emerged strongly during the Industrial Revolution. It included wealthy industrialists, factory owners, merchants, bankers, and large-scale commercial entrepreneurs. Also, part of this class were senior military officers, clergymen, doctors, lawyers, and other professionals, as well as the petite bourgeoisie, small business owners, shopkeepers, clerks, and lower-level managers, who aspired to social mobility and respectability through education, hard work, and adherence to strict moral codes.

At the base of the social pyramid was the working class, which comprised manual laborers, factory workers, miners, servants, and the urban and rural poor. This class often lived in harsh conditions, with limited access to education, healthcare, or political representation, and faced long hours of labor in exchange for meager wages. Despite this, the working class played a crucial role in sustaining the industrial economy and was at the heart of emerging labor movements advocating for rights and reforms.

It is important not to think of social strata or classes as isolated categories. Instead, they are interconnected: for instance, the middle class often exhibits a range of political and social tendencies. During periods of rapid economic growth, especially when traditional, inherited systems of authority are weak or absent, many individuals tend to move into higher social classes. However, in societies where traditional authority structures remain strong, individuals may rise socially without changing their position within the hierarchy of power. In such contexts, a distinct middle-class consciousness may emerge, characterized by individualism and a rejection of deference. This consciousness can give rise to a political class that challenges established authority in the pursuit of influence and power. (Neale, 68, pp.23-24)

The issue of social injustice became a major problem in 19th century England. While for many the industrial revolution and technological innovations contributed to the improvement of everyday life, the benefits of industrialization were not enjoyed equally by the different social strata: industrial workers faced long hours shifts without any kind of regulation, women and children, especially the poorer ones, were exploited, making the “working class” vulnerable and defenceless.

On the other hand, as a consequence of the industrial revolution, poverty became an issue, especially in big cities: poor people lived in overcrowded slums in terrible non-hygienic conditions which led to the outbreak of epidemics. The “poor laws”, issued in 1834, only made the situation worse: poor children were separated from their families and sent to work in parish workhouses. Poverty was seen as a crime rather than a social problem.

This particular situation which opposed prosperity to poverty, social injustice to social reforms, moralism to corruption, is remembered as the Victorian Compromise. The Victorian Compromise refers to the cultural, social, and moral balancing act that characterized 19th-century British society, referring to the simultaneous coexistence of extreme moral conservatism and rapid industrial, scientific, and economic progress. This duality defined much of Victorian life: while society upheld strict codes of public morality, respectability, and religious values, it also tolerated or concealed widespread poverty, child labor, gender inequality, and moral hypocrisy and contributed to the prejudice against the character and behavior of manual workers as a class, a prejudice which was embodied in the civil law and which has exerted a powerful long-term influence on class relationships and self-perception.

As for the political context, it reflects the changes in Victorian society: the three major Reform Acts passed in the 19th century significantly transformed the British electoral system by gradually expanding the franchise and redistributing parliamentary representation. These reforms were crucial in reshaping the political influence of the social classes, particularly the middle and working classes.

The Reform Act of 1832, also known as the *First Reform Act*, was a response to growing public dissatisfaction with the outdated and unrepresentative nature of the electoral system. It abolished many "rotten boroughs" (constituencies with very few voters), redistributed seats to the industrial towns and cities that had grown during the Industrial Revolution, and extended the vote to more men in the middle class, specifically, male property owners meeting a certain income threshold.

The Reform Act of 1867, or the *Second Reform Act*, further expanded the electorate by lowering property requirements. It enfranchised many skilled urban working-class men, particularly in boroughs, nearly doubling the number of eligible voters and marking a shift toward a more inclusive political system.

The Reform Act of 1884, also known as the *Third Reform Act*, extended voting rights to rural working men on the same terms as those in urban areas, thereby creating a more uniform and democratic franchise across the country. It significantly increased the electorate and reduced the urban-rural disparity in political representation. Moreover, the Third Reform Act of 1884 extended the right to vote to all male householders, representing a significant advancement for the working class. This expansion of the electorate enabled greater political participation, allowing many working-class representatives to enter the House of Commons.

Together, these acts marked a gradual but fundamental move toward democratic inclusion, shifting political power away from the aristocracy and broadening participation in the political process.

During Queen Victoria's kingdom the house of Commons became the center of Government, the house of Lords gradually lost its power and the monarchy transformed into a symbol of the nation. The house of Commons consisted of 600 men who were elected to represent the counties and boroughs of England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland, while the house of Lords was populated principally by several hundred noblemen who had life tenures, member of both houses were wealthy men.

By the 1820s enough people in the social strata covered by the middle class had generated sufficient class-consciousness to develop as a political class, at least in some regions. The working class too were beginning to develop a distinctive proletarian class-consciousness, again in some regions, and was beginning to emerge as a political class. However, it was still far from developing a form of class consciousness that moved beyond deference, and was equally distant from emerging as a clearly defined and distinctive political class. (Bailey, 1999).

1.2.2 The Industrial revolution

The industrial revolution is the pace of economic and social changes, it marks a major turning point in history from many points of view, and yet it affected negatively many categories of citizens in British society.

Thanks to increasing wealth, the upper-and middle classes became richer, while the lower class became poorer, and suffered from poor living conditions. In terms of social structure, the Industrial Revolution witnessed the triumph of a middle class of industrialists and businessmen over a landed class of nobility and gentry. Ordinary working people found increased opportunities for employment in mills and factories, but these were often under strict working conditions with long hours of labour dominated by a rhythm set by machines.

It is essential to examine how the driving force behind England's new economic power, the working class, was compelled to confront the adverse consequences of the Industrial Revolution.

Firstly, industrial cities lacked elementary public services, water-supply, sanitation, street-cleaning, open spaces, the level of pollution had increased enormously due to smoke and filth; moreover, the houses, built in endless rows, were overcrowded.

Secondly, women and children were highly prized by employers because they could be paid less and were easier to control, besides, the fact that the children were so small meant they could move more easily in mines, or crawl between the machines in the cotton industry to carry out repairs.

In the early 1830s, the population of England was beginning to exceed its capacity to house itself healthily. According to many historians, such as Kay, in England, by 1832 the country had arrived at a moral and political crisis not only caused by the wake of riots or reform agitation but also by the cholera epidemic of 1831; consequently, numerous characters, belonging to the liberal intelligentia, set out to explore that unexplored continent known as the poor workers in their own houses, in order to understand and make surveys of their living conditions and moral habits. The increasing concentration of the population in towns which led to overcrowding, exacerbated the already serious problems of the poor and as a result, social researchers such as Jay, Alison, Southwood Smith, and Chadwick made an attempt to draw attention to the inequalities in society of the labouring class, and, therefore, offer solutions: William Jay (1789–1858), a social reformer and jurist, wrote in 1823 *An Inquiry into the Character and Tendency of the Labour, Poor, and Criminal Classes*, analyzing the conditions of the working and poor classes and advocating reforms. Archibald Alison (1792–1867), a Scottish lawyer and writer, published *Observations on the Management of the Poor in Scotland and England* in 1831, comparing poor relief systems and emphasizing the need for social and sanitary reforms. Dr. Southwood Smith (1788–1861), a pioneering public health physician, produced influential reports between 1839 and 1841, including the *Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britain* (1842), highlighting the sanitary conditions in industrial cities and calling for public

health interventions. Edwin Chadwick (1800–1890), a key figure in Victorian sanitary reform, also published the landmark *Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britain* in 1842, commissioned by the government, which documented poor urban hygiene and proposed improved sewerage and water supply systems to combat disease (Lamb, 1997, pp. 39–52).

However, who constituted the working class in the context of the Industrial Revolution, and what criteria were used to classify individuals within this group? A clear understanding of the composition and defining traits of the working class is essential to contextualize its role in this historical period.

Working-class people were industrial proletarians in factory areas, workers in the domestic industries, agricultural laborers, low-paid-non factory urban laborers, domestic servants, urban poor, most working-class women, and finally, children; nevertheless, harsh working conditions were prevalent long before the Industrial Revolution took place.

In fact, pre-industrial society was very static and often cruel, with the onset of the industrial revolution, there was a rapid increase in the industrial exploitation of labour, including child labour, in cities like Birmingham, Manchester and Liverpool, with rapidly increasing child mortality rates. During the Victorian era children as young as four were employed in production factories and mines, working long hours in dangerous and fatal working conditions (Thompson,1968, pp. 366–367.)

An essential aspect of this analysis is understanding the underlying reasons for the widespread employment of children in mines and factories, which reflects the economic demands and social conditions of the time. Several key factors created a strong correlation between industrialization and child labour.

Firstly, new industries such as textiles, coal mining, and metallurgy required a large workforce, children were seen as ideal workers because they could be paid less, were more manageable, and their small size made them useful for tasks in tight or dangerous spaces, such as crawling under machines or working in narrow mine shafts.

Secondly, many families living in poverty relied on their children's wages to survive. Industrialization often led to urbanization and poor living conditions, making child labour a financial necessity for working-class households.

Thirdly, at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, there were few laws protecting children's rights or limiting working hours, therefore employers could exploit children without facing legal consequences. Before industrialization, children worked in agriculture and apprenticeships, but the shift to factory work changed the setting and scale of child labour. Lastly, education was not yet widespread, so many children entered the workforce instead of attending school.

Thus, during the classic phase of industrialization, child labor and the employment of very young workers increased. This trend helped accelerate and expand economic change, driven by the economic and social conditions of the time

As industrial economies grew, so too did the scale and visibility of child labour, eventually prompting public concern and reform efforts later in the 19th century (Humphries,2013, pp. 1-2).

1.2.3 *Working conditions in the Victorian age: the working class and child labour*

Even though the working class was the engine of the new economic power in England, they still had to fight to see their rights recognised, given the fact that they were still lacking political representation. Working conditions were harsh and, especially during the 19th century, the work discipline intensified, "the labour force was not only very larger, but was worked very much harder" (Chambers, 1972, p.149), as the growth of domestic industries was accompanied by deteriorating conditions: whether workers were employed in a textile factory or in a small workshop, they suffered a marked deterioration in their life at work.

Nevertheless, only in the second half of the 19th century there was a general reduction in the length of the working day and improvement in working conditions (Hopkins, 1982, p. 52).

Despite this, in his essay "Time, work, discipline and industrial capitalism", Thompson sums up this positive outcome for workers with a metaphor: "the industrial proletariat was not allowed to grow in a sunny garden: it was forged yet over a fire by the powerful blows of a hammer" (Thompson,1967, p 90).

In England, particularly in Birmingham, a city with a dynamic and thriving working class, and in the so-called 'Black Country'[1], which had become a major industrialized area by 1851, new labor habits either imposed on or adopted by the industrial workforce began to spread throughout the entire nation. First of all, by the end of 1830 in larger establishments the normal working day lasted 12 hours, with less than two hours for meal, though longer hours might be worked by children in domestic workshops; the larger firms were usually closed for a week or a fortnight at Christmas and also one or two days were given off at Easter. During this period, it was common for workers to receive holidays or breaks around certain times of the year. However, this custom had some unintended consequences: since workers wanted to take advantage of these breaks or had irregular attendance habits in general, they often compressed all their weekly working hours into just a few days, typically three, rather than spreading them out evenly over the week. This led to a very uneven and chaotic working pattern in many factories, with intense periods of labor followed by long absences. Such irregularity drew criticism from employers and social commentators, who viewed it as inefficient and disruptive to

[1] The "Black Country" is a historical and industrial region in the West Midlands of England, located to the northwest of Birmingham. The name comes from the heavy industrial pollution and thick black soot that once covered the area during the Industrial Revolution, due to: extensive coal mining, iron foundries, steel mills, other heavy industries. By the mid-19th century, the Black Country had become one of the most intensively industrialized areas in the world. Observers at the time often described its landscape as dark, smoky, and harsh, hence the name.

industrial productivity. It also raised concerns about the health and well-being of workers, who subjected themselves to exhausting hours over a short time rather than maintaining a steady, manageable workload throughout the week

In smaller workshops, the factory owner or middleman was usually unconcerned with whether traditional working practices changed or not, as long as the work was completed on time and at the agreed price or wage. These smaller-scale employers were more focused on output and cost than on enforcing strict working routines. For the average worker in Birmingham during the first half of the nineteenth century, daily working life was shaped less by factory discipline and more by larger external forces. The most significant influences were the ups and downs of the economic trade cycle and major national or international events, such as wars. For example, the economic downturn of 1812 and the hardships of the early 1840s had a much greater impact on employment, wages, and living conditions than workplace rules or employer expectations (Hopkins, 1982, p. 57).

Secondly, in big cities where there was a large scale of ironworks, coal mines, brickyards tanneries, that required a greatly increased labor force, therefore the scale and regularity of work must have increased considerably. For example, it appears that the average working day in the black country by the 1860s remained of 12 hours shifts, with one or two hours allowed for meals.

On the other hand, when it comes to mining, working hours were different: in the 1840s, mining work in the Black Country followed a relatively consistent structure, with the standard day shift lasting around 12 hours, minus an hour for a meal break. There were no night shifts, and work typically ended earlier on Saturdays.

Despite the long nominal hours, the actual amount of productive labor varied considerably. The physically demanding and hazardous nature of the hewer's job made it impossible to work at full intensity for the entire shift. Since miners were paid by output (piece rates), they could adjust their work pace and take time off according to their financial needs (Benson, 1980, pp.55-62).

Work rhythms were further affected by economic fluctuations and seasonal demand. During downturns or the summer months, short-time working was common, and miners often supplemented their income with alternative employment, such as nail making. As late as 1900, most industrial workers worked a 10-hour day; however, most workers in textiles, which was by far the leading industry in terms of employment, were women and children. For workers of the labouring classes, industrial life "was a stony desert, which they had to make habitable by their own efforts." (Hobsbawm, 1969 p. 65).

As previously stated, the rapid industrial growth during the Industrial Revolution created a heightened demand for cheap and unskilled labour, which in turn contributed to the widespread use of child workers. The Victorian age became notorious for the conditions under which children were employed (Del Col, 2018).

Jane Humphries, in *Childhood and child labour in the British industrial revolution* (2010) took into account many autobiographies of workers to demonstrate how the classic era of industrialization, 1790–1850, saw an upsurge in child labour due to many reasons. For instance, a more detailed division of labour, which had contributed to create jobs for children, was due to an increased need to move work in progress and finished goods around the workplace: children in the pottery industry moved clay to the potters, moulds to the kilns, pots to the packing cases, returned moulds to the stores, even in coal mines they would crawl through tunnels too narrow and low for adults or pushed the carts or guided the animals in never-ending circles of effort. (Humphries, 2010, p. 33).

Furthermore, Humphries showed at what age children started to work. She took into account the industrialized period, from the late 18th century to the mid 19th century; these years are divided into four different periods: the first one contemplates children born before 1790, the second one those born between 1791 and 1820, the third those born between 1821 and 1850 and the last one those born between 1851 and 1878. When comparing the age at which children started working, it emerges that in the first period the average starting age was 11.5 years, in the second and in the third period it dropped to 9-10 years, while in the last one it rose to 11. Indeed, about 40% of children born between 1791 and 1850 were employed before the age of 10, whereas only around 20% of boys born before 1791 and after 1850 started working before that age. This change occurred when the first social reforms in the Victorian era were made.

Therefore, it can firmly be stated that the exploitation of child labour was endemic in the early industrial economy, it also extended well beyond mills and mines, and the biggest employers of children were the traditional sectors of the economy (Humphries, 2010, pp.7-8)

In big industrialised cities such as Birmingham, there are many evidences that children were exploited. An example is the pin factory of Richard Phipson where 130 children were employed; Ledsam and Sons employed 87 children out of a total work force of 318, but John Turner, another button manufacturer, employed up to 160 workers, including over 100 children. Even in the larger establishments, where significant numbers of children were employed and one might expect something resembling factory discipline, there is little evidence that children were overworked by the standards of the time. Only two workplaces,those of Phipson and Palmer & Holt,were criticized in 1843 for mistreating children. However, these cases were "strikingly opposed to the general good treatment of children in Birmingham." (Thompson, 1968, pp. 366–367).

Child labour played an important role in the industrial revolution from its outset. Often, due to economic hardship, the children of the poor were expected to contribute to their family income. But it was at the beginning of the 19th century that one third of the poor families were without a breadwinner, as a result of death or even abandonment, obliging many children to work from a young age; however, their wages were very low, a condition that affected adults and children as well, failing to provide

enough money to survive especially in big cities such as London: children with their families lived in desperate conditions, but there were also homeless, destitute children living on the streets of London. Consequently, in order to survive many children lived by stealing and a high number of them also worked as prostitutes.

In conclusion, in the 19th century child labour became a widespread issue largely due to the upper class's neglect in improving working conditions. Influenced by the wealthy elite, the government prioritized luxury and economic growth over the protection of workers of all categories, leaving many children to endure harsh and dangerous environments, working long hours. These conditions often led to severe respiratory illnesses and frequent accidents.

During this period, literature also played an important role in raising awareness about these injustices. Writers such as Charles Dickens used their works to criticize social inequality and expose the harsh realities of child labor: for example, with his novels like *Oliver Twist* (1837-1839) or *Hard Times* (1854), he portrayed the struggles of the poor and the exploitation of children, helping to shape public opinion and inspire calls for reform. Another important writer was Elizabeth Gaskell, who with her novel *North and South* (1854-1855) described a conflict between employers and the condition of workers, underlining the complex social conflicts that occurred at that time.

It was not until at least thirty years later that reformers began to push for change and advocate for the rights and protection of child workers, marking the beginning of a slow but crucial shift toward labour reform.

1.2.4 The Labour movement and the birth of Chartism

In the past decade a prominent theme in the historiography for 19th century Britain has been the imposition of middle-class habits and attitudes upon the population by means of re-invigorated mechanisms of social control. Philanthropist, educators, clergymen and moralizers all became soldiers in a campaign to uproot the ‘anti-social’ characteristic of the poor and to cement the hegemony of the elite. On the other hand, the working-class aimed to improve their life conditions and asked for social changes. In fact, Dorothy Thompson suggests to pay more attention to the workers’ history (Bailey,1984, p.134). The transformation that occurred in Victorian social habits and social relations owes as much to the autonomous development of the working class, by means of the capability of many individuals to reshape their lives and, together with their fellows, to move towards increased autonomy and effectiveness (Thompson, 1981, pp.196-197).

Indeed, one of the most important movements led by workers in the UK asking for political reform and social changes, was Chartism. Chartism could be considered as a mass-working class political

movement that emerged in the late 1830s, but it was most active during the 1840s. It took its name from the People's Charter of 1838.

Chartism developed in the smaller industrial towns where the powers of the magistrate and the Church were particularly weak. In many manufacturing districts Chartism was not something distinct from popular culture. It was indeed connected to the alehouse, the popular theater, the rhythms of work and leisure; politics were embedded within the fabric of everyday life. As Epstein argues, the Chartist period is distinguished by the way in which a dense cluster of economic and cultural concerns about the erosion of customary protection of traditional trade skills, or about control over the education of working-class children, were seen to have an essentially political solution (Epstein, 1985, p.72).

Consequently, the laboring class did not remain passive in the face of profound structural changes such as industrialization, urbanization, and the emerging social challenges these processes created. Although labour movements have a long history, including early forms of collective action like strikes, or peaceful protests, which highlighted both the determination of workers to demand better conditions, these efforts often faced harsh repression from authorities, most notably exemplified by the Peterloo Massacre of the 16th August of 1819,a peaceful protest for workers' rights in Manchester, in Saint Peter's field, organized to demand electoral reforms: a crowd of 80.000 people was violently suppressed by the cavalry, resulting in between eleven and fifteen deaths and several hundred injuries. Several strikes were carried out by workers: the General Strike of 1842, also known as the Plug Plot Riots, involved around 500,000 workers in northern England and other industrial areas, beginning in the coal mines and spreading to other industries. During this strike, workers sabotaged machinery by removing steam plugs to halt production, which gave the event its name. This was one of the first major working-class mobilizations and was met with harsh government repression. Part of this wider movement was the Preston Strike of 1842, where thousands of cotton workers in the textile town of Preston, Lancashire, stopped work to demand shorter hours and better wages, but the strike was suppressed with arrests and police action. Additionally, between 1839 and 1848, the Chartists organized several strikes and protests across the country, linking their demands for political rights with calls for fairer working conditions.

These unions eventually developed into strong organisations with mass membership and economic, political, and social influence. The factory labourer became the symbol of the suffering working class, forced into dismal conditions of life and employment by capitalist entrepreneurs. Dorothy Thompson argues that "Chartism was a movement whose members, supporters, and most of its leaders, were working men. A few were shopkeepers, innkeepers or marginal members of lesser professions" (Thompson, 2015, p. 115).

Since the working class still had no rights, working class people felt the need to ask for a Charter, which is a list of rights and social reforms. Insurrection was definitely a real possibility, even if a full-

scale revolution was not. The violence involved in suppressing a large political strike happening at the same time across several key industrial areas could have significantly changed how social conflict was experienced, making the relative stability of the mid-century period less certain. The power of the law sometimes limited the actions of both local and central government authorities. At the same time, it gave the Chartists an opportunity to make use of the constitutional framework established in the late seventeenth century, when the gentry and the rising middle class secured their own victory over absolutism. The Chartists' frequent emphasis on legal procedures should not be seen simply as a lack of revolutionary courage (Epstein, 1985, pp. 70-71).

Before the outspread of the movement in 1832, the Reform Act had been passed. It failed to extend vote beyond those owning property, thus excluding the working-class; furthermore in 1834 the Poor law Amendment was passed, depriving working people of relief and driving the poor into workhouses, where families were separated.

In 1837, six members of Parliament and six working men formed a committee; in 1838 they published the "People's charter", a charter calling for six reforms to render the political system more democratic. Even though none of these demands were new, the People's Charter became one of the most famous political manifestos of 19th-century Britain. In this charter the workers asked for: universal male suffrage for every man aged 21 years and above, secret ballot to protect the elector in the right to exercise their vote, no property qualifications for Members of Parliament, payment for Member of Parliament, equal-sized electoral districts securing the same amount of the representation for the same number of electors and last, annual parliamentary elections. The Years 1838-48 witnessed a multifaceted challenge to the structure of ruling-authority in Britain. The most important year in the history of Chartism was 1839, with a national convention sitting in London, meant to facilitate the presentation of the first petition. In June 1839, the petition, signed by 1.3 million working people, was presented to the House of Commons, but many members of Parliament rejected it.

During the 1840s, especially in 1842, a second petition of over three million signatures was submitted and yet rejected by Parliament; as a consequence, the workers responded with a wave of strikes in 14 English counties, principally in the Midlands, Lancashire, Cheshire and Yorkshire, as workers opposed the wage cuts imposed by employers. Calls for the implementation of the Charter were soon included alongside demands for the restoration of wages to previous levels. (Malcolm, 2007)

The ideological groundings of the labour movements were shaped by intellectuals as well as labourers. In France and Germany, so-called 'craft socialism' became very prominent, promoting the idea that a just and equal society could be 'crafted'. Likewise, the demands of the democratic Chartist movement in England, which aimed to give the labouring class a political voice by pleading for universal suffrage (for men), were formulated and put forward by skilled workers.

Such socialist/communist ideas culminated in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, a pamphlet written by the German philosophers Karl Marx (1818–1883) and Friedrich Engels (1820–1895) and published in 1848. The influence of the manifesto would remain limited for decades after its publication, but its ideas were ultimately adopted and used as the foundation of labour movements across Europe, albeit in different ways. For example, in Great Britain a closer connection between labour and liberals existed, while in Southern Europe anarchist movements gained influence. Labour movements had three main goals and values: first, they aimed at improving working conditions through higher wages, shorter working hours, and valuing (physical) work. Second, their political demands focussed on participation, democratisation, and freedom. Third, an equal society, solidarity, and a vision of a 'classless society' represented the social aims of the labour movement.

To achieve their aims, the labour movement adopted a great variety of practices and actions. Luddism as a direct form of violence disappeared in the first half of the nineteenth century due to more effective forms of protest and more durable and powerful organisations.

In fact, in 1842 and 1848 Chartists again mobilized the mass presence of popular radicalism, presenting huge national petitions to Parliament, holding large outdoor demonstrations and convening national conventions. Insurrection was at least in the air in the context of what became the largest wave of mass strikes of 19th century. Therefore, strikes became a powerful weapon, ranging from small-scale events on the shop floor to nationwide mass strikes. In the organisation of these strikes, trade unions played an important role, although they were sometimes cautious about using this tool when the risk of failure could threaten their own stability. Besides, grassroots activism and trade union organisations, political engagement and political associations became increasingly important. (Epstein,1985, p. 71). Nevertheless, there were outbreaks of serious violence, including property destruction and the ambushing of police convoys, in the Potteries and the West Riding. Though the government deployed soldiers to suppress violence, it was the practical problems in sustaining an indefinite stoppage that ultimately defeated the strikers; also, during the Summer of 1842, several chartist leaders were arrested and incarcerated, including Feargus O'Connor, who was one of the representatives of a significant Irish working-class group of Chartists.

Despite the arrests, Chartist activity continued in February 1848 after a series of bread riots in Manchester, Glasgow and Dublin. A new mass meeting was scheduled, after the gathering a planned procession would carry a third petition to Parliament, which in response reactivated an old law from the time of Charles II that banned more than ten people from delivering a petition in person. On 7 April, new legislation was also introduced making it a serious crime, punishable by death or transportation, to call for war against the Queen or to threaten Parliament through speech or writing. Although the authorities were aware that the Chartist demonstration was intended to be peaceful, they still organized a large show of force, recruiting 100,000 special constables to support the police. As a result, O' Connor

cancelled the planned procession and the petition, signed by the workers, was taken to Parliament in three carriages, but once again it was rejected by Parliament for the third time (Goodway,1982).

However, after 1848, Chartism as an organized political movement declined rapidly, some argued that it was O' Connor's fault, but more recent historians, among them Dorothy Thompson, have argued that the process was too complex to be explained by the actions or personality of just one individual. Even if the movement declined its demands influenced later reforms. Although political labour parties faced state persecution throughout Europe, their success in many countries demonstrated that persecution was not the answer to this political-societal rise of the labouring class.

But the situation began to change only later in the century when factory workers increasingly participated in these organisations as well. Especially in the labour parties, which emerged in the 1860s, left-wing intellectuals also played an important role.

In addition, mutual help and insurance fostered solidarity among the workers and was an important starting point for national insurance schemes against the risks of illness, unemployment, work accidents, and old age beginning from the late nineteenth century.

Consequently, international cooperation strengthened the power of the labour movements and demonstrated the importance of transnational networking, that this ideal of transnational cooperation would ultimately collapse in 1914 with the outbreak of the First World War was not foreseeable in the nineteenth century.

Despite their success, labour movements faced unsolved problems. Because the labour unions and parties had their origins in craft traditions and associational organisation patterns, they mainly represented skilled workers. In striving for respectability, the 'lumpenproletariat', as the lowest societal strata had been called by Marx and Engels, was excluded.

Finally, labour movements were shaped by male behaviour and membership, showing how the relative independence of Chartist shopkeepers or newsagents enabled them to assume leadership roles within the local movement. Thompson points out that places like the alehouse or the newsagent's shop often served not only as informal meeting points between official gatherings, but also as a 'filter' for newcomers to a neighborhood. On the other hand, it took a long fight for female workers to be accepted as "comrades" on equal terms and not as rivals on the labour market. Since this fight was only partially successful, female labour organisations developed in parallel with men's organisations. Chartist women unquestionably played a subordinate role within the movement; they rarely spoke at mixed meetings, appeared in published lists of National Charter Association membership, or contributed regular articles to the Chartist press. Moreover, the Chartist demand for suffrage usually excluded women, although most Chartist (male) leaders at least supported the goal of votes for unmarried women and widows who could not be represented by husbands. However, Chartist women seem to have been

less concerned about votes for women than about immediate issues such as the operation of the Poor Law (Epstein, 1985, p.72).

In conclusion, European labour movements achieved both successes and failures in the nineteenth century. In general, nineteenth-century revolutions were liberal, middle-class actions fighting for parliamentarism, democracy, and political freedom. These were also the aims of the labour movements. But the labour movement's fight for social equality and against exploitation and alienation did not turn into revolutionary reality, in fact, the level of political power achieved by the working class remained limited. However, in Great Britain, thanks to the cooperation between liberals and labour movement, the trade unionists could enter Parliament particularly beginning in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. At its height Chartism was a movement that involved entire communities of working people as it drew strength from the cohesiveness of class, community and family (Epstein, 1985, p. 72). At the same time, throughout the nineteenth century an integration process occurred in which labour movements became much more closely attached to their nation states, gained influence on the municipal level, and helped to improve the economic-social situation of the working class.

1.2.5 Social and Political reforms

Although Chartism did not achieve its goals immediately, five of its six demands were eventually enacted over the following 80 years. It is seen today as a foundational moment in the development of British democracy and working-class political activism.

At the very time when manual workers were being incorporated into the Victorian state structure through a recognition of trade unions and political rights, they were being actively discriminated against in other areas of the civil law. Legal barriers were erected in the path of working-class self-help activity and increasingly harsh sanctions were imposed on any personal financial lapse not because of the economic circumstances of manual workers but because of their social class (Johnson, 1993, p.147). Even though Chartism itself did not achieve immediate success, it cannot be considered a failure; its legacy is evident in the actions of later reformers, who came to view the Chartists' demands as less radical and gradually incorporated them into mainstream political discourse (Chase, 2015, pp 1-2). Because of this, during each stage of Victoria's reign important reforms were carried out, starting from workers and industrial labour and moving to the regulation of child labour. Anger at the contradiction between the conditions on the ground for children of the poor and the middle-class notion of childhood as a time of innocence led to the first campaigns for the imposition of legal protection for children. Reformers attacked child labor from the 1830s onward. The campaign that led to the Factory Acts was

spearheaded by rich philanthropists of the era, especially Lord Shaftesburry[2] who introduced bills in Parliament to mitigate the exploitation of children at the workplace.

In 1833, in order to limit child exploitation, the Factory Act and the Ten Hours Act were issued, regulating child labour in factories: it prohibited the employment of children under nine years of age in all textile mills powered by steam or water. In addition, the act limited children aged 9 to 12 to nine hours per day or 48 hour per week, no person under the age of eighteen was to work more than ten hours a day or eight hours on a Saturday, and no one under twenty-five was to work nights; moreover, it required them to attend school.

In 1834 the Poor law Amendment granted admission to workhouses to all people who could not support themselves and in 1842, when the Mines Act was issued, it prohibited the employment of female and boys under ten years of age from working underground in mines.

The Factory Act of 1844 established the half-time system, according to which children in textile mills worked half a day and attended school half-day, also this act lowered the minimum age of employment to eight. This act remained in effect until the Factory act of 1874, which raised the minimum age from 8 to 10 years and applied regulations to children aged 10 to 13 years.

With regard to workers' rights and trade unions, the situation began to improve as a result of legislative reforms.

In the early part of the century, trade unions were either illegal or severely restricted; however, the Trade Union Act of 1871 legalized their existence and provided them with legal protection.

Furthermore, the Employers and Workmen Act of 1875 granted workers the same legal status as employers in matters of contract disputes. As a consequence, the Independent Labour Party was established in 1892 to further represent workers' interests within the political sphere.

In addition, a series of significant social reforms during the Victorian and early 20th century periods addressed women's rights and social conditions. For example, the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 established civil divorce courts, allowing women, for the first time, to seek divorce through a legal process that was previously accessible only via private Acts of Parliament. The Married Women's Property Act of 1870 granted women the right to retain earnings and inherit property independently of their husbands, marking a crucial step toward financial autonomy.

[2] Lord Shaftesburry (1801-1885) was a British Tory Politician, philanthropist and social reformer. In March 1833, Ashley introduced the Ten Hours Act, which set limits on child labor in the cotton and wool industries: children had to be at least nine years old, no one under eighteen could work more than ten hours a day (eight on Saturdays), and those under twenty-five were banned from night work. The Act also mandated schooling and appointed inspectors to enforce it. However, the Whig government amended the bill to lower the minimum working age from eighteen to thirteen, allowing children aged thirteen and older to work up to nine hours. In June 1836, a second Ten Hours Bill was introduced. Although Ashley thought the timing was poor, he supported it. By 1837, he criticized the government for failing to enforce the 1833 Act and proposed a resolution expressing regret over the ineffective regulation of children's working hours, which was narrowly defeated.

Finally, in 1918, the Representation of the People Act granted voting rights to women over the age of 30 who met minimum property qualifications, representing a landmark achievement in the fight for gender equality and women's suffrage.

Public health reforms during the 19th century played a crucial role in improving living conditions in urban areas, particularly in response to rapid industrialization and population growth. The Public Health Act of 1848 marked the first major step in establishing a national framework for public health. It created local Boards of Health and empowered municipal authorities to implement measures aimed at improving sanitation, including the provision of clean water, proper sewage systems, and waste management. However, as these powers were largely discretionary, implementation varied significantly across regions.

The Public Health Act of 1875 strengthened and consolidated previous legislation by making it mandatory for local authorities to take responsibility for public health. Under this Act, local governments were legally obliged to provide effective sanitation, regulate housing standards, manage drainage systems, and control the spread of infectious diseases.

Together, these reforms laid the foundation for modern public health infrastructure in Britain and significantly contributed to the decline in urban mortality rates.

Education reforms in the late 19th century were instrumental in promoting literacy, social mobility, and the development of a more informed citizenship in Britain.

The Elementary Education Act of 1870, also known as the Forster Act, represented the first major step toward universal elementary education in England and Wales. It allowed local school boards to establish and maintain schools in areas where educational provision was insufficient, addressing gaps left by voluntary and religious institutions. The Act laid the foundation for compulsory elementary education and included provisions for girls, thereby promoting broader access to education for women.

The Education Act of 1880 built upon this foundation by making school attendance compulsory for children up to the age of ten, ensuring that education became a legal requirement rather than a matter of choice. Finally, the Education Act of 1891 further democratized access to education by abolishing school fees for elementary education, thus removing financial barriers for working-class families.

Collectively, these reforms marked a turning point in the expansion of state responsibility for education and laid the groundwork for the modern British educational system.

Chapter 2

Charles Dickens

2. Charles Dickens: life and literary style

Charles Dickens was born on 7th February 1812 in Portsmouth, England, and died on 9th June 1870. By the time Charles was 10 years old, he and his family had moved to London, to Kent and then back to London, due to his father's job: John Dickens was a clerk in the Royal Navy Pay Office. However, this period came to an end when in June 1822 his father was recalled to Navy Pay Office headquarters at Somerset House, and the family (except for Charles, who stayed behind to finish his final term at school) moved to Camden Town in London. Shortly after John Dickens was arrested and sent to debtors' prison for spending his money beyond his means; his wife and youngest children joined him. This marked a transition in Dickens' early life from one of carefree childhood to one filled with relative uncertainty.

Charles was then 12 years old when he boarded at College Place and later, he lived in a back-attic in the house of an agent for the insolvent court, Archibald Russel, "a fat, good-natured, kind old gentleman ... with a quiet old wife", in Southwark (Forster, 2006, p.27).

In order to pay for his board and to help his family, Dickens was forced to leave school and work ten-hour days at Warren's Blacking Warehouse, on Hungerford Stairs, where he earned six shilling a week pasting labels on pots of boot blacking. The strenuous and often harsh working conditions made a lasting impression on Dickens and later influenced his fiction and essays, becoming the foundation of his interest in the reform of socio-economic and labour conditions, the rigors of which he believed were unfairly born by the poor. He later wrote that he wondered "how I could have been so easily cast away at such an age" (Forster, 2006, p. 24).

"My work was to cover the pots of paste-blacking; first with a piece of oil-paper, and then with a piece of blue paper; to tie them 'round with a string; and then to clip the paper close and neat, all round, until it looked as smart as a pot of ointment from an apothecary' s shop" (Forster, 2006, p.25).

He experienced this situation together with other children: "Two or three other boys were kept at similar duty downstairs on similar wages. One of them came up, in a ragged apron and a paper cap, on the first Monday morning, to show me the trick of using the string and tying the Knot. His name was Bob Fagin; and I took the liberty of using his name, long afterwards, in Oliver Twist." (Forster, 2006, p.26).

Dickens's experiences in the Blacking Warehouse left him a scar that he had to face every day of his life:

> No words can express the secret agony of my soul as I sunk into this companionship; compared these every day associates with those of my happier childhood; and felt my early hopes of growing up to be a learned and distinguished man, crushed in my breast. The deep remembrance of the sense I had of being utterly neglected and hopeless; of the shame I felt in my position; of the misery it

> was to my young heart to believe that, day by day, what I had learned, and thought, and delighted in, and raised my fancy and my emulation up by, was passing away from me, never to be brought back any more; cannot be written. (Forster, 2006, p. 26).

Charles Dickens returned to formal education when his father was released from debtor's prison. Though his schooling was limited and interrupted, this early exposure to hardship deeply influenced his worldview and later literary themes. By the age of fifteen, Dickens entered the workforce as a legal clerk and soon transitioned into journalism, reporting on parliamentary debates and court proceedings. These early professional experiences sharpened his observational skills and familiarized him with the legal and social injustices of Victorian England, themes that would become central to his novels.

Dickens married Catherine Hogarth and fathered ten children, though the marriage eventually ended in separation. He was buried in Westminster Abbey, leaving behind a literary legacy shaped in large part by the adversities of his youth.

Indeed, a central element of Dickens's style is his fierce commitment to social critique. His novels offer a penetrating depiction of Victorian society, especially its failings: poverty, child labor, industrialization, class inequality, and the inefficiencies of institutions like the legal and educational systems (Andrews, 2012).

Dickens's literary career began with the publication of *Sketches by Boz* (1836), followed by the success of *The Pickwick Papers* the same year, which established him as a prominent writer. Over the next three decades, he authored a series of widely acclaimed novels: *Oliver Twist* (1837-1839), *David Copperfield* (1849-1850), *Bleak House (*1852-1853*), and Great Expectations* (1860-1861), many of which reflect his own experiences with poverty, child labor, and institutional cruelty.

His post-factory life reflects a remarkable transformation from exploited child laborer to one of the most influential social critics and novelists of the 19th century. Novels such as *Oliver Twist*, *Hard Times*, and *Bleak House* present bleak, realistic portrayals of urban slums, orphanages, and corrupt bureaucracies. Yet Dickens's realism is not dry or purely documentary; it is dramatized, emotional, and empathetic, giving voice to the voiceless and using narrative to expose and condemn systemic injustice (Fairhurst, 2022).

His works became a social document of the Victorian Era in Britain, and for this reason, his novels can be considered as a primary point of reference of the Victorians: Dickens' version of Victorian society came from his need to make stories work more effectively in evoking emotional responses in the reader. Furthermore, is important to highlight the fact that Dickens can be regarded as the greatest creator of characters in English literature; the majority of his characters were inspired by people Dickens actually encountered during his life. Although he often idealized characters or employed highly sentimental scenes to contrast with his caricatures and the harsh social truths he depicted, these techniques served to enhance rather than diminish the authenticity of his narratives.

In addition, his characters, though fictional, portray daily social life from the perspective of people who are poor or belong to the working class, and to the emerging middle class, in ways that can easily be recognized as embodiments of frank, timeless reality. Dickens transparently demonstrated how ineffective social policies and prevailing discriminatory social norms wreaked havoc on families and communities (Andrews, 2012, p.297).

Dickens's way of depicting characters aimed to amplify specific traits he was most interested in, that served his thematic and narrative goals; moreover, through exaggeration, he amplified the qualities most relevant to his critique, often omitting characteristics deemed unnecessary for the literary or moral purpose of the text (Dickens, 2010, preface to the novel, pp. V-VI).

While often rooted in social realism, Dickens's fiction is notable for its genre blending. He infused his works with elements of Gothic fiction (dark settings, mystery, supernatural overtones), melodrama, and even fantasy.

To sum up, Dickens's style is characterized by a reliance on simple, exaggerated, and frequently repeated details to convey the essence of his narratives. He often strips down descriptions to their barest bones, focusing on caricature and polemical rhetoric. This approach results in a fast-moving plot where characters and events represent extremes of a binary, lacking the nuanced exploration of thoughts and feelings found in other authors' works. For instance, Dickens describes the outsides of his characters but tends to avoid delving into their inner minds, creating a more abstract representation of his characters and settings (Schaub, 2013, pp.186-189).

In *Oliver Twist* (1837–39) and *Hard Times* (1854), Charles Dickens employs characterization as a central vehicle for social critique. The two novels demonstrate his evolving technique, from highly symbolic figures in his earlier works to more psychological rounded characters in his later fiction, though distinct in tone and method; they illustrate Dickens's use of characters as both narrative agents and social instruments.

In *Oliver Twist,* Dickens uses exaggerated and archetypal characters to expose the moral failures of institutional systems such as the Poor Laws and workhouses. Mr. Bumble, for example, who embodies the self-important parish beadle, and Bill Sikes, a brutal criminal, are sharply drawn to emphasize the cruelty and hypocrisy of the society they represent (Slater, 2009, p.54). Oliver, as the virtuous orphan, remains largely static, serving more as a symbol of innocence than as a fully developed individual; Fagin, though morally ambiguous and controversial in portrayal, embodies the figure of the outsider, shaped by marginalization and necessity (Sanders, 2003, p.102).

Hard Times demonstrates a more realist and introspective mode of characterization. Thomas Gradgrind, the utilitarian schoolmaster, initially prioritizes facts and reason over empathy, but undergoes a transformation that reflects Dickens's critique of industrial rationalism (Flint, 2001, p.189). Louisa Gradgrind is notable for her emotional repression and inner conflict, reflecting a

more psychologically complex depiction of female suffering. Stephen Blackpool, an honest yet oppressed factory worker, is drawn with deep sympathy, portraying working-class dignity amid systemic dehumanization (Ledger, 2007, p.128).

Overall, Dickens' characters serve as integral components of his narrative experiments, evolving from representations of singular ideas to more complex, interconnected figures that reflect the social, moral, and geographical distances within his stories (Ruthledge, 2015, p. 51).

2.1 Oliver Twist and the critique of Victorian society

Oliver Twist was firstly published in serial form from 1837 to 1839 in the magazine Bentley's Miscellany. The novel tells the story of a young orphan who is born under grim and mysterious circumstances. His mother dies shortly after giving birth, and Oliver grows up in harsh, uncaring institutions where he faces hunger, neglect, and cruelty. When he is about nine years old, Oliver, after having lived his early childhood in an orphanage, is sent to a workhouse, where any kind of disrespectful behavior is punished. For example, when Oliver asks for more food at the workhouse, the act prompts outrage from the officials. As punishment, he is offered as an apprentice to anyone who will take him and ends up working for an undertaker named Mr. Sowerberry. There, he suffers emotional abuse and decides to run away to London.

Upon arriving in the city, exhausted and alone, Oliver meets the Artful Dodger, a streetwise boy who brings him to Fagin, an old man who trains children to become pickpockets. Though Oliver doesn't realize it at first, he has been taken into a criminal gang. When Dodger and another boy steal a handkerchief from a wealthy gentleman named Mr. Brownlow, Oliver is mistakenly blamed. However, Mr. Brownlow soon realizes Oliver's innocence, takes him into his home, and begins to care for him. Just as Oliver starts to experience kindness and stability, he is kidnapped by Fagin's associates, including the violent burglar Bill Sikes and the troubled young woman Nancy, who works for Fagin but feels sympathy for Oliver.

Forced to take part in a burglary at a countryside house, Oliver is shot and abandoned. The homeowners, Mrs. Maylie and her kind niece Rose, take him in and nurse him back to health. They grow fond of him and begin investigating his past. Meanwhile, Nancy, torn between loyalty to Sikes and her compassion for Oliver, secretly contacts Rose and Mr. Brownlow to share what she knows about Oliver's background. Tragically, Nancy's act of kindness leads to her murder at the hands of Sikes.

Eventually, it is revealed that Oliver is the illegitimate son of a wealthy man. His half-brother, known as Monks, had conspired with Fagin to ruin Oliver's life and prevent him from claiming his rightful inheritance. At this point, Oliver would be entitled to the entire inheritance, but Mr. Brownlow persuades him to give a portion of it to Monks, in the hope that it might lead him to change his ways.

With the help of Mr. Brownlow and others, the truth comes to light. However, after emigrating to America, Monks quickly squanders all the money and, after being arrested for debt, dies in prison from an epileptic seizure. Fagin is tried and sentenced to death, while the boys from his gang, all except the Artful Dodger, finally begin to live honest lives, and Bill Sikes dies while fleeing justice.

Oliver is adopted by Mr. Brownlow and goes to live with him, and Rose finally marries Harry Maylie. As for Mr. and Mrs. Bumble, having fallen into disgrace after the police discovered their connections with Monks and thus with Fagin's gang, they lose everything and end up in the workhouse, where they eventually die in poverty, though probably without suffering the same cruel treatment they once inflicted on Oliver.

Set against the backdrop of widespread social and economic inequality, *Oliver Twist* offers a powerful critique of the harsh treatment endured by the poor and vulnerable in Victorian society. Through the journey of the young orphan, Dickens exposes the brutality of workhouses, the hypocrisy of charitable institutions, and the inescapable grip of urban poverty. The novel presents a vivid and unflinching portrayal of a system that punishes innocence and rewards corruption, inviting the reader to reflect on the moral failures of the institutions meant to provide care and protection.

However, amidst the bleak realities that shape Oliver's early life, Dickens weaves a narrative of resilience, moral integrity, and ultimately, redemption. Oliver's escape from the criminal underworld (and his eventual discovery of a loving and lawful environment) symbolizes the possibility of hope and transformation, even in the most oppressive conditions. In this sense, the novel not only denounces injustice but also affirms the enduring power of compassion, virtue, and human dignity.

This dual function, social critique and moral narrative, forms the foundation of Dickens's literary approach in *Oliver Twist*, and it is precisely this balance between realism and idealism that defines the novel's lasting impact.

In the following section, the key thematic elements and stylistic techniques through which Dickens articulates his critique will be examined, with a focus on the representation of poverty and institutional failure.

2.1.1 Child labour and exploitation in charitable institutions

The novel *Oliver Twist* explores the theme of childhood in Victorian society, focusing especially on its treatment of the poor and orphaned children. Among these themes, the precariousness of social position, living above one's means, unrealized aspirations, solitary innocent living in a vibrant broader environment, and optimism in the face of adversity, recur throughout Dickens's writing. They illustrate how one's personal life, particularly early childhood development, influences professional perspective.

Oliver’s journey from the workhouse to the criminal underworld and, ultimately, to a more compassionate and stable life, reflects Dickens’s commitment to social reform and his belief in the potential for redemption. His critique starts from the condition of children in workhouses, a condition Dickens had experienced himself when he was a child. Consequently, his sensitivity to the poor and working people can be attributed in part to the fragility of his social and economic status during this particular period of his life. (Andrews, 2012, p. 298).

The majority of the social changes accompanying industrialization aroused the indignation of contemporary critics and later historians. Perhaps the most despised was the employment of children, which "on this scale and with this intensity, was one of the most shameful events in our history."' (Nardinelli, 1980, p. 739).

The growing awareness of the contradiction between the conditions on the ground for children of the poor and the middle-class notion of childhood as a time of innocence, led to the first campaigns for the legal protection of children.

Dickens decided to denounce the living conditions of children through the characters of Oliver, and many other caricatures that serve as a warning for his readers, in order to sensitize public opinion on the conditions of the poor. Dickens’s narrative strategy, satirical, emotionally vivid, morally outraged, foregrounds the hypocrisy of a society that labels poverty as a personal vice while fostering inequality. In chapters 2, 3, and 4 Dickens highlights how institutions, which were meant to protect vulnerable children, had become systems of control and profit instead: child labour was normalized as both economic necessity and moral failure in the eyes of the ruling classes. Therefore, these chapters are pivotal: they introduce Oliver as a victim of structural neglect and set the tone for his struggle against a system that views children as dispensable labour.

An example of how people in poverty are challenged when they seek empowerment is Oliver Twist's famous request for more food. The prevailing social norm was that people in poverty should humbly and non-assertively accept what was given to them. Under a charity model, all power rests with the giver. Oliver's assertion is not exactly an act of empowerment on his part, in fact he is the new kid at the orphanage, skinny, starving, so after having eaten his gruel, he nudges forward Mr. Bumble and asks:

> “Please sir, I want some more." The master was a fat, healthy man; but he turned very pale. He gazed in stupified astonishment on the small rebel for some seconds; and then clung for support to the copper.The assistants were paralyzed with wonder; the boys with fear.
> "What!" said the master at length, in a faint voice.
> "Please sir," replied Oliver, "I want some more."

> The master aimed a blow at Oliver's head with the ladle; pinioned him in his arms; and shrieked aloud for the beadle." [3]

After this act of "rebellion", Oliver was ordered into instant confinement and put for sale as an apprentice. Dickens blasted the charity model, revealing the cruel oppression that can lie beneath the relationship between the giver and the hopelessness of the receiver. All of Dickens's works include the theme of the power differential between people of different socioeconomic classes (Andrews, 2012, p. 301).

Furthermore, in chapters 3 and 4 Dickens exposes the inhuman treatment of orphaned children under this system by illustrating how the parish is willing to sell Oliver to a known abuser for a reduced fee, revealing a system that values economic efficiency over child welfare; Oliver's desperate plea before the magistrate underscores his humanity and forces the first act of moral resistance within an otherwise indifferent bureaucracy:

> Oliver fells on his knees, and clasping his hands together prayed that they would order him back to the dark room, that they would starve him, beat him, kill him if they pleased, rather than send him away with that dreadful man (p.25)

In this case, Dickens used Oliver's story to protest against such institutional cruelty. According to Paul Schlicke, "the novel confronts the reader with the brutal truth about child labor, workhouses, and the false charity of the time" (Schlicke, 1985, p.44).

Another example of exploitation of children could be found in the chapters 5-7, when Dickens describes Oliver's condition when he is taken by Mr. Bumble to work for the undertaker. This decision taken by the workhouse board, after having discussed sending Oliver to sea as a cabin boy, fully aware that the harsh conditions would likely lead to his early death. Oliver is "given" to Mr. Sowerberry, a local undertaker, who offers to take him on as an apprentice. Mr. Bumble recommends Oliver as a suitable apprentice because of his small size and lack of other opportunities. So, Mr. Sowerberry agrees to take the child on, offering a small amount of money to the parish.

This chapter deepens the continued neglect and dehumanization Oliver faces, even outside the workhouse. The idea of sending a young boy to sea to die underscores the cruelty of the parish officials, who view the poor as disposable. Oliver's new role as an apprentice to an undertaker, a profession closely tied to death, symbolically reinforces the grim and lifeless environment in which he is forced to live. Mrs. Sowerberry's coldness and stinginess reflect the broader societal attitude toward the poor: even acts of "charity" come with cruelty and disdain.

[3] Dickens, Charles, *Oliver Twist* (1837-1839), published in series. Penguin classics, 2010, p.15, chapter 2. Further references to this edition will be given in the text.

At the Sowerberry home, Mrs. Sowerberry is immediately critical of Oliver, she is not welcoming, symbolizing the attitude of other social classes towards the poor, remarking on his small size and begrudging the cost of feeding him. She gives Oliver scraps of food for dinner that even the dog rejected, which he gratefully eats. Oliver's reaction to the leftover food, eating it as if it were a feast, emphasizes both his extreme deprivation and his resilience. The Chapter underscores the dehumanization of the poor, especially children, under the New Poor Law. The board's suggestion to sell Oliver to and undertaker before, and to send Oliver to sea after, highlights the cold utilitarianism of Victorian social policy, which viewed the impoverished as burdens better off dead.

In addition, Mrs. Sowerberry shows Oliver to a damp, dark cellar where he will sleep among the coffins. Despite the harsh conditions, Oliver is slightly better treated here than at the workhouse. He is given clothing (second-hand) and begins to adjust to his new, grim surroundings.

Indeed, sleeping in a coffin-filled cellar symbolizes how close he is to death, both literally and symbolically, and this is how Dickens portrays Oliver's feelings about death:

> he wished as he crept into his narrow bed, that that were his coffin, and that he could be lain in a calm and lasting sleep in the churchyard ground, with the tall grass waving gently above his head and the sound of the old deep bell to soothe him in his sleep. (Dickens, p.36).

This chapter sets the stage for Oliver's continued struggle and highlights the larger systemic failures that Dickens seeks to expose through the novel.

Oliver's transfer to the Sowerberrys further illustrates how poor children were commodified. Mr. Sowerberry is less interested in Oliver's welfare than in acquiring cheap labor, reflecting what Jordan calls "economic utilitarianism disguised as benevolence" of the Victorian middle class (Jordan, 2001, p.88). In his work, Dickens tries to reveal the complexities and contradictions of social reform narratives, questioning the effectiveness of moralizing stories and the true nature of charity.

The Victorian workhouses has symbolized systematic institutional cruelty driven by abstract economic principles. If we take into consideration the Poor Law amendment act of 1834, which established a central authority in order to supervise the poor laws, on one hand it aimed to reinforce the distinction between the "deserving" poor and the "undeserving" ones, as it suggested that one category was willing to work and the other wasn't. According to Jeremy Bentham's plan[4] , all impoverished individuals should fall under a single centralized authority, with relief provided solely upon entry into a workhouse. Consequently, the system required a substantial scale, as it was envisioned to eventually accommodate up to one million people. Dickens rejects any political management of the poor, on the contrary, he advocates for

[4] Jeremy Bentham's work on the poor laws focused on reforming the existing system by establishing a theoretical framework for providing relief to the poor while also addressing the perceived crisis in poor relief during the mid-1790s. He was a reformer but mainly known as a utilitarian philosopher.

a more natural, personal and human relationship between the classes; moreover, all people should be judged and treated according to their individual merit.

Nevertheless, Bentham and the ruling class did not agree with Dickens' perspective: they refused to acknowledge that any case is different from the other, treating everyone in the same economic conditions and circumstance as an indistinct part of a group. To be more precise, Bentham had considered his system as "true charity," by doing so he did allow the creation of an environment that enables and, in fact, compels the poor to be deserving, something a system that relies on individual judgment cannot do.

This idea emerges, in fact, in *Oliver Twist*: the majority of adults (less controlled than the poor people) tries to shape, or damagingly un-shape, Oliver's identity, and the identity of the other orphans, their lives have been already organized in every aspect, and therefore, they are trying to make this institution as charity (Stokes, 2001, pp. 711-714).

To sum up, Charles Dickens critiques the concept of charity as often misguided and ineffective. He emphasizes the importance of individual merit and humane treatment, suggesting that the institutional management of the poor, which is often associated with charity, can be inadequate and even harmful. In his works, Dickens portrays charity as something that should be more personal and compassionate, rather than an approach that fails to recognize the uniqueness of individuals. Dickens's critique suggests that the ruling class's approach to charity often lacks true understanding and connection with the poor, leading to a superficial and ineffective form of assistance. On the other hand, Dickens's work challenges the self-righteousness of the ruling class and questions the effectiveness of their social policies, advocating for a more compassionate and individualized approach to social issues.

On the whole, Charles Dickens critiques the ruling class through his portrayal of social institutions and the relationships between different classes. He often highlights the moral failings and insensitivity of the ruling class, contrasting their actions with the struggles of the poor; this topic will be discussed and analyzed in the following chapter.

2.1.2 The hypocrisy of the ruling class

Dickens masterfully "exposes the hollowness of middle-class morality" (Young, 1996, p. 507) by portraying how even private households replicate the same dynamics of exploitation as public institutions. The Sowerberrys cloak their motives in civility and religion, masking the exploitation of a child as a respectable act. The pretense of charity becomes a social tool used to maintain power and respectability while continuing to dehumanize those most in need.

From a different perspective, in Chapter 2, Dickens introduces the workhouse as a symbol of social control, not care. Born into poverty and instantly branded as a burden, Oliver is raised under the cold

auspices of the Parish authorities, the hypocrisy lies in the rhetoric of “Christian charity” used by the ruling class to justify these conditions. Mr. Bumble and Mrs. Mann, responsible for Oliver’s early care, embody this contradiction: they preach morality but pocket funds meant for the children's welfare and treat the orphans with neglect. Aminah (2018) highlights how Dickens “mirrors the social reality of the Victorian poor,” showing how workhouse’s officials maintained appearances of benevolence while systemically oppressing the poor; the goal was not reform but reinforcement of a class structure that preserved the comfort of the upper class by criminalizing poverty. In this way, Dickens critiques not just individuals, but the entire ideological apparatus that allowed such hypocrisy to flourish under legal sanction.

In Chapters 10 and 11, Oliver is living with Fagin and his gang of young pickpockets. One morning, while pretending to be asleep, Oliver sees Fagin admiring a hidden stash of stolen jewelry and watches. Disturbed by what he sees, Oliver begins to realize the criminal nature of his new surroundings. Fagin becomes paranoid when he notices Oliver watching, and although he tries to act kind, his threatening behavior frightens Oliver.

Later, the Artful Dodger and Charley Bates return, bragging about a successful pickpocketing. Fagin praises them, reinforcing their criminal lifestyle. He then tells Oliver he will soon join them. Over the next few days, Oliver is kept indoors to practice stealing. Eventually, he is sent out with Dodger and Charley for his first real attempt. During their outing, Oliver watches in shock as the boys steal a handkerchief from a wealthy man reading at a bookstall. When the man notices and sees Oliver running, he mistakenly believes Oliver is the thief and raises the alarm. Dodger and Charley join in the chase, shouting “Stop thief!”. A crowd forms, and Oliver is caught by a policeman despite his protests. At the police station, Mr. Brownlow, that the readers discover to be the man who was robbed, says he doesn’t want to press charges and feels something familiar about Oliver. In court, Oliver faints from exhaustion, but the judge still sentences him to three months of hard labor. Just in time, the bookseller arrives and confirms that two other boys committed the theft. Oliver is cleared, and Mr. Brownlow, moved by the boy’s condition, takes him home.

Mr. Brownlow and the events related to the theft could be considered as a sort of turning point of the story. In this case, the wealthy man does not represent a negative example, but on the contrary, he shows compassion and understanding towards Oliver.

In fact, after being chased by a huge crowd, when Oliver has hurt himself, covered with mud and dust, and bleeding from the mouth, the gentleman says “Poor fellow, he has hurt himself”, and then when the officer tears Oliver’s jacket to bring him to the police magistrate, Mr. Brownlow says “- Don’t hurt him - said the old gentleman, compassionately” (Dickens, p.81). For Dickens, “instinctive compassion and selfless benevolence are natural to man”, the impulse toward compassion is clearly present; however, circumstances often threaten to weaken or undermine its power. When Oliver, having “fallen

among robbers" with the help of a bad Samaritan (Fagin), is finally rescued by Mr. Brownlow, who notably has a picture of the "Good Samaritan" hanging above his fireplace, his greatest fear is not punishment, but that this new benefactor might cast him out, leaving him once again to wander the streets, or worse, return him to that "wretched place".

The narrative highlights the instinctive, selfless compassion that characters like Mr. Brownlow exhibit, which is essential for human connection and moral integrity. This compassion is often evoked in response to the suffering of others, as seen in the parable of the Good Samaritan, a compassion or a behavior that the entire Victorian society should display. (Patten, 1969, p.209). Dickens illustrates that the successful transformations in the story occur when characters move from a mindset of calculation and self-interest to one of compassion and care for others.

Dickens employs satire to dismantle the self-image of the ruling class. Characters like Mr. Bumble are drawn with comic exaggeration, but their absurdity underscores real dangers. Bumble's pompous speech and obsession with appearances contrast sharply with his cowardice and greed. When Bumble declares that "the law is a ass, a idiot," it is not only ironic but revealing: the very agents of the law acknowledge its inadequacy but continue to enforce it when it suits their interest (Dickens, p.461). This duality lies at the heart of Dickens's social critique. He doesn't merely expose suffering, he lays bare the mechanisms by which the powerful justify it. By placing Oliver, an innocent child, at the mercy of these systems, Dickens removes any excuse for their mistreatment. The institutions' inability to recognize Oliver's basic humanity reflects a broader societal blindness to the dignity of the poor. The move from the workhouse to the undertaker's service highlights how the system merely shifts the suffering of children from one place to another, rather than addressing their needs. Oliver is essentially sold from one form of servitude to another. His labor is treated as a commodity, and no real concern is shown for his well-being, on the contrary his being transferred from a place to another is to be considered a way to get rid of responsibility, not as an act of charity.

Despite having a respectable "façade", Victorian society also had to face the consequences of poverty especially among the youngest; in fact, in the novel Dickens portrays boys in the criminal underworld, emphasizing their vulnerability and the dangers they face. Oliver's innocence is portrayed as both a strength and a vulnerability, making him a target for exploitation. The narrative tension arises from the interplay between his innocence and the corrupt world around him, which includes the potential for sexual exploitation (Wolff, 1996, p. 247).

Indeed, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, children in Britain could still be executed for theft. In 1808, Parliament abolished death penalty for the crime of pickpocketing, marking the beginning of a gradual reduction in capital offenses for both children and adults. Between 1808 and 1837, the list of crimes punishable by death was progressively narrowed. From 1815, the issue of juvenile crime and

punishment became a subject of public concern, notably addressed by the Society for Investigating the Causes of the Alarming Increase of Juvenile Delinquency in the Metropolis.

By the 1830s, the decade in which *Oliver Twist* was published, children who committed theft were more commonly punished with imprisonment or transportation rather than execution. In 1837, the Commissioners on Criminal Law stated that "it would not be advisable to make any distinction in the mode of trial between adult and juvenile offenders" (Shannon, 1971). However, a year later, in 1838, Parliament established Parkhurst Prison as a separate penal institution specifically for juvenile offenders.

The movement toward reform continued with Mary Carpenter's influential 1851 publication *Reformatory Schools for the Children of the Perishing and Dangerous Classes and for Juvenile Offenders,* in which she advocated for educational institutions rather than prisons as the appropriate response to juvenile delinquency. Although a general shift toward recognizing the mitigating circumstances of youth in criminal punishment was evident, the legal system continued to rely on fixed age-based criteria to determine a child's criminal responsibility (Wolff, 1996, pp. 242-243).

Moreover, the opening chapters of *Oliver Twist*, set in the unnamed town where Oliver is born, offer a pointed critique of those responsible for the New Poor Laws, as well as those who justify, implement, and profit from them. Dickens also condemns the passive bystanders who, though not directly complicit, fail to intervene or alleviate the suffering of the poor. This section of the novel delivers its social criticism through dark comedy, sharp and ironic rather than overtly humorous, due to the grim nature of the subject and Dickens's overtly moralizing tone. The targets of his satire include figures such as the ironically named Mrs. Mann, who lacks all maternal qualities and literally deprives the children in her care of nourishment. Similarly, the workhouse cook is portrayed as grotesquely well-fed and shocked by Oliver's simple plea for "more," while the Sowerberrys, undertakers who profit from pauper deaths, complain when the bodies are not thin enough to save on wood for coffins. Mr. Gamfield, the chimney sweep, cheerfully describes how he lights fires beneath boys to force them up chimneys more quickly, and the "gentleman in the white waistcoat" a member of the parish board, advocates harsh treatment of Oliver while dressing in the symbolic color of moral purity.

Through these characters, Dickens exposes the many faces of human weakness, greed, and cruelty. Crucially, he presents such behavior as fundamentally at odds with Christian values. This dissonance is underscored by figures like Mr. Bumble, the beadle, whose repeated and pompous use of the word "porochial", a deliberate misspelling that signals both mispronunciation and misunderstanding, ironically emphasizes the gap between the Church's supposed moral mission and its real-world failings (Meyer, 2005, p. 242).

Moreover, Dickens places significant emphasis on Mr. Bumble's use of the word "porochial," reminding readers that what the Poor Laws had turned into a burdensome legal obligation was

originally understood as an expression of Christian charity, both at the level of the Church and of individual believers. This linguistic detail may also subtly recall that the Royal Commission that investigated the Poor Laws in 1832, leading to the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, was chaired by the Bishop of London.

Although Dickens does not explicitly condemn the Church for its complicity in the new system, Mr. Bumble's language implicitly links religious institutions to a harsh and inadequate form of state charity. The failure Dickens highlights is thus not merely individual but institutional: a moral breakdown shared by persons and structures alike. His satire in these early chapters is deliberately unsubtle, but it deserves attention, as it frames the moral landscape into which the figure of Fagin, a Jewish character, will later emerge. The gap between Christian ideals and actual practice is further emphasized when one of the board members questions Oliver after his removal from the baby farm, asking: "I hope you say your prayers every night... and pray for the people who feed you, and take care of you, like a Christian" (p. 25). Dickens then comments, with sharp irony: "It would have been very like a Christian, and a marvelously good Christian, too, if Oliver had prayed for the people who fed and took care of him. But he hadn't, because nobody had taught him″ (p.25). Here, the failure is not Oliver's, but the board's figures who fail not only in their duty to meet his basic needs, but also in their religious and moral responsibilities. The only form of religious instruction Oliver receives occurs when he is punished for asking for more food. Locked in solitary confinement, he is subjected to nightly prayers where the boys ask to be made *"good, virtuous, contented, and obedient,"* and to be *"guarded from the sins and vices of Oliver Twist"* (p. 30). The irony is scathing: Christian instruction here becomes a tool of exclusion and moral scapegoating, rather than a source of compassion and guidance (Meyer, 2005, pp. 242-243).

In conclusion, the main point Dickens makes against the ruling class in *Oliver Twist* is a critique of their behavior towards the poor. He emphasizes the failures of English society, particularly those in power, to provide for the needy and to act with mercy and benevolence. The novel ultimately calls for a recognition of the humanity of the impoverished and critiques the systemic injustices perpetuated by the ruling class. This critique is expanded throughout the narrative, as Dickens illustrates how the Poor Laws and the actions of the workhouse officials reflect a broader societal failure to uphold Christian values in the treatment of the vulnerable. The portrayal of Fagin serves as a foil to the Christian ideals that Dickens advocates, suggesting that the neglect and mistreatment of the poor by ruling class are fundamentally at odds with the principles of true Christianity.

2.1.3 *Poverty and social injustice in* Oliver Twist

Lastly, the novel also explores the themes of poverty, the corrupting influence of social structures and the consequences of social injustice. The novel reflects the cultural anxieties of the Victorian era, social

issues that Dickens navigates carefully, allowing for a critique of societal norms while maintaining a focus on the innocence of children. Having discussed previously the role of workhouses as a direct outcome of the Poor Law, this chapter shifts the focus to examine how the legislation engaged with issues of poverty and social injustice. Drawing primarily on *Oliver Twist* from a literary perspective, the analysis explores how Dickens's portrayal reflects and critiques the social assumptions embedded in the law, revealing the moral and structural failures of the system in addressing the needs of the poor.

Dickens took an ideological interest in the innocence of childhood; Oliver's innocence contrasts with the institutionalized cruelty of the workhouse and the criminal corruption of the urban pickpockets.

The story of Oliver Twist can therefore be interpreted as a powerful critique of the New Poor Law, as it raises awareness of its harshness and influences public opinion and contemporary debates on social reform by vividly portraying the suffering and dehumanization endured by those forced to depend on it (Roberts, 1963, pp.97-100).

In Chapter 4, Dickens shifts Oliver into the Sowerberry household, where he is apprenticed as an undertaker's assistant. On the surface, this appears to be a charitable act, a boy given a trade and a roof over his head. However, the Sowerberrys' motives are far from altruistic. They exploit Oliver's labor and treat him with the same contempt shown by the parish authorities. The Sowerberrys feed Oliver poorly, verbally abuse him, and use him for profit. Mr. Sowerberry chooses Oliver for funeral work specifically because of his small size and pale appearance, remarking that he will look "natural" in mourning processions. This dark irony underlines the economic value of poverty within a classist society.

Furthermore, Oliver is seen as a "body" to be fed and used, not as a child with emotions. On the contrary, Oliver does have emotions: he experiences once again loneliness, sadness and grief: "the boy had no friends to care for or to care for him, [..] the absence of no loved and well-remembered face sank heavily into his heart" (Dickens, p.36).

In fact, *The Times* printed many stories of the new poor law's cruelties, it denounced that workhouses became the central policy of the commissioners created by the new poor law, which according to its critics, were the main sources of cruelty

One of the cruelest features of workhouses wasn't floggings and confinement but insufficient diet: as mentioned in the novel, Oliver eats *"three meals of gruel a day with an onion twice a week and half a roll on Sundays"* and it wasn't a caricature or an exaggeration of Dickens: as discussed in *The Times* (27 February 1837), some poor had to face "meals consisting of a pennyweight of cheese, a solitary mouthful of beef and a potato pared down to an exact ounce".

The cruelties inflicted within the workhouses represented only one aspect of the severity introduced by the New Poor Law. Suffering extended far beyond the walls of these institutions. As Dickens poignantly observed, if the only alternatives were "being starved by a gradual process in the house or

by a quick one out of it," many chose to beg, steal, or simply die in a state of destitution. (Roberts, 1963, pp. 98-99)

Among the various categories affected by social injustice, illegitimate children were perhaps the most marginalized, as vividly illustrated in Dickens's novel. According to Susan Zlotnick (2006), *Oliver Twist* offers a serious critique of what she terms "bachelor law", a legal system shaped by institutional assumptions that often ignore the realities of those it governs. In the novel Dickens offers primarily his critique of the New Poor Law and of the concept of bastardy. In the final melodramatic moments of *Oliver Twist*, Mr. Bumble, the beadle and a representative of the Poor Law system, is revealed to have played a role in concealing Oliver's true identity and inheritance. When confronted, he tries to blame his wife for the wrongdoing. However, Mr. Brownlow refuses to accept this excuse, citing the legal principle that a husband is held more responsible for his wife's actions because, according to the law, she is presumed to act under his authority. Brownlow declares, "in the eye of the law... the husband is the more guilty of the two... for the law supposes that his wife acts under his direction" (Dickens, p. 335). This moment highlights the disconnection between the legal system's assumptions and the reality of Mr. Bumble's domestic life. Though he once embodied petty authority and control as a public official, he is clearly dominated by his wife at home. Humiliated and frustrated, he responds with these words: "If that's the eye of the law, the law's a bachelor.*"* Susan Zlotnick argues that the moment carries deeper significance: the novel critiques the New Poor Law's "bastardy" clause, which placed the financial burden of illegitimate children solely on the mother, effectively making the law a "bachelor" by relieving men of responsibility. This shift was intended to reduce out-of-wedlock births but instead exacerbated the plight of poor women (p. 131). Oliver Twist is depicted as a "bastard" whose mother dies in a workhouse. His journey to discover his true parentage challenges the bastardy clause by ultimately naming his father, which contrasts with the law's intent to erase paternal responsibility.

In addition, the novel portrays the struggles of unwed mothers and the corrupting influence of aristocratic libertines. (p. 132); in line with many critics of the revised Poor Laws, Dickens employs the popular conventions of melodrama to express his opposition to these policies. One particularly contested element, the so-called "bastardy clause", proved especially vulnerable to melodramatic reinterpretation. Through this lens, the figure of the poor, unwed mother is recast not as morally deviant, but as an innocent young woman, seduced and abandoned by an upper-class man. As a result, melodrama reframes the bastardy clause as part of an "aristocratic plot to ease the seduction of poor women". This narrative framework is clearly echoed in the backstory of Oliver's parents, which draws on such tropes to critique both the legal and moral assumptions underpinning the Poor Law. This narrative strategy highlights the innocence of women like Oliver's mother while critiquing the societal structures that condemn them. The text explores how the New Poor Law debates were intertwined with gender issues, particularly

the moral judgment placed on women. It suggests that the law's classification of individuals based on moral failings ignores the broader economic realities faced by the poor (p. 132).

The female characters in *Oliver Twist*, such as Agnes and Nancy, are portrayed with complexity, reflecting both sympathy and moral judgment. This duality illustrates the conflicting societal views on women's roles and responsibilities.

Lastly, another important social critique is carried out by Dickens, through the character of Fagin, in order to challenge readers to reflect on their own moral responsibilities and the true essence of Christianity, which he associates with mercy and benevolence towards the poor.

The narrative suggests that the real moral failures lie not with the marginalized but with those who profess to be virtuous while neglecting their duties to help others; Dickens uses the character of Fagin, a Jewish figure, to explore themes of social marginalization and injustice along with the complexities of morality. Moreover, he criticizes what he represents as un-Christian in the behavior of the English classes in the Victorian age towards the poor. Therefore, the non-Christian Fagin is introduced.

Joseph Gold (1972) discusses the role of Christianity in *Oliver Twist* in relation to the antisemitic portrayal of Fagin. He observes that "Fagin is used for satiric counterpoint as a non-Christian"; however, Dickens's distrust of vulgarity and financial dishonesty was part of a broader criticism of Victorian society and its so-called Christian values, in which anti-Jewish sentiment was simply not involved.

Dickens uses the Jewish character as a corrective figure meant to instruct and reform English Christians, in order to eliminate social injustice. Through a deliberate use of antisemitic rhetoric, he directs his audience toward what he presents as true Christianity, defined by compassion and kindness toward the poor.

Fagin is depicted as a villain, he's diabolical, an evil corrupter of children and a poisoner, he is scheming, miserly, dishonest, and willing to turn his associates in to be hanged when it is to his advantage to do so. Fagin is also described as a thief, a pimp, a corrupt individual who shelters and trains homeless children for criminal activities.

On the other hand, in Dickens' view Fagin also provides a sense of community and care for Oliver, contrasting sharply with the cruelty exhibited by the so-called "Christian" characters in the early chapters of the novel. This juxtaposition serves as a critique of the moral failings of the society that claims to uphold Christian values (Meyer, 2005, p. 244).

Consequently, by the end of the novel, Fagin (who symbolically embodies the absence of Christianity) is executed, clearing the way for a vision of a morally renewed England. This vision takes shape in the peaceful village to which Oliver, Mr. Brownlow, and the Maylies withdraw, with the church placed firmly at its moral center (Meyer, 2005, p. 241).

In conclusion, *Oliver Twist* presents a compelling critique of the social and institutional injustices that shaped Victorian England. Through vivid depictions of poverty, the failures of the New Poor Law, and the moral hypocrisy of those in power, Dickens exposes the dehumanizing effects of a system that neglected the vulnerable under the guise of Christian charity. Moreover, Dickens's use of melodrama and satire allows him to challenge prevailing attitudes towards illegitimacy, gender roles, and religious morality, particularly through figures like Nancy, Agnes, and Mr. Bumble. The inclusion of Fagin as a Jewish outsider further complicates the novel's moral landscape. While steeped in antisemitic tropes, Fagin paradoxically offers a form of twisted care and structure absent in supposedly Christian settings, highlighting the deep contradictions in Victorian values. Ultimately, by contrasting institutional cruelty with ideals of mercy, compassion, and true Christian virtue, Dickens envisions a reformed society grounded in moral responsibility, one where the church, as symbolized in the novel's final scenes, reclaims its role as a source of ethical guidance and communal care.

2.2 Hard Times and the critique of the Dehumanization of Labour

Hard Times was published in 1854, and it is a powerful social critique set in "Coketown", a fictional industrial town. Dickens explores the harsh realities of Victorian England during the industrial revolution, focusing on the dehumanizing effects of utilitarianism and the rigid education system.

The novel focuses on the story of Thomas Gradgrind, a wealthy, retired merchant, who devotes his life to a philosophy of rationalism, self-interest, and fact. He raises his oldest children, Louisa and Tom, according to this philosophy and never allows them to engage in imaginative pursuits. He founds a school and charitably takes in one of the students, the kindly and imaginative Sissy Jupe, after the disappearance of her father, a circus entertainer.

As the Gradgrind children grow older, Tom becomes a dissipated, self-interested hedonist, and Louisa struggles with deep inner confusion, feeling as though she is missing something important in her life. Eventually Louisa marries Gradgrind's friend Bounderby, a wealthy factory owner and banker more than twice her age. Bounderby continually trumpets his role as a self-made man who was abandoned in the gutter by his mother as an infant. Tom is apprenticed at the Bounderby bank, and Sissy remains at the Gradgrind home to care for the younger children.

In the meantime, an impoverished "Hand"[5], Stephen Blackpool, struggles with his love for Rachael, another poor factory worker. He is unable to marry her because he is already married to a horrible, drunken woman who disappears for months and even years at a time. Stephen visits Bounderby to ask about a divorce but learns that only the wealthy can obtain it. Outside Bounderby's home, he meets Mrs. Pegler, a strange old woman with an inexplicable devotion to Bounderby.

[5] Dickens's term for the lowest laborers in Coketown's factories

James Harthouse, a wealthy sophisticate young man from London, arrives in Coketown to begin a political career as a disciple of Gradgrind, who is now a Member of Parliament. He immediately takes an interest in Louisa and decides to try to seduce her. With the unspoken aid of Mrs. Sparsit, a former aristocrat who has fallen on hard times and now works for Bounderby, he sets about trying to corrupt Louisa.

The "Hands", exhorted by a crooked union spokesman named Slackbridge, try to form a union. Only Stephen refuses to join because he feels that a union strike would only increase tensions between employers and employees. He is cast out by the other "Hands" and fired by Bounderby when he refuses to spy on them. Louisa, impressed with Stephen's integrity, visits him before he leaves Coketown and helps him with some money. Tom accompanies her and tells Stephen that if he waits outside the bank for several consecutive nights, help will come to him. Stephen does so, but no help arrives. Eventually he packs up and leaves Coketown, hoping to find agricultural work in the country. Not long after that, the bank is robbed, and the lone suspect is Stephen, the vanished Hand who was seen loitering outside the bank for several nights just before disappearing from the city.

Mrs. Sparsit witnesses Harthouse declaring his love for Louisa, and Louisa agrees to meet him in Coketown later that night. However, Louisa instead flees to her father's house, where she miserably confides to Gradgrind that her upbringing has left her married to a man she does not love, disconnected from her feelings, deeply unhappy, and possibly in love with Harthouse. She collapses to the floor, and Gradgrind, struck dumb with self-reproach, begins to realize the imperfections in his philosophy of rational self-interest.

Sissy, who loves Louisa deeply, visits Harthouse and convinces him to leave Coketown forever. Bounderby, furious that his wife has left him, redoubles his efforts to capture Stephen. When Stephen tries to return to clear his good name, he falls into a mining pit called Old Hell Shaft. Rachael and Louisa discover him, but he dies soon after an emotional farewell to Rachael. Gradgrind and Louisa realize that Tom is really responsible for robbing the bank, and they arrange to sneak him out of England with the help of the circus performers with whom Sissy spent her early childhood. They are nearly successful, but are stopped by Bitzer, a young man who went to Gradgrind's school and who embodies all the qualities of the detached rationalism that Gradgrind once espoused, but who now sees as limited. Cleary, the lisping circus proprietor, arranges for Tom to slip out of Bitzer's grasp, and the young robber escapes from England after all.

Mrs. Sparsit, anxious to help Bounderby find the robbers, drags Mrs. Pegler, a known associate of Stephen Blackpool, in to see Bounderby, thinking Mrs. Pegler is a potential witness. Bounderby recoils, and it is revealed that Mrs. Pegler is really his loving mother, whom he has forbidden to visit him: Bounderby is not a self-made man after all. Angrily, Bounderby fires Mrs. Sparsit and sends her away to her hostile relatives. Five years later, he will die alone in the streets of Coketown. Gradgrind gives

up his philosophy of fact and devotes his political power to helping the poor. Tom realizes the error of his ways but dies without ever seeing his family again. While Sissy marries and has a large and loving family, Louisa never again marries and never has children. Nevertheless, Louisa is loved by Sissy's family and learns at last how to feel sympathy for her fellow human beings.

Hard Times is Charles Dickens's most overtly political novel. It serves as a sharp critique of the dominant ideologies of Victorian England, especially utilitarianism, industrial capitalism, and the rigid education system. Through its tightly constructed narrative and symbolic characters, Dickens portrays a society driven by "facts" and profit, rather than compassion and moral imagination. Therefore, Coketown becomes a microcosm of the dehumanizing effects of mechanized labor, rationalist philosophy, and class inequality, capturing the physical and psychological costs of the Industrial Revolution.

At the heart of the novel is Thomas Gradgrind, a staunch advocate of utilitarianism and rational self-interest. He raises his children, Louisa and Tom, within a strict framework of factual thinking, completely suppressing imagination and emotion. Dickens uses Gradgrind's household and educational model to satirize the prevailing educational philosophy of his time, which prioritized rote learning over personal development. As the narrative progresses, the emotional consequences of this upbringing become tragically clear: Louisa suffers from emotional repression and existential confusion, while Tom becomes selfish and morally bankrupt.

Gradgrind's eventual crisis of conscience represents a larger reckoning with the failure of utilitarian ideals to produce ethical or empathetic human beings. The novel culminates in a series of moral reversals and revelations: Bounderby is exposed as a fraud, Gradgrind renounces his rigid philosophy, and Tom is forced into exile after committing a crime. These narrative turns reflect Dickens's belief in personal redemption and social responsibility, even within a deeply flawed system. Though not all characters find happiness, Louisa, for instance, remains unmarried and childless, there is a sense of moral clarity by the novel's end. Sissy, who embodies the values Dickens champions, creates a loving home and provides the emotional nourishment that Coketown's philosophy of "fact" failed to deliver.

Ultimately, *Hard Times* stands as a compelling argument against the mechanization of human life and a plea for empathy, imagination, and moral conscience in the face of industrial modernity.

2.2.1 Condition of workers in the industrial city of Coketown.

In *Hard Times*, Charles Dickens offers a powerful critique of industrial society by focusing on the condition of workers in the fictional town of Coketown, a mill-town polarized between the industrialists on one side and working-class men on the other. Through vivid descriptions and deeply symbolic characters, Dickens exposes the harsh realities faced by the working class during the height of the

Industrial Revolution. The workers, often referred to simply as "the Hands," are presented not as individuals with personal identities, but as a faceless mass, a reflection of how industrial capitalism reduces human beings to mere instruments of labor. This depersonalization is central to Dickens's critique: the system is shown to prioritize productivity and economic efficiency at the expense of humanity.

The novel does not only depict the antagonism of the laboring class and the industrialist class, but delineates a cultural model where Gradgrind's utilitarianism and Bounderby factories create a discipline and a pattern that influence and regulate the lives of Coketown's population. In Coketown Bounderby's textile mills and Gradgrind's school do more than assign individuals their roles within the Victorian social order. They function as mechanisms of what Michel Foucault (1975) terms a "disciplinary society" (p. 183), aiming to reshape the self into a "docile" body, one that becomes an extension of institutional control (pp. 136–137).

While class-based economic oppression remains central to the condition of Coketown's working class, Dickens highlights how the city's educational, industrial, and governmental systems collectively impose a regime of discipline and normalization. In this sense, *Hard Times* interrogates the cultural construction of identity, exploring how personalities are formed, constrained, and possibly resisted. The novel raises critical questions about the possibility of maintaining personal authenticity and moral agency in a society dominated by utilitarian logic and institutional conformity, embodied in spaces such as factories, workhouses, and mechanized schools.

However, the ideological structure of *Hard Times* remains deeply polarized. Even in scenes that emphasize the "antagonism of classes", such as Slackbridge's address to the workers of Coketown, there is no suggestion of an actual revolutionary challenge to the Bounderby-Gradgrind system. While the narrative appears at times to give voice to opposition, this dissent is ultimately weakened by the novel's implicit acceptance of the existing social order. (Stiltner, 2001, pp. 193-194).

Moreover, Dickens was able to discuss the oppressive environment in his novel trough the description of Coketown's industrial landscape and its impact on the workers.

In this environment, workers exist in a tireless present, they travel identical streets with some other people who not surprisingly have the same identical routines. Therefore, they are "forced" to live in an oppressive environment: in the novel the oppressive nature of the factories is further emphasized by the portrayal of Stephen Blackpool, who actually could be a representation of the plight of the Coketown workers; his existence is characterized by a loss of individuality, as he is valued merely as "Steam Power" by the mill owners (Stiltner, 2001, p. 197).

Coketown itself is portrayed as a bleak and oppressive environment, where the air is thick with smoke and the streets are lined with monotonous, identical buildings. Dickens's descriptions of the town emphasize its lifeless uniformity, suggesting a world in which both the physical landscape and the

people have been shaped by industry. The pollution and environmental degradation are not merely aesthetic concerns, they symbolize the moral and social decay brought about by unchecked industrial growth. Workers operate in dangerous and unhealthy conditions, with little regard for their physical well-being or quality of life.

> It was a town of red brick, or of brick that would have been red if the smoke and ashes had allowed it; but as matters stood it was a town of unnatural red and black like the painted face of a savage. It was a town of machinery and tall chimneys, out of which interminable serpents of smoke trailed themselves for ever and ever, and never got uncoiled. It had a black canal in it, and a river that ran purple with ill-smelling dye, and vast piles of building full of windows where there was a vast rattling and a trembling all day long, and where the piston of the steam-engine worked monotonously up and down like the head of an elephant in a state of melancholy madness. It contained several large streets all very like one another, and many small streets still more like one another, inhabited by people equally like one another, who all went in and out at the same hours, with the same sound upon the same pavements, to do the same work, and to whom every day was the same as yesterday and to-morrow, and every year the counterpart of the last and the next Fact, fact, fact, everywhere in the material aspect of the town; fact, fact, fact, everywhere in the immaterial. The M'Choakumchild school was all fact, and the school of design was all fact, and the relations between master and man were all fact, and everything was fact between the lying-in hospital and the cemetery, and what you couldn't state in figures, or show to be purchaseable in the cheapest market and saleable in the dearest, was not, and never should be, world without end, amen. [6]

With these words, Dickens describes the city by exaggerating many of its negative aspects: relying on repetition, parallelism, and hyperbole, he was able to create a dystopic city where all the buildings looked exactly alike and every aspect of everyday life was controlled by the principle of political economy.

Starting from the choice of the name of the city, Coketown, Dickens sought to draw certain conclusions regarding urban and social development, highlighting its negative aspects. Firstly, “coke” refers to a solid black substance, a fuel, referring both to the material that stokes the furnaces and the waste product remaining after the transformative process[7]; secondly, it derives from the word “colk” which means core, which also refers to material that was burned as fuel, so it is "the hard core of the coal left after other parts have been consumed"[8].

Thus, by choosing this name, Dickens wanted to underline the fact that the city has founded its true nature on this core-process of fuel consumption. Therefore, the name suggests both the industrial process, the environmental impact and the social consequences: on one hand the city founds its outer

[6] Dickens, Charles, *Hard Times* (1854), Penguin classics, 2010, p.20, chapter V. Further references to this edition will be given in the text

[7] Collins dictionary

[8] According to the OED, Coke is a north-country word, deriving from colk.

structure on this process, but on the other, the real fuel, the true “coke” that is consumed is human life. (Johnson, 1989, p.130)

Coketown, Dickens tells us, is a town of red bricks, a town of machinery and tall chimneys, filled with vast piles of buildings full of windows, where the piston of the steam engine worked monotonously up and down. Specifically, Dickens’s distinctive emphasis on the repetitive structure of the factory within every aspect of life in Coketown has frequently been interpreted as a critique of the monotonous nature of factory labor and the alienating mechanisms of industrial production.

However, the metaphor of the replicated factory structure carries further symbolic weight. The square red-brick walls, perhaps the most visible representation of the factory, are reinforced and sustained by the institutions of the upper and middle classes, including religion, medicine, law, education, and politics. Churches, hospitals, prisons, schools, and even the rigid features of Mr. Gradgrind’s face “square wall of a forehead” (p. 17) all mirror the external appearance of the factory's architecture.

They enclose what Dickens describes as the “rattle of life,” echoing the mechanical operation of pistons, while the only outward signs of internal activity are the "interminable serpents of smoke," which suggest the ongoing consumption of fuel. (Johnson, 1989, p. 130)

With this description, Dickens does not focus on the pollution, the labyrinthine slums, or the bustling streets typical of the industrial city, instead, he abstracts its essential structure, what he refers to as its "keynote" fact, emphasizing not the surface manifestations but the underlying principle. He metaphorically embodies this idea in the very shape of the factory, a structure whose name echoes the sound of the word "fact.”

In the novel Dickens asks: "A town so sacred to fact, and so triumphant in its assertion, of course got on well?" and answers, "No. Coketown did not come out of its own furnaces, in all respects like gold that had stood the fire" (pp. 17-18).

Furthermore, *fact* is the foundation of all possible aspects of society, both the material (buildings, school, cemetery) and the immaterial (government, health, community, education, workplace, and even religion). In a few sentences, Dickens has dramatically named and demonized the root cause of England's problems. But a polemical method, while memorable, has the disadvantage that obvious exaggeration makes the novel easier for hostile readers to dismiss (Schaub, 2013, pp. 187-188).

Having established the outer structure on “*fact”* that the factory symbolizes, the novel aims to expose and describe the processes that the factory has been trying to hide.

The shape of *Hard Times* itself as a work of fiction reproduces the architectural design of the factory, composed of both an external framework and an internal core, the metaphorical "fuel" that drives the system. The first seven and final three chapters of the novel focus on this social and political framework, primarily through the story of Mr. Gradgrind. Like the square red brick walls that encase the inner workings of the factory, this narrative framework is the most immediately visible aspect of

the novel and appears almost detachable from its deeper core: regardless of what changes are made in the framework, as long as that structure remains intact, the broader system is preserved.

The novel suggests that it is only within this outer framework, both literary and social, that change can occur. The framework can absorb, accommodate, and even be reinforced by reform, provided such change remains disconnected from the novel's core and from the fundamental mechanisms of production and reproduction. Neither Gradgrind nor the circus can redeem or restore the lives of characters like Louisa or Stephen Blackpool. Gradgrind succeeds only in preserving and extending the life of his son Tom and, symbolically, his own legacy, by retreating further from the system's core. Thus, the novel implies that even humanistic reform, far from dismantling the industrial-capitalist structure, may serve to sustain it. Despite such moral transformation, the overarching framework of both the novel and society remains firmly in place, while the underlying dynamics of capitalist industrial production are untouched (Johnson, 1989, pp. 131-132).

Additionally, *Hard Times* is structured into three books titled "Sowing," "Reaping," and "Garnering." These "agricultural" metaphors reinforce the novel's central theme and highlight what may be considered its moral and structural core: by invoking the natural processes of growth and harvest, Dickens implicitly critiques the artificial and dehumanizing modes of production associated with the industrial factory system. This contrast between organic development and mechanical productivity serves to emphasize the broader social and ethical consequences of industrialization, especially at the expense of the working-class people.

In the setting of Coketown, Dickens draw attention to the miserable conditions of industrial workers through the character of Stephen Blackpool: his character serves as a critique of the industrial system and its impact on individual lives especially on the working-class man.

In chapter 10 his character is presented, he belongs to the category of the "Hands" described in the novel as "a race who would have found more favour with some people, if Providence had seen fit to make them only hands, or, like the lower creatures of the seashore, only hands and stomachs" (p. 56). Stephen is an honest and dignified man, yet he is treated unjustly by both the industrial system and by those who claim to speak for the workers. He serves as a voice for the working class, yet his character also illustrates the broader theme of difficulties in understanding the lives of industrial workers. His perspective is important as he articulates struggles and confusion of the working class: he states "deed we are in a muddle" (p. 109), which reflects the complexities and challenges faced by the workers and the "impossibilities" to overcome the established industrial system.

His attempt to improve his circumstances, including his desire to divorce his alcoholic wife and his refusal to blindly follow the trade union, ends in tragedy. Stephen's death in a collapsed mine shaft, after being falsely accused of theft, serves as a grim metaphor for the crushing weight of the industrial system on the individual (Spector, 1984, p. 375).

To be more specific, the life of workers in the novel is described as lifeless and monotonous. As previously mentioned, Stephen Blackpool embodies both the working-class man and Victorian class virtues such industry, honesty and self-denial, but most importantly, he lacks vitality and individuality: he is depicted as a docile figure who cannot articulate a solution to his plight, illustrating the powerlessness of workers within the oppressive structures of society. The general existence of workers is dull, they are expected to be violent and unthinking, similar to the machine they operate. Moreover, the narrative indicates that the workers are "equally like one another", since they are absorbed in an environment which ultimately fails to capture their individuality and complexity (Spector, 1984, p. 365). In addition, Dickens underlines the concept that workers' life reflects a grim reality, where oppression and conformity within a rigid industrial society is dominant: while industrialists preach self-reliance and meritocracy, they simultaneously exploit workers and deny them the opportunities they falsely claim to provide. There is no meaningful protection for laborers, and any attempt to seek justice or fair treatment is met with indifference. Mr. Bounderby, for example, represents the hypocrisy and moral emptiness of the Victorian industrial elite, especially for the dehumanizing effects of industrial capitalism, the exploitation and lack of empathy for the working class and the false narrative of meritocracy.

Indeed, the workers in Coketown are portrayed as collective, lacking individuality and their depiction emphasizes their struggles against a backdrop of industrialization and the disciplinary forces that seek to control their lives. The imagery of workers as non-human pervades the novel, underlying the concept of uniformity and, at a deeper level, dehumanization. The *Hands* are "manipulated", "shaped" and "trained", by the industrialist society, therefore, workers exist in a tireless present, they walk along identical streets, and they all have identical routines of "direful uniformity" (p. 69), they are not individuals but machines that work in a given space and time. The narrative highlights the alienation of workers from their labor: they are characterized as quiet servants with regulated actions, reflecting a life of direful uniformity where any hope for a better existence is "utterly driven out of their souls" (Stiltner, 2001, pp. 194-195).

Moreover, the institutions in Coketown, factories and schools, serve as agents of a "disciplinary" society that seeks to mold individuals into docile bodies. The workers are subjected to a routine that strips them of personal aspiration and reduces them to mere components of the industrial machine.

Dickens's portrayal of the industrial working class has long been subject to critical debate. Some critics argue that he lacked the lived experience necessary to authentically represent factory life. George Gissing (1903), for instance, dismissed Stephen Blackpool as "a mere model of meekness" (p. 201) and claimed that Dickens was ill-equipped to portray the working class (202). Similarly, Louis Cazamian (1973) argued that the depiction of factory life appears only as "brief interludes" and that Coketown itself is painted in overly broad strokes (p. 168). Humphry House (1941) echoed this view,

suggesting that the novel falters because it deals with people and conditions outside Dickens's personal experience (pp. 203–204).

These criticisms often trace the novel's origins to Dickens's brief 1854 visit to the industrial North, specifically Preston, during a major textile workers' strike. Although Dickens resented the implication that this visit alone inspired *Hard Times*, he insisted that his understanding of industrial life was informed by both theoretical insight and observation (Kaplan, p. 308). While it is true that characters like Stephen and Rachael lack the gritty realism found in factory novels such as Disraeli's *Sybil* (1845) or Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848), this may reflect not a shortcoming but a deliberate shift in focus. Rather than documenting industrial suffering in naturalistic detail, Dickens seeks to explore how disciplinary ideologies operate through institutions and individuals alike. By 1854, the "condition of England" novel had already familiarized readers with the material realities of working-class life. In contrast, *Hard Times* examines the psychological and institutional mechanisms that shape and sustain those realities through the lens of Utilitarianism and control.

In summation, in *Hard Times*, Dickens offers a portrayal of industrial society through the bleak landscape of Coketown and the dehumanizing experiences of its workers. Characters like Stephen Blackpool serve not just as individuals, but as representations of a working class stripped of agency, identity, and hope. The novel critiques the systemic forces, factories, schools, and institutions, that reduce people to mechanical functions, echoing the very machinery they operate. While critics have questioned Dickens's ability to authentically depict working-class life, his focus is less on the realistic depiction of material conditions and more on the ideological frameworks, especially discipline and control, that uphold industrial capitalism. Through this lens, *Hard Times* becomes a powerful examination of how human lives are shaped, constrained, and consumed by a society obsessed with productivity and uniformity.

This critique naturally leads into the novel's engagement with Utilitarianism, the dominant philosophical logic upon Coketown's institutions are based on. The next section will explore how Dickens exposes the moral limitations and human costs of a worldview that values quantifiable outcomes over emotional, and moral life.

2.2.2 Mr Gradgrind's Utilitarianism and its consequences.

At the heart of *Hard Times* lies a broader philosophical critique, particularly of the utilitarian ideology that was influential during Dickens's time. Figures like Mr. Gradgrind represent an extreme form of rationalism and empiricism that values facts and statistics over emotion, imagination, and moral responsibility. Dickens suggests that this worldview not only fails to alleviate social injustice but actively contributes to it by legitimizing exploitation in the name of efficiency and "the greatest good for the greatest number."

As mentioned before, the novel is divided into three parts: sowing, reaping and garnering. These agricultural metaphors suggest that the consequences of a fact-based, emotionless philosophy are inevitable and destructive. In *Hard Times*, Charles Dickens crafts a vivid critique of industrial capitalism and its dehumanizing effects, particularly through the theme of alienation. Drawing on key characters such as Thomas Gradgrind, Mr. Bounderby, Louisa Gradgrind, and Stephen Blackpool, Dickens illustrates how a rigid system built on utilitarian principles and profit-driven logic not only oppresses the working class but also alienates individuals from themselves, their relationships, and their emotional lives.

At the center of this philosophical system is Mr. Thomas Gradgrind, a schoolmaster and later a Member of Parliament, whose worldview is grounded in utilitarianism, a doctrine that emphasizes facts, logic, and measurable outcomes over imagination, emotion, or moral complexity.

This peculiar aspect of his character is visible in Dickens' description:

> "Thomas Gradgrind, Sir. A man of realities. A man of facts and calculations. A man who proceeds upon the principle that two and two are four, and nothing over, and who is not to be talked into allowing for anything over." (p. 2)

In chapter 1 Gradgrind's thoughts are presented, while he's talking to a teacher of his school:

> "Now, what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts: nothing else will ever be of any service to them. This is the principle on which I bring up my own children, and this is the principle on which I bring up these children. Stick to Facts, Sir!" (p. 1).

The school is criticized for Its lack of Imagination and emotional engagement, as it focuses solely on the acquisition of facts without considering the broader implications of education on individual development. This is evident in the portrayal of Gradgrind's model lesson, which is marked by repetitive and imperious declarations of fact, leaving little room for creativity or personal expression.

Furthermore, Gradgrind's educational philosophy is explicitly reductionist: "Facts alone are wanted in life." He sees human beings as rational units to be molded into productive members of society. However, Dickens shows that this over-reliance on facts leads not to enlightenment, but to alienation, a disconnection from one's own emotional and spiritual needs. Gradgrind's children, Louisa and Tom, are raised under this regime and suffer its consequences. Louisa becomes emotionally repressed, unable to form meaningful connections, while Tom becomes cynical and morally adrift.

Moreover, in the novel Gradgrind is described with "a square wall of a forehead", with wide, thin mouth, his voice was "inflexible, dry and dictatorial"; he had square legs, square shoulders; also, his house is described as a deliberate expression of his philosophical stance. Its square shape is noted to be

geometrically sensible, reflecting his rigid adherence to facts and order. The house lacks adornments, and its materials are of the "primest quality," indicating a utilitarian approach to living spaces. The architecture of Gradgrind's house symbolizes his totalitarian mindset, as it discourages human interference and reflects his desire for a controlled environment. This is further emphasized by the monotony of life within the house, which is likened to machinery (Toker, 1996, pp. 223-224).

As Toker (1996) stated in her article, Gradgrind's character embodies a utopian temperament, as he is deeply committed to his principles, which he strongly believes will lead to social improvement. However, his rigid adherence to facts often leads to a totalitarian mindset, where he dismisses the complexities of human experience and suffering. Gradgrind's approach to education, both at school and at home, has two main goals. First, he wants children to think "correctly" by focusing only on hard facts and rejecting imagination, emotions, and dreams. Second, he aims to prepare them for a life of hard work. The process of memorizing facts is not just about learning, it is meant to reflect the kind of effort and discipline expected of them in the future. Children are expected to become like Bitzer: efficient, factual, and practical. If they fail to do so, they are likely to struggle in the world. (pp. 222-223). What makes Gradgrind a "dictator" or a "totalitarian" or "authoritarian" person, it is that he identifies with his principles completely: he lives according to his own ideas and "its visible embodiment" (p. 223).

As previously stated, Mr. Gradgrind educated his children according to the principles of utilitarianism, and the effects could be easily seen in his daughter Louisa Gradgrind, who is one of the most prominent "victims" of his philosophy, since her alienation has been illustrated so far.

Firstly, she's been deprived of affection, imagination and freedom to think for herself; she is portrayed as kind and proper, never behaving selfishly towards those around her, also, she has an incorruptible good heart in contrast with the harsh realities imposed by her father's utilitarianism.

During her courtship by Harthouse, the narrator as much as admits that she has an incorruptible good heart: "in her mind, implanted there before her eminently practical father began to form it, a struggling disposition to believe in a wider and nobler humanity than she had ever heard of, constantly strove with doubts and resentment" (p. 125); yet, she has been manipulated by her father's values.

Secondly, she marries Mr Bounderby. Her marriage is depicted as a repressive institution, since Louisa's acceptance of the proposal has been influenced by the need to please her father. Besides, her father keeps her close even after her marriage, reflecting how not only he continues to exert influence over her life choices, but also how he portrays a very complex father-daughter dynamics, in which he behaves in a possessive way. (Humphries, 1996, p.183).

Dickens portrays Louisa's internal struggle with the limitations imposed by this view (that prioritize facts and efficiency over individual emotional experiences), in particular her inability to understand the emotional and social realities of the working class. Her understanding of human complexity

remains superficial, a direct result of the rational and utilitarian education she received. Louisa becomes a symbolic figure of Utilitarianism's failure to recognize the subjective, emotional, and moral dimensions of human life. Moreover, as a member of the middle class, she aspires to understand the experiences of the working class but ultimately fails, just as she fails to truly connect with others on a deeper emotional level. Her character exemplifies the disconnection and moral shortcomings inherent in a purely rationalistic approach to society and human relationships. (Spector, 1984, p. 375)

This theme is further emphasized when Louisa acknowledges her ignorance of the Coketown "Hands" as individuals, leading to a narrative shift where Dickens largely excludes the workers from the story, except for Stephen Blackpool's tragic death scene (Spector, 1984, p.367).

Nevertheless, her mental breakdown and the confrontation with her father is pivotal in the novel, she articulates the emotional cost of her upbringing and challenges the Utilitarian system that shaped her.

> " Father, you have trained me from my cradle?" Yes, Louisa."
> " I curse the hour in which I was born to such a destiny." He looked at her in doubt and dread, vacantly repeating:" Curse the hour? Curse the hour? "
> 'How could you give me life, and take from me all the inappreciable things that raise it from the state of conscious death? Where are the graces of my soul? Where are the sentiments of my heart? What have you done, o my father, what have you done, with the garden that should have bloomed once, in this great wilderness here! ″ (p. 193)

Ultimately, her story suffers a sort of "narrative death", she disappears from the narrative, as her identity dissolves into her father's narrative. Her thoughts and feelings about her marriage, her husband, and her eventual return remain untold, although they are subtly suggested through symbolic elements such as the fire and her earlier conversation with her father regarding Bounderby's proposal. Even in the climactic scene, where she confronts her father and seemingly expresses her inner turmoil, she remains unable to articulate her own desire explicitly, suggesting a suppression of her identity and autonomy due to her father's overwhelming presence in her life. At the end of the novel, Louisa, even though she has not fully acted on her desires (she has not run away with Harthouse), lives unpartnered, a guest at the banquet of Sissy's domestic happiness, doing her father's work, atoning for his sins. (Humphries, 1996, pp. 184-185).

A further point is the contrast between other two important characters of the novel: Bitzer and Sissy Jupe, who can be both considered as different outcomes of the Gradgrind's educational system. The former represents the perfect child that follows Gradgrind's teachings and becomes a successful product, and the latter represents a "failed" product of Gradgrind's philosophical system. Through this contrast, the novel highlights the limitations and dangers of an education that prioritizes facts over feelings, and utility over morality.

Firstly**,** Bitzer is a student at Mr. Gradgrind's school and later becomes a clerk at Bounderby's bank. He is portrayed as the perfect product of Gradgrind's rigid, fact-based, emotionless education system,

and Dickens uses him to demonstrate the consequences of such a philosophy. By fully embracing Gradgrind's teachings, Bitzer becomes cold, mechanical, and self-interested. When Bitzer is first introduced in Chapter 2, Dickens highlights his unnatural, emotionless appearance, describing his "cold eyes" which "would hardly have been eyes for the short ends of lashes which by bringing them into immediate contrast with something paler than themselves expressed their form" (p.4); with this description his lack of warmth and humanity are just a result of the void created by a factual education. Bitzer becomes indeed cold and calculating, he shows little empathy or emotion and values, rules and facts above all else. A key example of this occurs in chapter 2, when Gradgrind interrogates his students on the definition of a "horse", Bitzer gives a plain and a mechanical definition:

> 'Bitzer,' said Thomas Gradgrind. 'Your definition of a horse.'
> 'Quadruped. Graminivorous. Forty teeth, namely twenty-four grinders, four eye-teeth, and twelve incisive. Sheds coat in the spring; in marshy countries, sheds hoofs, too. Hoofs hard, but requiring to be shod with iron. Age known by marks in mouth.' Thus (and much more) Bitzer. (p. 4.)

Simbolically, Bitzer represents the failure of an education system based only on facts without compassion, imagination, or moral development. He is efficient but lacks humanity, a warning from Dickens about the dangers of reducing education and people to mechanical thinking.

Later in the novel, he turns against Tom Gradgrind, trying to arrest him for robbery, even though Tom is Gradgrind's son and his former classmate. This moment is particularly significant because it reveals the complete absence of empathy or personal connection in his character. Bitzer does not hesitate or show any inner conflict; he prioritizes duty and personal gain over loyalty or compassion. He even justifies his actions by stating that he is doing his job and securing his own future within the bank. In doing so, he exposes the ultimate consequence of an education based solely on utility and self-interest: the erosion of moral responsibility. Dickens shows that, in a system where facts are valued above all else, individuals like Bitzer become incapable of distinguishing between what is legally correct and what is morally right.

In contrast, Sissy Jupe struggles to conform to Gradgrind's rigid structure and is initially seen as a failure according to its standards; her character serves as the emotional and moral counterpoint to the rigid rationalism of the Gradgrind household in *Hard Times*.

Taken in by Mr. Gradgrind after her father disappears, Sissy enters a world governed by facts, measurements, and logic, a world that fails to understand or value her imagination, compassion, and emotional intelligence. When her character is described in chapter 2, Dickens shows the contrast between Gradgrind's philosophy and Sissy's imaginative world.

> 'Girl number twenty,' said Mr. Gradgrind, squarely pointing with his square forefinger, 'I don't know that girl.

> Who is that girl?' 'Sissy Jupe, sir,' explained number twenty, blushing, standing up, and curtseying. 'Sissy is not a name,' said Mr. Gradgrind. 'Don't call yourself Sissy. Call yourself Cecilia.'
> 'It's father as calls me Sissy, sir,' returned the young girl in a trembling voice, and with another curtsey. 'Then he has no business to do it,' said Mr. Gradgrind. 'Tell him he mustn't. Cecilia Jupe. Let me see. What is your father?' 'He belongs to the horse-riding, if you please, sir.' Mr. Gradgrind frowned, and waved off the objectionable calling with his hand. 'We don't want to know anything about that, here. You mustn't tell us about that, here. Your father breaks horses, don't he?' 'If you please, sir, when they can get any to break, they do break horses in the ring, sir.' 'You mustn't tell us about the ring, here. Very well, then. Describe your father as a horsebreaker. He doctors sick horses, I dare say?' 'Oh yes, sir.' 'Very well, then. He is a veterinary surgeon, a farrier, and horsebreaker. Give me your definition of a horse.' Sissy Jupe thrown into the greatest alarm by this demand. (p. 3)

In this passage, Gradgrind interrogates Sissy, who is referred to impersonally as “girl number twenty”as a part of his attempt to reduce students to mere identifiers and facts; the interaction reveals other fundamental key themes. Firstly, the dehumanizing effect of the fact-based system is made evident in Mr. Gradgrind’s refusal to accept Sissy’s name, insisting instead on the more formal "Cecilia." In doing so, he symbolically strips her of her identity and affection, as “Sissy” is a name given by her father, rooted in love and personal history. Gradgrind’s correction, "Sissy is not a name", suggests his rejection of anything that does not conform to his narrow definitions of utility and logic.

Moreover, Mr. Gradgrind's interrogation about Sissy’s father, dismissing the circus profession with disdain, highlights his aversion to anything imaginative, entertaining, or emotionally rich. His command, “You mustn’t tell us about the ring,” silences Sissy’s background, further marginalizing her and reinforcing the system's attempt to erase non-conforming realities. Ironically, he rebrands her father’s role as “a veterinary surgeon, a farrier, and horse breaker,” forcing a socially acceptable, fact-based vocabulary onto a world he does not understand or respect.

Sissy's visible discomfort especially when asked to define a horse, underscores her incompatibility with the system. Her failure to produce a mechanical definition (as Bitzer will do later) marks the beginning of her struggle within a world that values knowledge over understanding, and facts over feelings.

Nevertheless, Dickens positions her as morally and emotionally superior to characters like Bitzer, or Gradgrind’s children like Louisa. Unlike Louisa, Sissy resists the dehumanizing effects of Utilitarian education. Though she struggles academically within Gradgrind’s system, she retains her empathy, moral intuition, and capacity for love. Her failure to conform to the educational model is, paradoxically, a marker of her humanity. Sissy ultimately becomes a stabilizing force in the lives of the Gradgrind family, especially for Louisa, whose emotional repression contrasts sharply with Sissy’s warmth and vitality.

Her character is presented along with Bitzer, they’re both children in Thomas Gradgrind’s school, and they have been both interrogated by the headmaster, but with some differences.

Through Sissy, Dickens illustrates the limitations and dangers of a system that dismisses emotion, individuality, and imagination. She embodies the values that the Utilitarian system seeks to eliminate but which are essential to a humane and just society. In this way, Sissy Jupe is not only a character of contrast but also a quiet symbol of hope and moral resilience within an otherwise mechanical and emotionally barren world.

Therefore, alienation in *Hard Times* is not only a social condition but a philosophical one. Dickens critiques the utilitarian mindset, which reduces human experience to numbers and economic value. Characters like Gradgrind and Bounderby represent the logical extremes of this ideology, and Dickens shows that such a philosophy leaves individuals emotionally stunted, morally compromised, and socially fragmented. In contrast, characters who show compassion, imagination, or emotional depth offer a possible antidote to the spiritual impoverishment of the industrial world.

To sum up, *Hard Times* presents a powerful exploration of alienation within the capitalist system. Through its characters, Dickens reveals how an overemphasis on facts, profit, and productivity leads to the fragmentation of human life: the loss of emotional depth, the erosion of community, and the devaluation of moral responsibility. The novel ultimately calls for a reintegration of the human spirit, one rooted not in numbers or utility, but in empathy, imagination, and connection. To understand the full extent of this critique, it is essential to examine how capitalist logic shapes not only education but also labor, family, and personal identity throughout the novel.

2.2.3 Capitalist rationality and human dignity: the character of Mr. Bounderby and the dehumanization of individuals.

Another important character is Mr Bounderby: he symbolizes capitalist values, the spirit of the time and the theme of materialism.

Unlike Gradgrind (whose friendship with Josiah Bounderby highlights a misunderstanding between idealism and the current state of affairs, as Gradgrind believes in the value of facts for social improvement, while Bounderby uses facts to justify the status quo), Mr Bounderby does not care for the common good, but is concerned with his personal prestige as a self-made man (Toker, 1996, p. 225). Bounderby is characterized by a focus on profit, mercenary relationships, and a materialistic worldview, as indicated by phrases like "So much material wrought up, so much fuel consumed, so many powers worn out, so much money made..." (Sadrin, 1973, p. 198).

In the novel Dickens describes the character in these terms:

> He was a rich man: banker, merchant, manufacturer and what not. A big loud man with a stare and a metallic laugh. A man made out of a coarse material[..] a man who could never sufficiently vaunt himself a self-made man. A man who was always proclaiming, through that brassy speaking-

> trumpet of a voice of his, his old ignorance and his old poverty, a man who was the Bully of humility. (p.14).

Bounderby is characterized as a wealthy industrialist and factory owner, holding economic and social power, used to silence dissent and protect his own interests, regardless of truth and justice.

He presents himself as morally superior, but he is arrogant and lacks genuine concern for his workers. Bounderby embodies the capitalist system and the capitalist rationality that prioritizes profit over people; firstly, he treats Louisa**,** Gradgrind's daughter and his wife, not as an individual with feelings and agency, but as a commodity, approaching their marriage as a calculated, transactional arrangement rather than a romantic union (Starr, 2009, p. 325).

Secondly, the relationship with Stephen Blackpool underscores the stark divide between the working class and the capitalist elite: while Stephen embodies the dignity, hardship, and moral depth of the laboring poor, Bounderby represents the cold, utilitarian mindset that prioritizes profit and control over human empathy and social responsibility.

This dynamic illustrates the broader themes of exploitation and the dehumanization of individuals within the industrial framework of Coketown. Therefore, Bounderby serves for Dickens's critique of industrial exploitation, social inequality, and the dehumanizing effects of a system driven solely by profit and power.

The central portion of the novel, occupying 27 out of 37 chapters, focuses on the private lives and unhappy marriages of Stephen Blackpool, the novel's representative working-class man, and Louisa Gradgrind, the daughter of its central spokesman for Utilitarianism. *Hard Times* counterpoints the events of their lives, drawing a series of parallels between these two seemingly disparate characters.

Superficially, there would seem to be little connection between this older working- class man and this young middle-class woman, but Stephen and Louisa follow the same pattern. Each begins the novel in a state of confusion. The connection is strengthened by the fact that both characters' entrapment within the system is manifested primarily in their unhappy marriage (Johnson, 1989, p. 131).

The dynamic between the two characters and Bounderby illustrates broader themes of exploitation and dehumanization within the industrial framework of Coketown, highlighting how both characters are subsumed by the systems they represent (Starr, 2009, p. 323).

Starting from Bounderby's marriage to Louisa Gradgrind, their relationship is a logical transaction rather than a romantic union. Once others begin to profit from her actions, Louisa quickly moves from being treated like a child to being treated like a commodity. Mr. Gradgrind suggests that her decision to marry Mr. Bounderby is a purely logical equation, 'Confining yourself rigidly to Fact, the question of Fact you state to yourself is: Does Mr. Bounderby ask me to marry him? Yes, he does. The sole remaining question then is: Shall I marry him? I think nothing could be plainer than that'" (p. 77), but Louisa understands the situation more fully. Tom, her brother, has already presented both more

sentimental and mercenary reasons for accepting Bounderby's offer, suggesting that Louisa's marriage could have several beneficial effects. Along with getting to see each other more often, Tom asserts: "It would do me a great deal of good if you were to make up your mind to I know what, Loo. It would be a splendid thing for me. It would be uncommonly jolly!" (p. 74).

Tom knows, of course, that Louisa's future husband will take him into his business and treat him better than the average employee. Louisa's decision, then, is a result not simply of her tendency to make a rational choice in favor of an unobjectionable mate, as she has already perceptively registered the differences between Bounderby and her father. The deal is "made" for Tom's and Bounderby's mutual benefit, and Bounderby has been treating Louisa like a piece of property from the beginning of the novel. This is a wedding with a purpose, "Love … on all occasions during the period of betrothal, took a manufacturing aspect. Dresses were made, jewelry was made, cakes and gloves were made, settlements were made, and an extensive assortment of Facts did appropriate honor to the contract" (p. 83).

The first book ends with this accumulation of goods and Tom's congratulations: *"*What a game girl you are, to be such a first-rate sister, Loo! . . .An't is uncommonly jolly now!'" (p. 85). Louisa has sold herself and neither sibling attempts to mystify the transaction. (Starr, 2009, pp. 324-325).

On the contrary, Bounderby's relationship with Stephen Blackpool, which symbolizes a representation of the oppressor and the oppressed, underlines the power imbalance between the capitalist class and the working class, where Stephen represents working-class labourers and population "shown to be the fuel for the system of production (Starr, 2009, p. 323) and Bounderby, who symbolizes the cold, utilitarian approach of industrial capitalism, representing the capitalist elite.

In contrast to Louisa, a middle-class character who suffers internal alienation, Stephen Blackpool, suffers both social and economic alienation: Stephen works in Bounderby's factory under harsh conditions and without prospects for improvement. He is depicted as a representative working-class man (generically called "the hands"), he's 40 and he looks older than his own age:

> He looked older, but he had had a hard life. It is said that every life has its roses and thorns; there seemed, however, to have been a misadventure or mistake in Stephen's case, whereby somebody else had become possessed of his roses, and he had become possessed of the same somebody else's thorns in addition to his own (pp. 56-57).

Moreover, he is described as "haggard and worn", suggesting the toll that factory life has taken on him, and he appears older than his actual age due to the harsh condition he has to endure: "it is not that Stephen has internalized the factory, but that he is internal to it". As a consequence of this, his existence is closely tied to the factory system, which consumes him, making him feel like a "fuel for the system

of production". His experiences in the factory shape his nightmare, where he feels trapped and destined to suffer (Johnson, 1989, pp.132-133).

Furthermore, at the beginning of the novel, Stephen still harbors a fragile hope for personal transformation since that his private life is characterized by confusion and despair being also trapped in a loveless marriage. His character represents the voiceless masses who suffer under rigid social systems. He aspires to redeem his life by divorcing his estranged wife and pursuing a more fulfilling second marriage. Dickens describes this fleeting moment of resolve: "In the strength of his misfortune, and the energy of his distress, he fired for the moment like a proud man" (p. 56). This image suggests that, despite his suffering, a spark of dignity and agency remains within him. In the novel he often states that everything is "In a muddle" (Johnson, 1989, p. 133)

> "Yes' he said, with a slow nod or two. " Let 'em be. Let everything be. Let all sorts alone. 'Tis a muddle, and that's aw." […] Ay, Rachael, lass, awlus a muddle. That's where I stick. I come to the muddle many times and agen, and I never get beyond it." (pp. 58-59).

However, the chapter titled *No Way Out* immediately tempers this moment of defiance, forewarning the reader that Stephen's aspirations will soon be crushed by the industrial system that governs Coketown. For the factory worker, Dickens implies, there is indeed no escape.

This fatalistic message is rendered with bitter irony when Stephen leaves Coketown in an attempt to change his circumstances, only to fall into an abandoned mine shaft,the Old Hell Shaft, located just beyond the town's borders. The very name of the location evokes infernal imagery, underscoring the inescapable dangers of industrial life. As Stephen lies dying, he acknowledges the symbolic nature of his fall, recognizing his fate as representative of the collective experience of the working class. He says:

> "I ha' fell into th' pit, my dear, as ha' cost, wi'in the knowledge o' old folk now livin', hundreds and hundreds o' men's lives—fathers, sons, brothers, dear to thousands and thousands, and keepin' 'em fro' want and hunger. I ha' fell into a pit that ha' been wi' th' Fire-damp crueller than battle." (pp. 206-207)

The term "Fire-damp" brings the reader back to the motif of fuel and combustion, central metaphors in Dickens's critique of industrial society. In its literal sense, "fire-damp" refers to the flammable gas emitted by coal in mines, which can trigger deadly explosions when combined with air. Importantly, these explosions are confined within the mine, harming only the miners. those directly engaged in the production process. Dickens thereby underscores the violent disjunction between the outward structure of society and the hidden, perilous inner workings of industrial labor. Stephen articulates this separation poignantly when he states:

> “I ha’ read on’t in the public petition, as onny one may read, fro’ the men that works in pits, in which they ha’ pray’n and pray’n the lawmakers for Christ’s sake not to let their work be murder to ’em, but to spare ’em for th’ wives and children that they loves as well as gentlefok loves theirs. When it were in work, it killed wi’out need; when ’tis let alone, it kills wi’out need. See how we die an’ no need, one way an’ another—in a muddle—every day!” (p. 207)

Stephen’s death, then, becomes not merely a personal tragedy but a metonym for the systemic exploitation and fatalism imposed upon the working class. The industrial system, Dickens suggests, not only crushes individual hope but also perpetuates a cycle of suffering that has claimed and continues to claim countless lives. (Johnson, 1989, p.133). He highlights the system's brutality and the lack of necessity for such suffering. His recognition of the destructiveness of the factory system is evident when he expresses the daily struggles of workers: here, Stephen gives voice to the lived experience of the working class, exposing the systemic violence and disregard embedded in the structure of industrial capitalism. His words highlight the cruel paradox: whether labor is active or idle, it remains lethal. The phrase “in a muddle” suggests both confusion and entrapment, conditions that define the factory worker’s daily existence. Through his testimony, Stephen becomes a rare conduit for truth in a society where those in power, the lawmakers and the "gentlefolk" remain willfully ignorant of the human cost of production.

Stephen’s life, like the Old Hell Shaft, is defined by the industrial system: productive when exploited, discarded when spent. Both man and mine serve as sources of fuel for the larger economic machine; once exhausted, they are rendered waste. In this way, Dickens constructs a powerful analogy between the human laborer and the industrial landscape, each dehumanized, each ultimately disposable.

He is alienated from the economic system that exploits his labor and from the legal and social systems that deny him justice. Stephen's isolation is also reflected in his marginalization from both the employers and the workers’ union, which he refuses to join blindly

> He held no station among the Hands who could make speeches and carry on debates. Thousands of his 'compeers could talk much better than he, at any time. He was a good power-loom weaver, and a man of perfect integrity. What more he was, or what else he had in him, if anything, let him show for himself. (p. 58).

He is quite literally cast out from society, dying alone and broken in a collapsed mine shaft is a powerful image of how the capitalist system consumes and discards the very people who sustain it.

2.3 Influence of Dickens on social and political consciousness

Charles Dickens stands as not only the first major urban novelist in England but also as one of the most influential social critics of the Victorian era. Through his fiction, he effectively exposed and

condemned the economic, social, and moral injustices of his time. His work consistently reflects a deep sense of compassion for the marginalized and disadvantaged segments of English society, and he played a significant role in promoting public awareness and inspiring social reform, reflecting his belief in the ethical and transformative power of literature.

Dickens's enduring commitment to social issues can be traced back to his own traumatic childhood experiences: when his father was imprisoned in the Marshalsea Debtors' Prison under the Insolvent Debtors Act of 1813, the twelve-year-old Dickens was forced to work in a shoe-blacking factory.[9] These early hardships instilled in him a lifelong empathy for the victims of systemic injustice and shaped the strong social conscience evident throughout his literary career. (Ackroyd, 1990)

In a letter to his friend Wilkie Collins, dated 6 September 1858, Dickens articulated the ethical imperative of social engagement, asserting: "Everything that happens […] shows beyond mistake that you can't shut out the world; that you are in it, to be of it; that you get yourself into a false position the moment you try to sever yourself from it; that you must mingle with it, and make the best of it, and make the best of yourself into the bargain" (Marlow, 1994, p.132). This personal philosophy underscores the inseparability of the individual from society, a theme central to Dickens's life and work.

However, Charles Dickens was more than a popular novelist; he was a moral force whose works helped to shape Victorian public opinion and contributed significantly to the era's reformist spirit. Through both fiction and journalism, Dickens became a powerful advocate for the alienated, oppressed category, exposing the dehumanizing effects of industrial capitalism, the failures of the Poor Law system, and the exploitation of child labor.

Novels such as *Oliver Twist*, *David Copperfield*, and *Hard Times* brought urgent social issues into the cultural mainstream, translating abstract statistics and policy failures into emotionally resonant narratives. Dickens's critiques were not limited to poverty and child welfare; he also engaged with the labor politics of his time, reflecting the complex and often contradictory Victorian attitudes towards trade unionism.

While he expressed sympathy for workers' rights to organize, as seen in *Hard Times* and his editorial work in *Household Words*, he also raised concerns about the methods and rhetoric of union leaders, advocating instead for mutual understanding and moral responsibility between employers and employees. His influence extended beyond fiction into journalism, public discourse, and philanthropic projects, helping to generate awareness for legal reforms in areas such as education, prison conditions, housing, and labor protections.

[9] See chapter 2 for further information

Although Dickens has been criticized for offering sentimental rather than systemic solutions, his ability to mobilize public empathy and elevate the urgency of reform debates remains one of his most enduring contributions. In this way, Dickens functioned not only as a chronicler of Victorian society, but also as an active participant in its transformation. Dickens firmly believed in the ethical and political power of literature, as a vehicle for moral reflection and social reform. He consistently treated his fiction as a platform for engaging with contemporary debates on justice, inequality, and institutional failures.

2.3.1 Impact on the Victorian public

Undoubtedly, Charles Dickens exerted an extraordinary influence on the Victorian public, not only as a best-selling novelist but also as a powerful moral commentator whose works significantly shaped attitudes toward poverty, child labor, alienation and the exploitation of the working class, and advocated for institutional reform, along with social and economic changes.

In his novels of social critique, Dickens emerged as a vocal opponent of the economic and social conditions that defined Victorian England. His impassioned social commentary played a crucial role in raising public consciousness and shaping the moral sensibilities of his readership. Through his influence on the emerging force of public opinion, an increasingly powerful factor in shaping legislative and administrative decisions, Dickens contributed, indirectly, to a number of significant legal reforms. These included the abolition of imprisonment for debt, reforms in the Magistrates' courts, improvements in the administration of criminal prisons, and a more restricted application of capital punishment. In this way, Dickens's fiction not only reflected the social anxieties of his time but also helped to catalyze meaningful institutional change.

Although Dickens was not the first novelist to highlight the deprivation and suffering of the lower classes in England, he proved far more effective than his predecessors in exposing the deep-rooted injustices of industrial society. His work offered a powerful critique of class divisions, widespread poverty, inadequate sanitation, entrenched privilege, and the myth of meritocracy, while also capturing the complex and often alienating experience of life in the modern metropolis. (James, 1999, p. 546).

In the two novels examined in this thesis, *Oliver Twist* and *Hard times,* Charles Dickens sought to expose and critique the social injustices of Victorian England, using fiction as a vehicle for moral reflection and reform.

On one hand with *Oliver Twist* (1837–39), Dickens illuminated the harsh realities of child poverty, institutional neglect, and the failures of the Poor Law system, portraying orphans like Oliver as victims of a de-humanizing workhouse regime and a decaying urban environment. The novel challenged the prevailing notion of the "deserving poor" and appealed powerfully to the Victorian conscience. Dickens explores many social themes in *Oliver Twist*, but three are predominant: the abuses of the new Poor Law system, the evils of the criminal world in London and the victimization of children,

giving the most uncompromising critique of the Victorian workhouse, which was run according to a regime of prolonged hunger, physical punishment, humiliation and hypocrisy.

Although the initial condition of England discourse changes into a sentimental moral fable on the subsequent pages, *Oliver Twist* is an important manifestation of Victorian social conscience. For instance, Dickens challenged the prevailing assumptions of the New Poor Law of 1834, which treated poverty as a moral failing and confined the destitute to workhouses. His scathing depiction of the workhouse system, "It was the custom... to keep the poor on the lowest possible diet" (*Oliver Twist*, ch. 2), provoked public outrage and contributed to growing scrutiny of poor law practices. Therefore, Dickens succeeded in making Victorian public opinion more aware of the conditions of the poor. He depicted persuasively the disorder, squalor, blight, decay, and the human misery of a modern industrial city.

In another famous novel, *David Copperfield* (1850), Dickens draws from his own childhood to depict the harsh realities of child labour. David, like Dickens himself, goes to work in miserable conditions, abandoned by a society that fails to protect its most vulnerable members. Through this deeply personal narrative, Dickens exposes how poverty robs children of their innocence and opportunities, forcing them into a cycle of suffering. “No words can express the secret agony of my soul ... as I worked, watched, and waited.” (Dickens, p.150).

As Michael Slater notes, Dickens “brought social questions home to his readers in a way that statistics and parliamentary reports could not” This ability to translate complex social issues into emotional, human narratives is central to his enduring influence (2009, p. 213).

In *Hard Times* (1854), written later and more polemical, Dickens launches a direct attack on the utilitarian values of industrial capitalism, criticizing educational practices that reduced children to "little vessels" to be filled with facts (ch. 2). Furthermore, he engages directly with the consequences of industrialization, utilitarian philosophy, and laissez-faire capitalism. Dickens rejects the idea of institutional management of the poor, advocating instead for a more personal and humane relationship between classes. He believes that individuals should be judged based on their unique circumstances rather than being treated as indistinct groups (Stokes, 2001, p. 712).

Moreover, through the grim fictional industrial town of Coketown and the character of Stephen Blackpool, Dickens underscored the dehumanizing conditions of labor in Victorian England. With characters like Gradgrind and Bounderby, Dickens critiques a society governed by profit, mechanization, and the suppression of imagination. As Kate Flint (2011) argues, Dickens’ work “articulated a resistance to the reduction of human beings to economic units,” positioning him as “a literary spokesman for social justice” (p. 87).

His portrayal of child labor and urban squalor resonated powerfully with the public and reform-minded politicians, helping to generate support for legislative change. For example, the Ten Hours Act of 1847

and subsequent Factory Acts that limited working hours and protected child workers emerged in an environment increasingly sensitized to such issues, an atmosphere to which Dickens' work contributed. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, beyond fiction, Dickens was deeply engaged in public discourse through his journalism. His periodicals *Household Words* and *All the Year Round* served as platforms for campaigning against unsanitary housing, inadequate education, and legal injustices. Essays such as "A Walk in a Workhouse" (1850) and "Down with the Tide" (1853) offered first-hand, often searing observations of social degradation, bringing middle-class readers into empathetic proximity with the urban poor. "Let us reform these glaring abuses," he wrote, "lest we perpetuate them with our silence" (*Household Words*, vol. 1, 1850).

His reporting style, marked by immediacy and emotional engagement, enhanced the persuasive power of his calls for reform. Consequently, Dickens' influence extended beyond literature into philanthropy and policy advocacy. For example, he collaborated with reformers like Angela Burdett-Coutts[10] to found Urania Cottage[11], a "home for homeless women" (as Dickens described it in an article published in 1853) for girls and women working in London's streets as prostitutes; the institution aimed to provide education in domestic work and to foster self-discipline among the residents. Charles Dickens personally selected the property and took responsibility for various details, including the selection of reading materials, the provision of brightly coloured dresses, and he handled petitions from the women, consulting with Burdett-Coutts when necessary.

He was also a vocal supporter of Ragged Schools, which provided free education to destitute children. In Mary Carpenter's seminal work *Reformatory Schools for the Children of the Perishing and Dangerous Classes* (1851), she acknowledged Dickens' role in drawing public attention to the need for educational and correctional alternatives to imprisonment for juvenile offenders.

Dickens' belief in moral reformation through education, compassion, and systemic change underpinned much of his activism. Ultimately, Dickens' impact on Victorian society lies in his unique capacity to humanize statistics, dramatize injustice, and mobilize public sentiment. He bridged the divide between art and advocacy, creating emotionally resonant narratives that provoked readers and influenced policy discussions on child labor, education, poverty, and the law. His fiction and journalism together became what John Bowen terms "a moral barometer for the Victorian middle class," challenging them to confront the contradictions of a society that prized progress yet neglected its most

[10] Angela Burdett-Coutts (1814-1906) was a British philanthropist, who dedicated her life to help the poor. She was also a rich heiress and spent the majority of her fortune on philanthropic causes.

[11] The Urania cottage, founded by Angela Burdett-Coutts and Dickens in 1847 in London, became a sort of Women's shelter; the main object was helping women to avoid being imprisoned or going to the workhouses. It was located in Shepherd's Bush, a suburb in south-west London which, during the 1840s, remained largely rural. The house, built in the 1820s, was owned by a widow named Elizabeth Scott. It was a detached residence that could accommodate thirteen women along with two superintendents. (Hartley, 2008, p. 29; Schlicke, 2011, p. 509)

vulnerable members (2001, p. 128). In this way, Dickens was not merely reflecting the Victorian age, he was helping to change it.

2.3.2 Dickens and trade unionism

To fully understand the contradictions in Victorian responses to trade unionism, including those of Charles Dickens, it is essential to situate them within their historical context.

Under English common law, any collective attempt to control wages, hours, or conditions of labor was viewed as an illegal conspiracy in restraint of trade. While, in theory, such laws applied equally to both employers and workers, in practice, enforcement was far more punitive toward the latter.

This longstanding legal stance was reinforced by the Combination Acts of 1800, which were motivated in part by fears that revolutionary sentiment from France might spread to Britain. The Combination Act of 1799 passed by the Parliament of Great Britain under the title *"An Act to prevent Unlawful Combinations of Workmen,"* effectively outlawed trade unions and collective bargaining among British workers. Reinforced by a subsequent act in 1800, this legislation aimed to suppress organized labor movements, forcing workers' associations to operate clandestinely. However, growing public sympathy for the working class, combined with persistent lobbying efforts (most notably by the radical tailor Francis Place), led to the repeal of both acts in 1824.

This legislative shift briefly permitted more open labor organization, but the wave of strikes that followed prompted a swift response.

In 1825, Parliament enacted the Combinations of Workmen Act, which, while legalizing trade unions, imposed strict limitations on their activities, thereby continuing to curtail the collective power of the working class within the framework of industrial capitalism. Although there was partial legal recognition of union activity in the Act of 1859, which legitimized peaceful persuasion on matters of wages and working hours, the formation of trade unions continued to be regarded as "un-lawful".

Public agitation against these restrictions culminated in a series of violent incidents, commonly referred to as the outrages in Sheffield and Manchester during 1865–66.

In response, the government established a Royal Commission (1867–69) to investigate union practices. Its findings laid the groundwork for the Trade Union Acts of 1871 and 1876, which significantly shaped the legal status of unions in the UK until the reforms of the Thatcher era in the 1980s (Schlicke, p. 566). To be more precise, The Trade Union Act of 1871 marked a pivotal moment in the development of UK labour law by formally legalizing trade unions and granting them the right to strike an essential advancement beyond the restrictive framework of the Combinations of Workmen Act 1825, which had limited collective bargaining to wages and working hours and criminalized strikes. Prompted by the 1867 Royal Commission on Trade Unions, established by Conservative Prime Minister the Earl of

Derby, the Act was largely influenced by the minority report authored by Frederic Harrison, Thomas Hughes, and the Earl of Lichfield. This report rejected the criminalization of union activity, called for the repeal of discriminatory legislation, and advocated for full legal protection of union funds. Despite initial resistance from the majority of the Commission, the recommendations gained traction under William Gladstone's Liberal government, aided by persistent campaigning from the Trade Union Congress. Introduced by Home Secretary Henry Bruce, the bill underwent extensive debate and amendment in both Houses of Parliament before receiving royal assent on 29 June 1871. Though later superseded by the Trade Union and Labour Relations (Consolidation) Act 1992, the 1871 Act remains foundational in legitimizing the role of unions within British industrial relations.

The principal texts for understanding Dickens's views on trade unions are *Hard Times* and his February 1854 *Household Words* article, "On Strike." However, an earlier article from December 1853, "The Preston Lock-Out," also provides valuable insight.

Although authored by James Lowe, it is widely acknowledged that Dickens exercised editorial control over all content in *Household Words*, making the article reflective of his broader stance. In it, the root of industrial conflict is identified as ignorance: "...Ignorance of the most deplorable kind is at the root of all this sort of strife and demoralizing misery. Every employer of labour should write up over his mill door, that Brains in the Operative's Head is Money in the Master's Pocket" (Ford, p. 286).

While the Preston Lock-out may not have directly inspired *Hard Times*, the industrial unrest there, during which 20,000 to 30,000 cotton workers were unemployed and dependent on union and charitable support for up to eight months, certainly caught Dickens's attention. He visited the town in preparation for writing the novel. The tone of Lowe's article reflects a common Victorian middle-class perspective, portraying union leaders as dangerous "mob-orators" who use "highly spiced eloquence" to manipulate "the thoughtless crowd" (Ford, p. 284).

In contrast, the tone of "On Strike" is more balanced. Dickens acknowledges that workers have a "perfect right to combine in any lawful manner" and refers to unionization as "a protection to them" (Ford, pp. 288–89). He also concedes that not all blame lies with the workers, admitting that "the associated Lock-out was a grave error" (p. 289).

Nonetheless, Dickens refrains from unequivocally siding with the workers, describing the strike as "an unreasonable struggle." This reluctance stems from his belief that employer-employee relations must be guided not only by law or economics, but also by "feeling and sentiment," emphasizing mutual understanding and moral responsibility (p. 288).

This effort to present a balanced view informs Dickens's portrayal of trade unionism in *Hard Times*. While modern readers may view his ambivalence as a form of moral cowardice, it can also be interpreted as a deliberate rhetorical strategy. Dickens may have believed that open condemnation and cautious criticism of union excesses could challenge middle-class prejudices more effectively.

Leavis contends that Dickens's treatment of trade unionism reveals a significant limitation in his social vision. By granting the representative voice of unionism to Slackbridge, *Hard Times* reduces trade unionism to a misguided error, which contributes to the martyrdom of the good working man (Leavis, pp. 244–45).

Nevertheless, as Leavis himself acknowledges, Dickens complicates this depiction through his satire of middle-class hypocrisy. In one notable exchange, Mrs. Sparsit criticizes unionized labor while praising the solidarity of employers:

> "'It is much to be regretted,' said Mrs. Sparsit, making her nose more Roman and her eyebrows more Coriolanian...'that the united masters allow of any such class combination.''Yes, ma'am,' said Bitzer.
> 'Being united themselves, they ought one and all to set their faces against employing any man who is united with any other man.'
> 'They have done that, ma'am,' returned Bitzer, 'but it rather fell through, ma'am.'
> 'I do not pretend to understand these things,' said Mrs. Sparsit with dignity. '...I only know that those people must be conquered, and that it's high time it was done, once and for all'" (Dickens, *Hard Times*, p. 89).

This passage exposes the double standards of employer solidarity versus worker combination, suggesting that Dickens's position is more nuanced than his critics often allow.

2.3.3 Influence on social reforms and labour policies

As George Bernard Shaw (1913) observed, Dickens was 'a revolutionist without knowing it,' (p.7) not because he advocated insurrection, but because his works destabilized complacent views of industrial prosperity and forced middle-class readers to confront the moral implications of their society.

As David Paroissien asserts, "Dickens used the novel and the newspaper as dual instruments of reform, wielding fiction and fact with equal force to challenge complacency and provoke conscience" (Paroissien, 2008, p. 302). By editing journals like *Household Words* and *All the Year Round*, where he published articles on poverty, public health, and reform, Dickens gave real-world context to the problems his fictions dramatized.

According to Nicholas Coles (1986) Dickens had complex relationship with social reforms, particularly as illustrated in his novel *Hard Times*. He shared some of the "naive enthusiasms" and "middle-class presumptions" of the Benthamites and political economists, which made it challenging for him to critique these ideologies effectively. His closeness to Utilitarianism and the ethos of progress allowed him to perceive the political implications of the social issues he addressed in his fiction, even if he did not fully acknowledge them as a reformer (p. 152). In *Hard Times*, Dickens critiques various social movements, yet he notably refrains from criticizing sanitary reform, a project he supported. This absence of criticism is significant

because it aligns with his view as a novelist that societal issues, such as poverty and filth, are deeply rooted in the social structure (Coles, 1986, p. 175).

However, Dickens' approach to social reform through his fiction has been met with mixed reactions. Some critics argue that he is too aligned with the ideologies he critiques, suggesting that he only proposes vague humanitarian revisions rather than substantial changes (p. 161). Others have pointed out that while he recognized the need for reform, he often failed to see the "real forces" at play in society, which could lead to a perception of blindness to the necessary changes (Coles,1986, p. 172).

Unlike systematic political thinkers such as Marx, Mill, or Ruskin, Dickens did not propose legislative reforms nor develop a coherent ideological program. Instead, his influence lay in the narrative power of his novels, essays, and public speeches, which reached a mass audience and translated abstract social problems into human stories that readers could immediately recognize in their own lives. In evaluating Dickens's contribution to Victorian social reform, it is essential to recognize both his limitations and his achievements. He neither drafted legislation nor offered systematic alternatives to capitalism. Yet, by harnessing the cultural authority of literature, he shaped public discourse and influenced attitudes toward poverty, education, labor, and the responsibilities of industrial leaders. As John Ruskin (2000) remarked, Dickens was 'entirely right in his main drift and purpose in every book he has written, and all of them, but especially *Hard Times,* should be studied with close and care by persons interested in social questions.'

In conclusion, Dickens's role in Victorian social reform lies less in direct political activism and more in the creation of a moral imagination that challenged readers to acknowledge injustice and envision alternatives. He was able to arise social and political consciousness in Victorian England. His ability to reach a wide readership enabled him to challenge prevailing assumptions about poverty, labor, and institutional responsibility. By dramatizing the failures of systems such as the Poor Law and industrial capitalism, he helped to shape public opinion and inspire discussions around legal and educational reforms. Through his novels, journalism, and philanthropic activities, he humanized the abstract problems of industrial society and gave voice to the marginalized. By combining narrative eloquence with social critique, Dickens became not only the most celebrated novelist of his age but also a vital, if unconventional, participant in the long struggle for social justice in nineteenth-century England.

Chapter 3

Elizabeth Gaskell

Another author in the 19th century was interested in raising awareness on the condition of workers, relying especially on the importance of communication and compromise: Elizabeth Gaskell.

Elizabeth was born in 1810, in Chelsea, London, she was raised primarily in Knutsford, Cheshire; after the early death of her mother, she was educated within the Unitarian tradition, an influence that deeply informed her humanitarian outlook and moral sensibility. Gaskell's marriage on 30 August 1832 to the Reverend William Gaskell, a Unitarian minister in Manchester, marked a decisive turning point in her intellectual and literary formation. Following her marriage, Elizabeth entered a milieu of intellectual liberalism and social reform characteristic of Manchester's Unitarian community; in fact, the couple's home at Cross Street Chapel, and later at Plymouth Grove, became not only a domestic center but also an intellectual salon that brought together writers, reformers, and religious dissenters (Uglow, 1993).

Elizabeth corresponded with and hosted prominent figures such as Charles Dickens, Charlotte Brontë, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Charles Hallé in her house. Among these personalities, Dickens was certainly the most influential in Gaskell's life: through Dickens's journal *Household Words*, she published some of her most enduring works, including *Cranford* (1851–1853)[12], *North and South* (1854–1855), and *My Lady Ludlow* (1858), important novels that allowed her to reach a wide audience and to address pressing issues of industrial conflict, class relations, and female agency through an accessible narrative form.

Her work often engaged with urban settings and social themes, reflecting the labor conflicts of her time by expressing discomfort with commercial and competitive enterprises; she addressed the conflicts and struggles of urban life, particularly focusing on the working class and the impact on this class of industrialization. Her narratives helped her to intervene in social issues, suggesting that fiction can materially affect public life and commercial relations. Additionally, the author emphasized the act of story-telling as a means of shaping social relationships. In *Mary Barton* and *North and South,* the construction of narratives became vital in order to address the urban settings and conflicts, encouraging readers to compare the connection between personal stories and broader social issues. (Starr, 2002, pp. 386-387).

The death of her infant son in 1845 served as the emotional catalyst for her first major work, *Mary Barton* (1848), a pioneering "industrial novel" that confronted class disparity, urban poverty, and moral responsibility. Through her depiction of working-class life, Gaskell offered one of the earliest and most

[12] It was her early life in rural Cheshire that inspired the fictional town of *Cranford (1851-1853)*, emblematic of small-town gentility and community cohesion within an increasingly industrialized world (Young, 1995, p. 7)

sympathetic portrayals of industrial England, anticipating later developments in realist social fiction (Sanders, 1988).[13] Therefore, her married life in Manchester profoundly shaped her literary career, providing both the social context and moral impetus for her most significant works.

At the same time, Gaskell's domestic life remained central to her identity and creative practice. She balanced her literary career with the responsibilities of motherhood to four surviving daughters and active participation in her husband's pastoral and philanthropic work. Her engagement with local charitable initiatives and her visits to impoverished areas of Manchester informed the moral realism of her fiction. The Gaskells' home at Plymouth Grove symbolized this dual existence as both a site of domestic tranquility and a space of intellectual labor and social conscience (Stoneman, 1987).

Needless to say, it was within this environment that Gaskell developed her distinctive synthesis of domestic realism and social critique, which became a hallmark of her contribution to the Victorian novel. Living amid Manchester's rapid industrial expansion and social upheaval, she witnessed firsthand the harsh realities of factory life; above all unemployment, social inequality, and poor working conditions, experiences that profoundly shaped the central themes of her fiction.

As mentioned before, an important "character" of her novels is the industrialized city; in the novel analyzed here, *North and South*, the story is set in Milton, a fictional city that represents Manchester in all its negative aspects.

Manchester in the mid-nineteenth century was, indeed, emblematic of Britain's industrial transformation, a city characterized by rapid urbanization, poverty, and class conflict; also, it became a symbol of the new industrialism: despite other cities had developed in similar ways as a consequence of the Industrial Revolution, none had done so dramatically or with such evident dynamism.

Even though in 1830s, the period when the Gaskells set into their Manchester life, it was a city of cultural and intellectual vibrancy, the author in her novel focused on Manchester of the "mill operatives and the workers" since she knew them thanks to her charitable work as minister's wife. Consequently, Manchester is depicted as a city of stark contrasts, particularly in her novel *Mary Barton* (1848): set in Manchester during the 1830s and 1840s, the narrative focuses on the lives of the mill operatives and their families (Mary and her father John Barton, working-class people), highlighting the struggles and hardships they face in a rapidly industrializing environment. Gaskell's portrayal emphasizes the "Manchester of the courts and alleys" that is often overlooked by those in the city's business and cultural elite. This hidden Manchester is characterized by poverty and the daily struggles of its working-class inhabitants, which Gaskell aims to bring to light for a wider audience; the main themes are class conflict and industrial poverty, social injustice and empathy, together with the struggling of the working-class families.

[13] Her subsequent novels including *Cranford* (1851–1853), *North and South* (1854–1855), and *Wives and Daughters* (1864–1866) also combine acute social observation with psychological depth.

Gaskell's depiction of Manchester serves to highlight the complexities of urban life during the Industrial Revolution, focusing on the human experiences behind the industrial façade. By doing so, Gaskell pays her own tribute to this in *North and South* where the southerners, Margaret Hale and her father, come ultimately to admire the energy of the northern business community in which they find themselves (Shelston, 1989, p. 48).

By the time of her death in 1865, Gaskell had established herself as a prominent moral voice within Victorian culture, one who successfully integrated domestic and public spheres in her writing. Her Manchester years not only shaped her understanding of industrial England but also underscored her belief in human compassion, moral duty, and the possibility of social harmony instead of class division. Through her literary engagement with Manchester's industrial realities, Gaskell transformed personal experience into a body of work that continues to define the Victorian social novel.

3.1 The industrial context of North and South

North and South can be included in the genre of the industrial novel, also labelled as social problem novel or condition-of- England novel. It is a literary genre that developed in the 19th century aiming to highlight social injustice (exploitation, class inequalities, lack of worker rights and poverty) and to raise awareness and advocate for social and political reform. During the aggressive onset of industrialism, characterized by massive material transformation (for example steam engines, factories, railroads, urbanization), even greater transformations occurred in the way people lived, thought and acted. People in this era existed differently, and the consequences of these transformations became the form and the substance of the inquiry. Novelists such Gaskell, Dickens, Disraeli and Kingsley[14] tried, on the one hand, to raise awareness and, on the other, to shape cultural practices. The novels turned to the 'documentation of industrialism', for example, parliamentary reports and the press, or the details of everyday life that came to characterize their narratives, while social investigations looked to the novel as the most effective way of organizing and presenting those details.

The subject matter was becoming increasingly interesting to the general reading public, and this marks an important shift in the way people were thinking about their world. Those who had previously been socially peripheral became symbolically central to the projects of novelists and social reformers; and it was these figures, whether drawn from a novel, a report or a newspaper account, that captured the

[14] Benjamin Disraeli (1804-188) wrote *Sybil, or the Two nations* (1845) while Charles Kingsley (1819-1875) wrote *Alton Locke* (1850) both novels exemplify the Victorian "Condition of England" tradition, yet they articulate contrasting ideological solutions to the social crises of industrial Britain. Disraeli, writing as a Conservative politician, uses *Sybil* to expose the stark gulf between the rich and the poor while advocating a paternalistic "One Nation" conservatism that imagines reconciliation through enlightened aristocratic leadership. Kingsley, by contrast, approaches the same industrial and class tensions from a Christian Socialist perspective; *Alton Locke* depicts the struggles of working-class artisans and the hopes invested in Chartist reform, ultimately emphasizing moral regeneration and social responsibility over revolution. (Winch, 2012)

imagination of the reading audience. In both fiction and non-fiction, it was the poor, the criminal, and the sick who elicited the greatest interest. Therefore, in these years a separation of industrialism and the novel was nearly impossible (Childers, 2006, p. 78)

The resulting "blurring" of generic boundaries is central to understanding *North and South*. Gaskell's novel, positioned between social investigation and fictional narrative, exemplifies how industrial fiction could both rely on documentary evidence and reshape it in the service of a broader cultural and ethical critique: she employed fiction not merely to expose social injustice but to argue for competing models of national renewal, making literature a key site of political debate in Victorian culture.

The protagonist, Margaret Hale, lives in the countryside, in the village of Helstone in the south of England with her family. Her father, Mr. Hale, a minister of the church of England, announced that he has become a "dissenter" due to a crisis of conscience, he leaves his job and, therefore, he has to find a new one. In order to do so, he has to move with his family to the north, where he's going to become the tutor of John Thornton, the master of a factory. Margaret suffers for this change of scenery, she was used to live in the countryside where life seems perfect, and as soon as she reaches the north she enters into a different "world", a world characterized by pollution, where people are completely different. They settle in the imaginary city called Milton (or Milton-Northern), an industrial town, where the inhabitants are influenced by the environment, they live in a city dominated by textile and mills factories. Here she meets John Thornton, the master of the factory, an active and strong figure who initially embodies the stereotypical Victorian industrial master, displaying several negative traits. He is a proud, self-made mill owner who values hard work and discipline above all else. The man becomes fascinated by Margaret, who dislikes him due to his attitude towards the workers.

However, Margaret meets also the workers of the factory, who are surprisingly totally different from the southern farmers she used to know: workers in the north were more aware of their own rights. An important character is Higgins, a very wise man who works in the factory as his daughter Bessy, who suffers from lung disease caused by dust inhaled in the cotton factory. Since the Hales' move to Milton also Mrs. Hale gets sick because of the smoky atmosphere and she receives a fatal diagnosis.

Meanwhile, Margaret starts to understand better how life is conducted in the north. Through the Higgins she learns about the workers' grievances. During his visits to the Hales', Thornton, Mr. Hale, and Margaret have numerous discussions about the cotton industry and class relations in Milton. Margaret argues that the "antipathy" between masters and workers is due to too little friendship between the groups, while Thornton maintains that she overestimates his personal influence over his workers. While Thornton shows genuine concern for individuals, Margaret can't reconcile this with his cold application of economic theories.

Meanwhile, some huge problems start to emerge in the factory: Thornton's workers participate in a city-wide labor strike, protesting a reduction in wages. Thornton, arguing that the strikers are ignorant fools

who don't understand the laws of commerce, decides to import foreign workers: he imports workers from Ireland, a country that at the time was living harsh economic conditions, but he refuses to raise their wages. At this point the strikes become more and more violent. When Mrs. Hale's condition takes a downturn, Margaret walks to the Thorntons' to ask for a waterbed that will make her mother more comfortable. She notices an ominous murmur throughout the town, and by the time she reaches Marlborough Mills, the crowds, angry about the imported Irish workers, are preparing to break down the factory gate. The tensions escalate: Margaret begs Thornton to speak to the crowd "as if they were human beings." When he faces them, however, he is defiant, and some men begin to throw clogs at him. Margaret instinctively embraces Thornton to protect him, taking for granted that no one will harm a woman, and is briefly knocked unconscious when a pebble grazes her face. The rioters disperse, and as he carries her to safety, Thornton confesses his love to the unconscious Margaret. The next day, Thornton, who has misinterpreted her courage as affection, visits and proposes to Margaret, who at first is appalled that Thornton saw her protective instinct as anything personal between the two of them, and she refuses him.

Mrs. Hale, meanwhile, becomes increasingly desperate to see her firstborn son, Frederick, before she dies. Exiled in Spain for his role in leading a mutiny against a tyrannical naval captain~~,~~ years earlier, Frederick faces the threat of capture and execution should he return to England. Out of filial devotion, Margaret writes to him, urging him to undertake the dangerous journey home.

Shortly thereafter, Bessy Higgins dies, asking Margaret to prevent her father from succumbing to drink in his grief. When Margaret visits the Higgins household, she compassionately intervenes, inviting Nicholas Higgins to take tea with her father rather than resorting to the gin-shop. This meeting initiates an unexpected friendship between Higgins and Mr. Hale, during which Higgins confides that the recent riot has effectively ended the strike and left him unemployed.

Not long after, Frederick arrives in Milton. The Hales briefly enjoy a poignant family reunion before Mrs. Hale's condition deteriorates and she dies. While Mr. Hale and Frederick are immobilized by grief, Margaret assumes responsibility for comforting them and arranging the funeral. Before the service, Frederick must return to Spain, and Margaret accompanies him to the train station. There, they are seen by John Thornton, who mistakenly believes Frederick to be Margaret's lover. During their farewell, Frederick is recognized and threatened by Leonards, a drunken former shipmate; in the ensuing struggle, Frederick pushes Leonards, who falls and later dies from his injuries.

When a police inspector questions Margaret, she denies having been present at the scene, though she is tormented by the lie, told only to protect her brother. Thornton, serving as a magistrate, learns of the case and discreetly halts the inquest to shield Margaret from public scandal. This act of protection, however, leaves Margaret humiliated by the knowledge that Thornton is aware of her falsehood.

The Hales soon hear that Boucher, one of the strikers, has taken his own life. Wracked with guilt, Higgins expresses a desire to care for Boucher's orphaned children but remains unable to find work. Margaret persuades him to approach Thornton, who initially rejects him. Yet, recognizing Higgins's sincerity, Thornton later visits in person to offer him employment. Their growing mutual respect marks a pivotal moment in the novel's exploration of class reconciliation.

When Mr. Hale visits his old friend Mr. Bell in Oxford, Margaret finally has time to rest and grieve after years of self-sacrifice. During this visit, Mr. Hale dies suddenly, prompting Margaret to leave Milton and return to her relatives in London. There she finds upper-class society shallow and unsatisfying. A subsequent visit to Helstone with Mr. Bell confronts her with the irrevocable passage of time and change. Shortly afterward, Mr. Bell dies, leaving Margaret a considerable inheritance, which she resolves to use in service of others, determined to "take her life into her own hands." Meanwhile, Thornton's business falters in the wake of the strike and his own principled refusal to engage in speculative risks. Despite financial ruin, he ensures that his debts are fully paid. When Higgins later mentions Frederick, Thornton finally comprehends the true circumstances of the train station encounter. Margaret and Thornton are reunited at a dinner in London, where she learns of his changed outlook on industry and labor relations. Thornton now envisions a model of partnership between masters and workers that transcends the "mere cash nexus."

Deeply moved by his transformation, Margaret proposes to invest part of her inheritance to rescue Marlborough Mills. In this renewed spirit of mutual understanding and respect, the two confess their love and are united.

Elizabeth Gaskell wrote *North and South* and decided to publish it in *Household Worlds,* whose editor was Charles Dickens, in twenty weekly episodes from 1854 to 1855. The novel was later issued in volume form in 1855.

Although Dickens' magazine offered Gaskell a significant public exposure, her relationship with Dickens was not without tension: Gaskell resisted his attempts to soften her social critiques. Their professional relationship was marked by both collaboration and conflict, revealing much about the dynamics of nineteenth-century literary production and the limitations faced by women writers within a male-dominated publishing world. Their association began positively, as Dickens, impressed by the success of *Mary Barton* (1848), invited Gaskell to contribute to *Household Words*. He praised her as one of the most talented contemporary novelists, and her serialized works significantly contributed to the journal's appeal. However, the constraints of periodical publication soon proved restrictive for Gaskell, whose narrative style and thematic depth clashed with Dickens's editorial demands for brevity and regular submission.

As *North and South* was serialized with Dickens's *Hard Times* (1854)[15], tensions between the two authors intensified. Both works explored industrial society and class conflict, yet Dickens's insistence on structural compression and title changes interfered with Gaskell's creative autonomy. His increasingly critical attitude, accusing her of being "wearisome" and attributing declining sales to her novel, reflected a broader gendered imbalance of authority between editor and contributor. Gaskell's frustration with editorial interference ultimately led her to sever ties with *Household Words* and to publish later works, such as *Wives and Daughters* (1864–66), through the *Cornhill Magazine*,[16] where she enjoyed greater artistic freedom under the more sympathetic editorship of William Makepeace Thackeray[17] (Sanders, 2000, pp. 45-48)

The deterioration of Gaskell and Dickens's relationship thus illuminates both the challenges and the opportunities inherent in Victorian literary networks. While Dickens initially provided Gaskell with a platform that expanded her readership and shaped her early career, her eventual assertion of independence underscored her resilience and self-determination as a writer. Their complex relationship demonstrates how creative friction can catalyze artistic growth, and it remains a revealing episode in understanding Gaskell's evolution as a novelist committed to realism, social critique, and female agency.

This novel, arguably her most mature social narrative, articulates a vision of reconciliation between industrial progress and human sympathy, encapsulated in the evolving relationship between Margaret Hale and John Thornton (Matus, 2007**).**

Gaskell at first wanted to title the novel "Margaret Hale" after the name of the protagonist of the novel, but Dickens insisted on changing to *North and South,* deteriorating their relationship.

However, despite the happy ending and the romance between the two characters, the novel analyzes through the character of Margaret the remarkable differences between the northern, industrialized England and the agricultural south. It also reflects the importance of understanding social issues and the complexities of human relationship in the Victorian era, not only between employers and employees but also between different classes.

Furthermore, Gaskell acknowledges the role and the struggle and competition in human affairs and, mainly, after the impact of the industrial revolution: she suggests that survival and success, in economic terms, derives from strength but also from the ability to change and work together (Martin, 1983, p. 105).

[15] When Gaskell began publishing *North and South* (September 1854), Dickens had just finished publishing *Hard Times*, which concluded in August 1854.

[16] The Cornhill magazine was a monthly magazine and literary journal, that issued serialized novels and articles; it was founded by George Murray Smith in 1859, the final issue was published in 1975. From 1860 to 1862 the main editor was William Thackeray.

[17] William Thackeray (1811-1863) was an important Victorian author, he wrote novels, articles and satires; among his novels the most famous was *Vanity Fair* (1848), thanks to which he gained recognition and fame.

As previously mentioned, Gaskell was "forced" to change the title from Margaret Hale to "North and South" due to Dickens' decision. As Dickens wrote on 26th July: "North and South appears to me to be a better name than Margaret Hale. It implies more, and is expressive of the opposite people brought to face to face by the story" (Storey, Tillotson, Easson, 1993, p.378). According to Dickens's vision, Margaret Hale's story is secondary to a broader theme of class conflict: if Gaskell had entitled the novel with the name of the protagonist, it would have become a romantic tale in which the two characters, Margaret and John, representing two different classes, fall in love and their reconciliation at the end symbolizes a figure of class harmony. On the contrary, the title *North and South* implies a difference between the two regional contexts, a difference which is indeed intractable. The conflict in this case is not subordinated but is the central statement about society made by the narrative.

3.1.1 The division between the agricultural South and industrial North in England.

This difference in perspective between Dickens and Gaskell was significant because it reflected their contrasting views on the novel's themes. While Gaskell saw the novel as centered on Margaret's growth and independence, Dickens interpreted the work as a commentary on industrial and social issues of the time, similar to his own novel *Hard Times.*

Gaskell's novel explores the contrast between the agricultural South of England and the industrial North: the title emphasizes this geographical, sociological and thematic division. The "North" in mid-Victorian fiction is not merely a place but the emblem of capitalistic values, for which Manchester (Milton) was often the symbol. The division of the society is visible here: the poor workers, the poor mass who had to struggle for their rights to be recognized, are opposed to the successful employers (in the novel John Thornton) whose success is a sort of "demonstration" of their superior gifts. The South, on the other hand, was like another country: not only physically distant but also unrelated, it was the location of the educated and "comfortable" middle class. It symbolizes the perfection of the city uncorrupted by the industrial revolution, a place where nature still combines with human beings, where the main jobs are related to agriculture and workers do not have to go to industries and face long hours of work. (Ingham, 1995, pp. 8-9)

When Margaret describes the two places, she uses totally different words and lexis: according to her *"*Helstone is like a village in a poem-in one of Tennyson's poems. But I won't try and describe it anymore […] oh I can't describe my home. It is my home and I can't put its charms into words" [18].

Her life was indeed different

> this life- at least these walks- realized all Margaret's anticipations. She took a pride in her forest. Its people were her people, she made hearthy friends with them, learned and delighted in using their

[18] Gaskell, Elizabeth, *North and South*, Penguin classics, 2003, p. 14, further references to this edition will be given in the text.

> peculiar words; took up her freedom amongst them, nursed their babies, talked or read with slow distinctness to their old people […], but she was continuously tempted off to go and see some individual friend- man, woman or child- in some cottage in the green shade of the forest. Her out-of-doors life was perfect
> (p.19)

Due to Margaret's portrayal, the south seemed to be a more lovely place to be, with almost no struggles and conflicts between masters and men, abounding in beautiful nature and nice people. Indeed, her life was characterized by a constant presence of nature, she lived near the forest, near the trees which marked the time and the passing of the seasons, nature was uncorrupted, as the inhabitants of the village, in fact their profession was mainly related to land, a profession that Margaret enjoyed "I like people whose occupations have to do with land" (p. 20)

While she was there, Margaret received the visit of Mr Lennox, a lawyer coming from London, who is also the brother of Edith's husband, captain Lennox: he courted her and proposed to her very early in the novel, but his character represents the educated, upper-middle-class world of the South, by embodying the traditional values of professionalism, propriety, and London society.
He stands for a world built on law and heritage, not industry or hands-on labor, which Thornton represents. Nevertheless, Mr Lennox was still a man from the city: "what a perfect life you seem to live here […] I've been nothing better than a cockney just now I feel as If twenty years' hard study of law would be amply rewarded by one year of such an exquisite serene life as this- such skies- looking up 'such crimson and amber foliage, so perfect motionless as that" (pp. 28-29*).* Mr Lennox's words describe the powerful impact that such village has on a man coming from the city, who was used to see nothing but grey skies and streets; his reaction emphasizes the stark contrast between industrial urban life and the agricultural world, the "pastoral" almost idealized village.

Margaret, however, replies "you must be please to remember that our skies are not always as deep blue as they are now. We have rain and our leaves do fall and get sodden: though I think Helstone is about as perfect a place as any in the world" (p. 29).

On the contrary, her reaction to the imminent relocation to Milton-northern, "the manufacturing town in Darkshire" (p. 38), reveals her fear and pain; she doesn't indeed like the city "there was the secret motive, as Margaret knew, from her own feelings. It would be different. Discordant as it was with almost a detestation for all she has ever heard of the North of England, the manufacturers, the people, the wild and bleak country, it was different from Helstone and could never remind them of that beloved place" (p.40).

As soon as Margaret and Mr. Hale are approaching Milton-Northern,

> she had the repugnance of the idea of a manufacturing town, for several mile before they reach the city they saw a deep lead-coloured cloud hanging over the horizon in the direction in which it lay nearer to the town the air had a faint taste and smell of smoke, perhaps after all more a loss of the

> fragrance of grass and herbage than any positive taste or smell […] quick they were whirled over long straight, hopeless streets of regularly-built houses, all small and of brick. Here and there a great oblong many-windowed factory stood up like a hen among her chickens, puffing out black unparliamentary smoke. As they drove to through the larger and wider, from the station to the hotel they had to stop, great loaded lorries blocked up the not over-wide thoroughfares (p.60). [19]

The Hales' house in Helstone was also much different if compared to Milton-Northern; Helstone parsonage was simple and small but full of charm, it was surrounded by gardens, flowers, threes, in a perfect idyllic scenery, while the latter was a rented house in Crampton, small and dark surrounded by "thick yellow November fogs" and "smoke", often described by Mrs Hale as an "unhealthy place" (pp. 66-67). Helstone becomes, for Margaret, a site of remembered wholeness, a sort of "rural bliss" (Krishnamurthy, 2000, p. 429), while the family's move to Milton precipitates a radical dislocation: the new house in Crampton is situated in a town defined by industrial noise and smoke. Its cramped rooms and indistinguishable terraced street stand as material signs of the Hales' declining social position and of the wider forces reshaping Victorian society.

Mr. Hale articulates the sense of cultural disorientation that Margaret experiences upon encountering the industrial North. Reflecting on the workers' living conditions, he confesses his difficulty in reconciling what he sees with the rural world they have left behind:

> "I hardly know as yet how to compare one of these houses with our Helstone cottages. I see furniture here which our labourers would never have thought of buying, and food commonly used which they would consider luxuries; yet for these very families there seems no other resource now that their weekly wages are stopped, but the pawn-shop. One has need to learn a different language and measure by a different standard, up here in Milton" (p.158)

Through Mr. Hale's words, Gaskell foregrounds the profound socio-economic contrasts between pastoral Helstone and industrial Milton, highlighting how industrial capitalism reshapes not only material conditions but also the very standards by which life is judged.

According to Patsy Stoneman (1987) the Milton house exposes the limits of Margaret's earlier pastoral worldview by thrusting her into direct contact with industrial modernity, labor conflict, and class inequality. The spatial opposition between the two homes thus mirrors the novel's broader thematic trajectory, from innocence to maturity, idealization to confrontation, and from a nostalgic vision of the South to an engaged understanding of the industrial North.

Indeed, Milton-Northern serves as a setting for exploring urban labour disputes; the fictional town is depicted as a site of conflict and negotiation between different social classes, highlighting the struggles and dynamics of industrial society (Kanda, 2010, pp. 47-57)

[19] Gaskell echoes certain details of Dickens's description of the city itself: the brick, the smoke, and the regularity. But she balances the use of a bleak word like "hopeless" with a more comforting detail, the simile of the hen and chicks. Dickens also uses animal imagery to describe Coketown. (Schaub, 2013, pp. 188-189)

Significantly, the city of Milton-Northern is described by Gaskell as the portrait of the manufacturing town, as the economic space of industrial capitalistic society, whose organizational feature was mainly of production-relations. Gaskell had a precise city in her mind, Manchester, which according to Asa Briggs in his book *Victorian Cities* (1993) was the "shock city" of the nineteenth century (p.56), due to the rapid advancements in manufacturing, which were accompanied by stark and unsympathetic class relations. Moreover, it reflects the dramatic social changes and the intense contrast between wealth and poverty characterizing the industrial culture of the city in that period.

Therefore, Gaskell's portrayal of Milton-Northern is influenced firstly by her personal experience in Manchester, and various middle-class reactions to the working class, referred to as "the other nation": Gaskell drew on her knowledge of Manchester, its slums, mills, workers and industrialists. While she does not describe specific Manchester buildings or areas in the book, the city she lived in was undoubtedly her inspiration for the fictional town.

Secondly, she aimed to represent these issues as truthfully as possible, choosing from a variety of sources, including articles, reports and other industrial novel, in order to enrich her narrative (Kanda, 2010, pp. 47-49). For example, among these sources, a crucial one was *The condition of working class in England* (1845), by Friedrich Engels. He discussed Manchester in the context of significant social changes and class relations, emphasizing the harsh realities faced by the working class during the industrial revolution. He viewed Manchester as a prime example of the "industrial epoch," where the conditions of the working class were at their most severe. Engels highlighted that the rapid industrialization led to the exploitation of workers, who were treated as mere commodities within a capitalist system. He noted that the industrial city was not merely chaotic but was a space where oppression and injustice were intertwined with the mobility and changes brought about by capitalism (Krishnamurty, 2000, p. 430)

Milton represents the economic space of industrial capitalist society. Gaskell's narrative engages with the "condition of England" debate, illustrating the class conflict and the division of urban space between the bourgeoisie and the working class. The novel resolves class conflict through personal relationships, such as marriage, which brings together different social classes (Krishnamurthy, 2000, p. 429).

In conclusion, the opposition between the agricultural South and the industrial North in *North and South* operates not merely as a backdrop for social commentary but as a literary structure through which Gaskell interrogates Victorian categories of identity, space, and power. Helstone and Milton function as symbolic landscapes, one pastoral, enclosed, and steeped in romance conventions; the other urban, fragmented, and shaped by the rhythms of industrial capitalism.

Margaret's movement between these worlds becomes a narrative device that exposes the limitations of pastoral idealization while simultaneously revealing the ethical and epistemological demands of modernity. Gaskell's reworking of regional contrast thus participates in a broader Victorian debate about the adequacy of traditional narrative forms to represent an industrializing nation.

In this sense, *North and South* demonstrates how fiction itself becomes a mediating space, capable of articulating the complexities of a society caught between pastoral memory and industrial reality: this geographical divide is not merely descriptive, it becomes a framework through which Gaskell explores different social ideologies, economic tensions, and personal transformations, showing how geography shapes values, and social relationships people's lives, which are affected in a negative way.

Margaret soon comes to understand the connection between industrial progress and its human cost. This realization develops gradually during her time in Milton, as she repeatedly "lowering her hopes and expectations every week, as she found the difficulty of meeting with any one in a manufacturing town who did not prefer the better wages and greater independence of working in a mill. It was something of a trial to Margaret to go out by herself in this busy bustling place" (p.71).

3.1.2 Living and working conditions in industrial cities.

In the 50 years before the publication of *North and South* in 1854, Manchester had undergone a period of extraordinary expansion. At the time Elizabeth Gaskell was writing, its population had doubled in the previous 20 years. Manchester had previously been a busy textile town, but in the 19th century it boomed with the increased mechanization of the cotton industry. It has become one of Britain's largest and most important industrial centre.

The rapid extension of textile manufacturing led to unprecedented economic growth. By the 1850s the city had been nicknamed 'Cottonopolis'; the area grew into the centre of the cotton spinning trade not just in England but in the world. People poured in from the surrounding countryside and from further countries especially from Ireland, looking for work.

Manchester was also a city rich in cultural and intellectual life, with institutions like the Portico Library, the Literary and Philosophical Society, and the Theatre Royal, but this vibrant Manchester does not appear in Gaskell's novels. The author aimed to expose the realities of the "hidden Manchester," where the struggles of the working class were often overlooked by the more affluent citizens. She expressed a deep sympathy for the working men and their families, as highlighted in her preface to "Mary Barton" (Shelston, 1989, pp. 46-48) The new prosperity was accompanied by worsening of living and working conditions and environmental struggles.

Firstly, Manchester emerged as a place where inequalities and the human consequences of industrial capitalism became more visible, revealing stark contrasts between wealth and poverty, health and disease, and opportunity and exploitation. Moreover, while living conditions for the urban poor were severe, working conditions in the mills were harsh too. In this environment workers had to face long hours for low wages while the use of dangerous machinery created a regime of continuous physical strain.

Secondly, overcrowded housing, together with inadequate sanitation and polluted air produced a dreadful landscape marked by disease and poverty.

The city was transformed and the expansion led to the overcrowding of existing housing and the throwing up of a multitude of substandard buildings to accommodate all the workers flooding into the city. Living conditions for the poor were cramped, squalid, poorly ventilated and frequently disease-ridden. Engels described the squalor of Manchester workers' houses in *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1845):

> ...under the railway bridge there stands a court, the filth and horrors of which surpass all the others by far... this chaos of small one-storied, one-roomed huts, in most of which there is no artificial floor; kitchen, living and sleeping-room all in one. In such a hole, scarcely five feet long by six broad, I found two beds – and such bedsteads and beds! – which, with a staircase and chimney-place, exactly filled the room. In several others I found absolutely nothing, while the door stood open, and the inhabitants leaned against it. Everywhere before the doors refuse and offal; that any sort of pavement lay underneath could not be seen but only felt, here and there, with the feet.

He continued: "... New houses were thrown up by the score to house the influx of workers from the countryside, surrounding towns and Ireland; yet these houses were badly designed with no thought to ventilation, sanitation or even access to clean water" (p. 2)

Furthermore, a cholera epidemic had swept through the city in 1831-1832, and sanitary conditions improved only slowly after. It was not until the 1850s that clean drinking water was piped into the city from the Longdendale reservoirs in Derbyshire (and most people had to queue at street standpipes to obtain it). Tuberculosis was a major source of death, and infant mortality was high in 1839, almost a quarter of babies died before the age of one.

The mill-workers in Gaskell's book do not live in the worst of the conditions described by Engels. Nonetheless, their ill-health, poverty and hand-to-mouth existence is made clear. In the novel Elizabeth Gaskell employed the character of Mrs. Hale and of Bessy Higgins as symbols and critique of the physical and moral costs provoked by industrial life.

It is disputable whether Mrs. Hale would have died if the Hales had stayed in the Helstone area as, in Milton, the illness was at least fostered by the polluted air the Hales were exposed to. Besides, Gaskell drew a parallel: both Bessy and Mrs. Hale died presumably of an industrial disease, becoming the victims of technological advancements and striving for gain, an emblematic trait of the period. Hence, Mrs. Hale got sick as soon as she spent time in Milton-Northen, her character has kept on stressing how unhealthy the city was, the same issues that Mr Hale had expressed when they reached their apartment "Margaret I do believe this is an unhealthy place, only suppose that your mother's health or yours should suffer" (p.67). Mrs Hale's health deteriorated rapidly after they moved to the smoky, foggy and polluted city, since their new home is surrounded by industrial pollution "the life in Milton

was so different … the air itself; deprived of all revivifying principle as it seemed to be here; there was good reason to fear that her mother's health might be becoming seriously affected." (p.89)

On the other hand, Bessy Higgins's illness has a special function in the novel: she is Nicholas Higgins' daughter, who became friend with Margaret, in fact, Bessy is the first working class individuals from Milton that Margaret met. She is the same age as Margaret but she is dying of a chronic lung disease, due to exposure, for many years in the cotton mills, to many substances. Cotton "fluff" as Bessy explains "got into my lungs, and poisoned me. […] little bits, as fly off fro' the cotton, when they're carding it and fill the air till it looks all fine white dust. They say it winds round the lungs and tightens them up" (p.102).

Bessy has been working in the mills ever since her mother died, in order to support her family despite her poor health. In fact, she is described as really fragile, and at the same time as really mature, with a good temperament, gentle manners and a strong religious faith, all features in contrast with her father. Significantly, her role in the novel is vital: she became the symbol of the human cost of industrial progress, especially the consequences from a physical point of view on the workers, underlining the harsh physical condition of factory work, the vulnerability of young people (she is 19, but she started working when she was very young), and lastly the sacrifice of working-class people imposed by industrialization.

Therefore, Bessy's illness is a direct indictment of the factory system: by explicitly telling Margaret that the cotton fluff is killing her, she becomes a real witness to the cost of labor; Gaskell therefore, utilized a living testimony in order to expose mill life and working conditions. Nevertheless, her death reinforces Gaskell's message: industrial capitalism has generated wealth for the few, but suffering for the others, in this case the working class. Through the physical decline of Bessy, Gaskell wanted to raise awareness how industrial city has been undermining the life of people.

By doing so, Gaskell illustrates how urban industrialization shapes both the physical environment and the social fabric of the working class.

Within this context, conflicts between workers and employers emerge not merely as isolated disputes but as symptoms of a wider urban system marked by economic pressure, social stratification, and limited avenues for dialogue. Gaskell's representation underscores the emotional and physical strain endured by workers while situating their struggles within the larger dynamics of industrial city life.

3.2 Class and labour dynamics in the novel

The narrative in *North and South* illustrates the conflicts between workers and employers, reflecting Gaskell's observations and the socio-economic conditions of the time. The novel reflects the "Condtion of England" debate, showcasing the stark contrasts between the bourgeoise and the working class.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Milton-northern is characterized by its industrial backdrop, where strikes and trade unionism are significant themes, in contrast with Helstone, the 'perfect' place. Both locations were used by Gaskell to critique not only the geographical differences but, on a deeper level, the socio-economic structures of the time, resulting in a critique of class relations. While Manchester is a site of direct observation of working-class conditions, Milton is used to explore the broader implications of industrialization on social relations and class dynamics. Gaskell's work reflects a romantic response to the industrial city, capturing the psycho-social effects of urban life, similar to how Dickens critiques the capitalist spatial organization in *Hard Times* (Krishnamurthy, 2000, p. 430).

The novel is based on a major conflict, the conflict between workers and employers, but there is also the main heroine of the story, Margaret who serves not only as a "mediator" between the two classes but also as an observer. Her friendship with Bessy is pivotal in the novel, thanks to her, she grows and becomes more aware of the condition of the poor: "Oh mamma, mamma! How am I to dress up in my finery, and go off and away to smart parties, after the sorrow I have seen today?" exclaimed Margaret" (p.156). With this sentence, Margaret expresses the profound moral dissonance she feels after witnessing the suffering of Milton's working poor. It signifies a moment of class consciousness and also moral awakening: firstly, because she feels "ashamed" for the superficial rituals that she performs as a member of the middle class, for example going to parties or wearing dresses; secondly, she recognizes that her own social world operates in ignorance, or even denial, of the human suffering generated by industrial capitalism. Her reaction marks a turning point in her development: she begins to question the moral legitimacy of her class's comforts and to align herself emotionally with those who bear the heaviest burdens of industrial life.

Not only in her qualifications for the social worker was Elizabeth Gaskell extremely modern, but also in her methods, particularly the one based on her humanitarian philosophy of innate goodness. The social worker is pictured as the epitome of nobility who, through various virtues, awakens this embryo of goodness in others. This method is effectively illustrated by Margaret,who is sought by all classes in the community, understanding both rich and poor, employer and employee, and serving as a means of reconciling capital and labor.

In the following section, the main issue of class relationships and labor dynamics will be analyzed, focusing on the three central characters of the story: John Thornton, the mill master; Margaret Hale; and Nicholas Higgins, a crucial representative of the working class and the father of Bessy

3.2.1 Conflicts between workers and employers

Margaret Hale is undoubtedly the protagonist of the story, whose presence will help Thornton and Higgins develop a positive interaction; in fact, she is self-confident, and secure in her opinions which she manifests trough her action. (Anderson, Satalino, 2013, p.120). An important innovation brought

by Elizabeth Gaskell was the choice of a heroine of the "unmercantile" South, who is educated, refined, with a taste for virtue, beauty and comfort, and found herself into the ugliness and conflict of the North. Having lived in a household in London and being raised in a parsonage in Helston, she is unfamiliar with the different social classes in Milton. As a result, despite Margaret's genuine compassion for others, she tends to interpret unfamiliar, different social groups through derogatory generalisations. Even before moving to Milton, she looks down on *shoppy people*, "butchers and bakers, and candlestick-makers", and she already holds a firm idea of which professions are respectable and which are not; nonetheless she never questions these assumptions: for Margaret, all Milton residents, both manufacturers and their workers, are simply "tradesmen," and the term carries a negative connotation. Similarly, she assumes that the only possible relationship she can have with factory workers is a one-sided one, in which she plays the role of a philanthropic "fairy" dispensing charity. Yet Margaret's proactive attitude brings her into contact with individuals who challenge and ultimately dismantle these misconceptions. Through her interactions with Thornton and Higgins, she encounters members of two unfamiliar social classes and learns to recognize each man as an individual, distinct from his occupation or social status. This process compels her to undergo the same kind of self-reformation that she expects from them. (Anderson, Satalino, 2013, p.120)

Thus, Margaret Hale, who embodies the southern values with all its superiority and detachment, is transformed by her life into a different person; when she returns to the southern luxury of her aunt's house in Harley Street at the end of the novel, it is a denial of middle-class values and the idea of inevitable class separation.

Initially when she is forced to move to Milton, she dislikes every aspect of it: the landscape, the manners, smoke, dirt, clothes, this is partly related to her values strongly influenced by her aunt and her way of life in the countryside. Margaret's social relationship with the Higgins and with the Thorntons will lead her to a reconstruction of her own personal scale of values. Therefore, Margaret takes it upon herself to intervene in situations that could lead to violence, such as stopping a riot by appealing to the strikers' sense of humanity. In these terms her actions are motivated by a desire to prevent harm and demonstrate her commitment to social improvement, she also developed communication skills, and by doing so, she recognizes the importance of seeing others as unique individuals, separate from their social class, which is essential for effective communication. This understanding allows her to facilitate dialogue between characters like Thornton and Higgins, leading to improve relations and initiatives that benefit the working class.

In addition, her moral responsibility emerges in the novel: Margaret feels a sense of personal responsibility for the consequences of her actions, reflecting her commitment to facing uncomfortable truths and acting in the best interest of others. An example of this behavior can be found in her constant urging Thornton to communicate openly with his workers, and when her advice finally begins to take effect, she does not

hesitate to place herself in physical danger by stepping in front of a rioting crowd to shield him from a stone thrown by an enraged worker.

Moreover, she plays a decisive role in encouraging Higgins to approach Thornton for work after the failed strike. She is now confident that direct, personal communication will dispel the mutual misconceptions between master and worker, just as it has helped dissolve her own prejudices: "If he and Mr. Thornton would speak out together as man to man, if Higgins would forget that Mr. Thornton was a master and speak to him as he does to us, and if Mr. Thornton would be patient enough to listen to him with his human heart, not his master's ears…" (Anderson, Satalino, 2013, pp. 120-122).

However, Margaret Hale was more than a simplistic depiction of the middle-class woman. Gaskell indeed was able to portray another type of Victorian heroine, Margaret has the capacity to deal with matters of public interest, she has what has been called "abstract" or "objective" intelligence, and by these terms, the ability of thinking abstractly and disinterestedly about political, social intellectual and religious matters are intended. Margaret Hale stands out as one of the few nineteenth-century heroines who are not merely described as interested in public affairs, but are actually depicted engaging with them. She conducts substantive, equal conversations with men and articulates clear, well-reasoned views on social and political issues. In this sense, her character embodies a form of female agency that is unusually progressive within the literary context of her time. (Mann, 1975, p.24)

On the other hand, John Thornton embodies perfectly the role of the master in the novel, in Gaskell's words, he is self-educated, economically wise, engrossed exclusively in business and his mother's and sister's welfare. He is described as a man of action, busy in his great battle of life, he is honest, straightforward and quick to take action especially when his power and autonomy are threatened (Anderson, Satalino, 2013, p. 111). Through the words of her mother, Thornton, whose name "not only England but in Europe is known and respected in all men of business" is also considered a man with a "high and honorable place among the merchants of his country", a place he has hold and maintained (p. 114). He believed that every human being could turn into a self-made man through wise spending and hard work: "It is one of the great beauties of our system, that a working-man may raise himself into the power and position of a master by his own exertions and behaviour…" (p.115). He was modest, constantly fearless in both his life and business activities. John Thornton is firm in his beliefs; his decisiveness, at times bordering on stubbornness, might be perceived as a positive trait, too:

> "Do yo' ever see a bulldog? Set a bulldog on hind legs, and dress him up in coat and breeches, and yo'n just getten John Thornton. But let John Thornton get hold on a notion, and he'll stick to it like a bulldog; yo' might pull him away ti' a pitchfork ere he'd leave go. He's worth fighting wi', is John Thornton" (p.135). "…you will never move me from what I have determined upon – not you!" (p.223)

with this statement Gaskell describes his personality and his nature, which, indeed, seemed to be focused on work and on his success (Anderson, Satalino, 2013, p.110).
Indeed, he has some ideas regarding the stratification of society, an outlook that deserves attention:

> "I would rather be a man toiling, suffering—nay, failing and successless—here, than lead a dull prosperous life in (…) what you call more aristocratic society down in the South, with their slow days of careless ease. One may be clogged with honey and unable to rise and fly" (p. 113).

Through this words, John Thornton expresses his hostility towards the middle class of the south and their bourgeois lifestyle: it becomes evident that he has no desire to align himself with that class, this reluctance derives from his deep commitment to his work and from an awareness that southern society would never truly accept him into its upper circles. As a matter of fact, he admits: "I won't deny that I am proud of belonging to a town, or perhaps I should rather say a district, the necessities of which give birth to such grandeur of conception" (p.113).
This statement further underscores his essentially urban identity and his admiration for visionary minds and inventors who propelled industrial and technological progress. Thornton embodies the spirit of industry itself: he favours innovation and advancement. Unfortunately for his workers, however, his enthusiasm for improvement was initially limited to machinery and production, not to labour conditions. Indeed, by defending his way of life, emphasizing his belief in sufficiency, independence, self-made success, and individual rights he highlights his limited involvement in workers' personal lives, "he will not take any undue interest in the personal lives of his workers" "the masters would be trenching on the independence of their hands, in a way that I, for one, should not feel justified in doing, if we interfered too much with the life they lead out of the mills' (pp. 148-149).
As a consequence of this, he cuts himself off from other people undermining the mutually dependent nature of human interaction, an important aspect of society; by doing so Thornton expresses two main ideas: firstly, he does not really care for his workers and secondly, he does not see them as individuals, he sees them only in generalities.
Despite this, he is open to criticism, especially when it comes from Margaret, although he ignores most of it; as the story develops, he increasingly comes to understand her perspective. When she urges him to communicate with the rioters directly as if they were human beings, he sees the truth in what she says, and acts upon it. She commands, rather than suggests, him to "go down this instant, if you are not a coward, go down and face them like a man" (p.175). It is therefore striking to observe how his principles and his own view gradually evolve throughout the narrative. After the violent riot and the "intermediatory" act of Margaret, Thornton becomes increasingly attentive to the needs of his employees and to possible reforms that not only enhance productivity but also improve workers' welfare.

The third important character of the story, the main representative of the working-class, is Nicholas Higgins, the father of Bessy. As a father figure, his relationship with his daughter reveals his emotional depth: his caring and attention towards Bessy contrast with his assertiveness as a Union leader, he takes care of her with patience, grief and suffering, showing his moral integrity and emotional intelligence and above all, familial love. Later in the story he became also an important figure for John Thornton. However, he is also characterized by a strong belief in his values and he does not hesitate to express them. Moreover, he idealizes the Union and sees it as a powerful and meaningful tool for the workers, aiming to defend them against the oppressive power of their owner (Thornton). In fact, he expresses his idea: "I'll not deny but what th'Union finds it necessary to force a man into his own good. I'll speak the truth. A man leads a dree life who's not in the Union, but once i' th' Union, his interests are taken care on better nor he could do it for himself, or by himself" (p. 286)

Higgins becomes one of the leaders of the strikes and he strongly believes that the union can help to bring about his pursuit of justice. Furthermore, according to him the only way men can obtain their rights is "by all joining together, more the member, more chance for each one separate man having justice done him", he also adds that "if any man is inclined to do himself or his neighbor a hurt, it puts a bit of a check on him, whether he likes it or no. That's what we all do in the Union" (p. 286); with these words he expresses his faith and trust into the union, considering it the only power of the workers (p. 287). Like Thornton, Higgins starts to consider some fellow workers as ignorant for their lack of understanding the importance of the Union, for instance he blames one mill worker, Boucher, because during the riot he acted cowardly, since he failed to be a good member; he expresses his intentions to punish him as "a troublesome weed among many" (Anderson, Satalino, 2013, p.115).

These three characters are essential for the development of the story, especially their exchange regarding work; therefore, relations become pivotal in the novel.

As previously stated, Thornton listens and discusses work matters with Margaret, who despite belonging to the southern middle class, becomes the "voice" for the working-class. As a consequence of this, she starts discussing with Thornton about social stratification and the importance of strikes.

Thus, John Thornton and Higgins have a precise role in the novel, they both embody the effectiveness of how productive conflict and social relationship are essential for social change. Thornton's willingness to confront his own beliefs and engage in discussions with others leads to a more humane approach to his role as factory owner, showcasing the transformative power of open dialogue, while Higgins's interaction with Margaret and Thornton transforms him into someone more empathetic and more collaborative, especially in his vision of labour relations. (Anderson, Satalino, 2013, p.124).

Ultimately, the shifts in understanding among the three characters foreshadow the collective struggle that follows, allowing the strike to emerge as the natural consequence of the same pressures they negotiate on a personal level

3.2.2 A blow and its consequences: the strike and early workers' struggle for rights.

"'Why do you strike?' asked Margaret. 'Striking is leaving off work till you get your own rate of wages, it is not? You must not wonder at my ignorance; where I come from, I never heard of a strike'" (p.132). Margaret is asking Higgins a rather difficult question that implies an explanation, the meaning of a strike and the reason why workers decide to strike. The question highlights both Margaret's unfamiliarity with industrial realities and the need for an explanation that goes beyond a simple definition.

Higgins attempts to clarify not only what a strike is but also why they strike: "we know when we're put upon, and we'n too much blood in us to stand it. We just take our hands fro' our looms and say "yo' may clem us, but yo'll not put upon us, my masters' and be danged to 'em they shan't this time." As the conversation continues, Higgins asks Margaret if in the south workers strike, as she replies no because "they have too much sense", Higgins says "it's not that they have too much sense, but that they've too little spirit" (p.133). He explains that workers strike because they recognize injustice.

Nevertheless, Higgins doesn't reply to Margaret's question, in fact "no answer is ever given to the question that runs through the novel and is the title of chapter 18, 'What is a strike?' This has now been transformed into another question, 'How can strikes be avoided?' and the answer to that is that, they cannot. (Ingham, 26).

However, Higgins gives Margaret the reason why they are going to strike

> There's five or six masters who have set themselves again paying the wages they've been paying these two years past a d flourishing upon, and getting richer upon. And now they come to us and say we are to take less. And we won't. we'll just clem them to death first and see who'll work for 'em them. They'll have killed the goose that laid 'em the golden eggs I reckon..I just look forward to the chance of dying at my pist sooner than yield. That's what folk call fine and honorable in a soldier and why not in a poor weaver chap? (pp.133-134).

The strike thus emerges not as a failure of communication but as an inevitable consequence of structural inequalities within industrial capitalism.

In contrast, through the words of Mrs Thornton the workers strike for "the mastership and ownership of other people property. That is what they always strike for. If my son's work-people strike, I will only say they are a pack of ungrateful hounds. But I have no doubt they will" (p.116); in response to the more reasonable sentence of Mr Hale, when he declares the real reason people presumably strike for, i.e. higher wages, she replies "they want to be masters and make the masters into slavers into their own ground" (p.116). So, she interprets strikes as an attempt to seize power rather than a response to economic necessity, revealing also a profound fear of social inversion and a refusal to acknowledge the workers' material suffering.

When Mr Thornton shows up at the Hales', he explains that the "fools will have a strike" and he immediately justifies himself "because we don't explain our reasons, they won't believe we're acting reasonably"; later, besides telling them that they "won't advance a penny, we'll tell them we may have to lower wages but can't afford to raise" (p.117).

Later, he starts an important discussion with Margaret: he states the he will not give any reason for his decision to the workers, comparing his workers to "servants", consequently Margaret accuses him of not respecting a "human right", a feeling which she thinks he would not share (p.117).

Mr Hale too is engaged in the discourse, he confesses that "I am very much struck by the antagonism between the employer and employed, on the very surface of things. I even gather this impression from what you yourself have time from time said" (p.119).

In addition, Margaret argues that according to her informant (Higgins) "masters would like their hands to be merely tall, large children, living in the present moment with a blind unreasoning kind of obedience". Consequently, she tries to make him aware of the reductive implications of using the word "Hands" for his workers: "miss Hale, I know, does not like to hear men called "hands" so I won't use that word, though it comes most readily to my lips as the technical term, whose origin, whatever it was, dates before my time" (p.120)

However, he misses her points: indeed, she problematizes both the contemporary major discourses that justify the workers' oppression: paternalism and the struggle for existence. If mill-owners are described as fathers they must be assumed to have absolute authority over their workers. She then uses an anecdote of a rich father who, by keeping his son confined, made him incompetent: as a master he could not make his workers always obey his orders and not being free, or worse, not give them the possibility to grow.

It has been argued that Gaskell's novels, most notably *Mary Barton* and *North and South*, consist of two distinct narrative strands: the former about the struggle between employers and employees and that the latter, the so-called "Manchester Love Story," amounts to merely cheap melodrama; it becomes clear that the "Manchester Love Story" also functions as a serious social protest narrative. It portrays the worker as fundamentally respectable, while presenting a member of the middle class as acting dishonorably.

Once again, Gaskell employs the motif of a love triangle to reinterpret it from a new perspective and to offer a more nuanced depiction of Manchester (or Milton) and its labour disputes.

This dynamic is also evident in Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley*[20]. Gaskell remarks in a letter that she "disliked a good deal in the plot of *Shirley*." In *North and South*, she clearly engages with *Shirley* in

20 *Shirley* (1849) by Charlotte Brontë is set against the backdrop of the Luddite unrest in Yorkshire and follows the intertwined stories of Caroline Helstone and the wealthy heiress Shirley Keeldar. The novel opens in Yorkshire during the Luddite uprisings of 1811–12. The region's mills are failing due to war-time trade blockages, and unemployed workers threaten violence against mill owners. The novel examines industrial conflict and social tensions. Caroline's unrequited love for mill owner Robert Moore and her subsequent illness are resolved through personal revelation and reconciliation, while Shirley defies class expectations by choosing to marry Louis Moore. The narrative closes with the two heroines achieving emotional and social stability, paralleling the restoration of peace within the troubled industrial community.

order to challenge its portrayal of labour conflicts, reshaping these issues within the industrial context of Milton-Northern. In *Shirley*, for instance, rioters attack Robert Moore's mill, and Moore and his companions, having been ambushed, return fire

> A crash – smash – shiver – stopped their whispers… A yell followed this demonstration—a rioter's yell… You never heard that sound, perhaps, reader? … Wrath wakens to the cry of Hate: the Lion shakes his mane, and rises to the howl of the Hyena: Caste stands up ireful against Caste; and the indignant, wronged spirit of the Middle Rank bears down in zeal and scorn on the famished and furious mass of the Operative class. It is difficult to be tolerant—difficult to be just—in such moments… That yell was a long one… (p.248)

In this scene, the middle class is metaphorically aligned with the Lion, while the working class is compared to the Hyena. Both images reduce the social conflict to a battle between beasts, as "the fighting animal was roused in every one of those men… and was for the time quite paramount above the rational human being." (Kanda, 2010, pp.54-55) Gaskell clearly disliked this representation.

The main reason for the strike in *North and South* revolves around the workers' demand for better wages amidst difficult economic conditions. The workers are striking for a five percent raise, during a time of high food prices and declining trade. This situation mirrors the real-life Preston Strike, where similar economic pressures led to labor unrest. The strike is also influenced by the presence of Irish laborers, who are seen as a threat to English workers' jobs and wages due to their willingness to work for lower pay, which exacerbates tensions between the two groups. These dynamics highlight the complex labor relations and the impact of immigrant labor on the working class in industrial England (Cammack, 2016, p. 115).

However, in *North and South* the riot serves as a critical moment in the story, highlighting the broader themes of class struggle and the necessity for empathy and dialogue in addressing the issues faced by the working class: as Barbara L. Harman (1998) observes, "the strike scene in *North and South* could easily be read as a revision of Brontë's riot at the mill." Indeed, Gaskell rewrites the episode, even reusing key terms from *Shirley*, such as *yell* and *mêlée*. Yet she transforms the animalistic violence into what Margaret Hale insists must become a "man to man relationship". (Kanda, 2010, pp. 54-55)

> As soon as they saw Mr. Thornton, they set up a yell, to call it not human is nothing, it was as the demoniac desire of some terrible wild beast for the food that is withheld from his ravening ... 'Mr. Thornton, said Margaret, go down this instant, if you are not a coward. Go down and face them like a man. Save these poor strangers, whom you have decoyed here. Speak to your workmen as if they were human beings. Speak to them kindly. Dont let the soldiers come in and cut down poor creatures who are driven mad. I see one there who is. If you have any courage or noble quality in you, go out and speak to them, man to man (p.175).

Furthermore, according to Kanda (2010), Gaskell had a possible source for the riot scene, *The Claims of Labour* (1844) written by Arthur Helps[21], where he depicts the class conflict as a sort of "flood", he gives the images of the flood-gates like an angry-sea of men for the riots and of a revolution rushing outside the flood gates, while the middle-class people shut themselves up behind them.

Gaskell uses this metaphor for the riot scene in chapter 22: workers turn into an angry sea of men, surrounding the mill and the house of John Thornton, who together with his family stays in the house without facing the workers outside, hoping for the arrival of soldiers to dismiss the crowd. Gaskell uses the metaphor of flood-gates to depict the class conflict, where the middle class is seen as shutting themselves away from the turmoil outside, reflecting their timidity and selfishness. When Margaret arrives at Thornton's house, Mrs. Thornton expresses her fear "they are at the gates! […] they're at the gates! They'll batter them in!" (p.172).

Later Margaret and Mrs Thornton gather round the window and hear "the gathering tramp an increasing din of angry voices raged behind the wooden barrier, which shook as if the unseen maddened crowd made battering-rams of their bodies"; they are fascinated and yet terrified to look on the scene. There is an infuriated multitude outside who "had been voiceless, wordless needing of all their breath for their hard-labouring efforts to break the gates" (p.177). In the passage the author wanted to symbolize the fear and lack of sympathy of the Thornton family inside, through the image of the gates.

The workers on the outside of Thornton's house and mill "were mere boys; cruel and thoughtless, cruel because they were thoughtless, some were mean, gaunt as wolves. And mad for prey" (p.176). Margaret knows this people, she is totally aware of their condition, they have starving children at home, and they are striking "relying on ultimate success in their efforts to get higher wages"; those people "were raging worse than ever" (p.176). The following scene carries significant meaning for the story: Margaret follows John outside his house and tries to "protect him," despite having aligned herself with the workers' needs. She is fully aware that "in an instant it would all be uproar. The first touch would cause an explosion, in which among such hundreds of infuriated men and reckless boys, even Mr. Thornton's life would be unsafe" (p.176). Acting on instinct, she runs after Thornton and places herself between him and the crowd. She urges the workers not to "use violence; he is one man and you are many" (p.176).

Thornton, however, does not appreciate her interference, insisting that it is not her place. Margaret replies firmly that "you did not see what I saw," highlighting both her involvement and her awareness of the workers' conditions and demands. At the same time, she warns the workers, "Do not damage

[21] Sir Arthur Helps (1813–1875) was an English writer and civil servant, educated at Eton and Cambridge, who wrote widely on social and moral issues before becoming Clerk of the Privy Council later in life. In *The Claims of Labour* (1844), Helps offers an ethical critique of industrial society by arguing that the relationship between employers and workers should be grounded not merely in wage contracts but in mutual moral responsibility. He insists that employers must consider the human as well as the economic dimensions of labour, urging that attention to health, comfort, and dignity among the working classes is part of a broader duty shared by all citizens. Unlike abstract political economists who emphasized market forces, Helps places human sympathy and moral obligation at the centre of his defence of labour's claims, promoting a vision of social improvement rooted in individual conscience and benevolence (Helps, 1844).

your cause by this violence" (p.177), demonstrating her understanding of the moral and political consequences of their actions.

When Margaret is injured by a stone meant for Thornton, the crowd's aggression is exposed, and Thornton himself condemns their cowardice: "you do well, you come to oust the innocent stranger. You fall, you hundreds, on one man and when a woman comes before you to ask you to for your own sakes to be reasonable creatures. Your cowardly wrath falls upon her! You do well" (pp. 117-178).

Margaret's role is significant as she serves as a moral compass and a critical observer of the labor dynamics at play. She recognizes the plight of the Irish workers, her understanding of the situation leads her to confront the consequences of the union's actions on individuals like Boucher, who is marginalized and desperate due to his circumstances. In this moment, Margaret assumes the role of a moral mediator: her intervention is spontaneous and instinctive, motivated by a profound sense of justice rather than personal loyalty to Thornton. Fully aware of the workers' suffering, she sympathizes with their demands, but at the same time she recognizes the destructive potential of their violence and the danger not only to Thornton but also to the legitimacy of the workers' cause; her statement highlights her awareness of the complexities of labor relations and the moral implications of forcing individuals into collective actions that do not align with their personal needs or desires.

Therefore, by placing herself physically between Thornton and the crowd, Margaret becomes a *symbolic barrier* embodying conscience, compassion, and moral restraint. She is the only figure willing to confront the crowd without weapons, authority, or social power, relying solely on moral conviction, who is, above all, capable of perceiving the humanity of both classes

Thornton's furious reaction after she is injured further reinforces this interpretation, as he condemns the crowd for attacking a woman who attempted to protect them from their own destructive impulses. Margaret emerges simultaneously as a mediator between the two classes, a moral force able to perceive both sides with clarity, a sacrificial figure absorbing the violence aimed at others, and a catalyst for Thornton's recognition of her integrity. Her role in this episode is thus crucial, revealing not only her social insight and moral authority but also the personal risk she is willing to undertake in the name of justice and humanity.

Margaret's perspective emphasizes the critique of both the masters and the unions, suggesting that the union's coercive tactics can be as tyrannical as the actions of the mill owners. Her character embodies the struggle for empathy and understanding in a time of social upheaval, making her a crucial figure in the narrative surrounding the strike and the broader issues of labor and class in industrial England. (Cammack, 2016, p.122)

Nevertheless, the Thorntons and their servants interpret this act of protection as a declaration of love, even if Margaret insists that her motives were different: "If I saved one blow, one cruel, angry action that might otherwise have been committed, I did a woman's work". She feels personally responsible

for the danger Thornton faces, since it stems from her own challenge to him, and she therefore acts immediately to mitigate the consequences. Although her intervention complicates the relationship between them, making her appear, in her own words, "like a romantic fool", it is undeniably effective in halting the riot (p. 236). Once the strikers realise that their actions have unintentionally harmed an innocent woman, their anger subsides and the crowd begins to disperse. In this way, Margaret's swift intervention prevents further violence. (Kanda, 2010, p.56).

In the end, Margaret's solitary stand at the factory gates not only diffuses the immediate violence but symbolically reimagines the possibility of a society in which dignity, empathy, and mutual recognition can prevail over fear, hatred, and class division.

3.3 The Tension Between Morality and Economic Necessity

Overall, Milton-Northern serves as a critical backdrop for examining the themes of class conflict and social justice in Gaskell's work. (Kanda, 2010, pp. 47-57) In her examination of the ethics of risk in Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*, Eleanor Reeds (2014) highlights the persistent tension between capitalism and moral responsibility, showing how the novel interrogates the ethical dimensions of economic life. Gaskell's characters, particularly Margaret Hale and John Thornton, are depicted as navigating financial and social decisions with a deep sense of ethical awareness, for example by investing their capital and bearing the consequences of their decisions, challenging the notion that capitalist enterprise is purely self-interested (p.55). Through these characters, Gaskell emphasizes the importance of integrating moral considerations into economic practice, suggesting that individuals should confront the consequences of their financial choices rather than deflecting responsibility onto others. This ethical stance is especially striking when contrasted with the historical context of the 1850s, a period marked by significant legal and cultural shifts in attitudes toward risk.[22] This perspective suggests that ethical responsibility in financial matters transcends class boundaries, as both Margaret Hale and John Thornton navigate these ethical dilemmas.

Nevertheless, this perspective also reshapes the dynamics between masters and workers in *North and South*, suggesting that ethical responsibility in financial matters can serve as a bridge across class divisions. By portraying both Margaret Hale and John Thornton as individuals who grapple with the moral implications of economic risk, Gaskell reframes the relationship between employers and laborers as one grounded in mutual obligation rather than pure self-interest. Thornton's growing willingness to take personal responsibility for the well-being of his workers, influenced in part by Margaret's ethical

[22] A cultural shift is noted during the 1850s towards avoiding risk, marked by legislation like the Joint Stock Companies Act of 1856. This shift allowed individual investors to escape the consequences of corporate failures, leading to a more impersonal approach to risk management (Reeds, 2014, p. 55).

convictions, challenges the prevailing model of industrial relations built on hierarchy and detachment. His eventual shift toward practices such as fairer wages, improved working conditions, and open communication reflects an acknowledgment that financial decisions made in the counting-house reverberate through the lives of the laboring class. At the same time, the workers' recognition of Thornton's personal investment and accountability softens class antagonisms, fostering the possibility of trust where suspicion had previously dominated. Through this evolving relationship, Gaskell demonstrates that economic ethics cannot remain confined within class boundaries; instead, they function as a catalyst for redefining the social fabric of Milton-Northern, encouraging a more cooperative, interdependent model of industrial relations.

The introduction of limited liability legislation, which allowed investors to avoid personal accountability for corporate failures, encouraged a more impersonal and detached approach to financial management, effectively transforming risk into a collective, rather than individual, burden (Reeds, 2014, p.66).

Against this backdrop, Margaret Hale's willingness to invest her own money, despite the inherent dangers, exemplifies an older, more responsible conception of financial ethics, one in which personal integrity and social conscience are inseparable from economic activity. Her choices underscore a commitment to bearing both the rewards and consequences of financial action, positioning her as a moral counterpoint to the emerging capitalist ethos that privileges profit over responsibility. Similarly, John Thornton's engagement with business is depicted not merely as a pursuit of wealth, but as a series of ethical decisions that affect the lives of his workers and the wider community, reinforcing Gaskell's vision of an economy inseparable from human accountability. The novel, in fact, challenges the political economists' view of human behavior as purely rational and self-interested. Gaskell presents an alternative model that embraces risk and ethical considerations, arguing against the notion that financial decisions can be devoid of moral implications (Reeds, 2014, p. 58). In this light, *North and South* can be read as a critique of the modernizing forces that promote detachment from ethical responsibility, advocating instead for a vision in which individual accountability, communal welfare, and moral conscience coexist harmoniously. Reeds' reading positions the novel as an intervention in debates about capitalism and morality, revealing Gaskell as an author deeply concerned with the human implications of financial risk, the social responsibilities of economic actors, and the ethical challenges posed by modernization. Therefore, the novel not only challenges the prevailing capitalist ethos of risk management but also proposes a model of economic engagement grounded in ethical reflection, personal responsibility, and a recognition of the interconnectedness of social and financial life.

3.3.1 The issue of social justice and class differences

Central to the novel's representation of industrial society is the issue of social justice and class differences, which Gaskell uses to examine the ethical implications of economic power and social hierarchy, by exposing the economic and moral fractures of an industrializing nation, revealing how these divisions shape both personal relationships and collective identities, making class conflict not merely an economic issue but a deeply human and moral one.

Outside the fragile structure that her home represents, Margaret finds herself an alien in Milton; she arrives believing herself socially superior to all those she finds there. Moreover, there is no social group in Milton who shares her tastes, feelings and values, on the contrary, the only "system" that the northern class offers are the mill-owning Thorntons or the workmen Higgins's motherless family. (Ingham, 1986, p. 7) In addition, Thornton's mother regards Margaret as inferior, being the child of a private tutor and her family is "poor".

Margaret starts to visit the Higgin's family, especially the ill daughter Bessy; she can only visit them only on terms of equality, after an invitation, therefore Margaret aligns herself with them, feeling part of their class and "as she went along the crowded narrow streets, she felt how much of interest they had gained by the simple fact of her having learnt to care for a dweller in them" (p. 100). This condition symbolically places her on the same level as the working-class family she befriends.

However, her attachment on terms of equality to the working class is also signaled by her linguistic deviations, and use of dialect. Language becomes a powerful marker of class affiliation and social transformation: "Margaret don't get to use these horrid Milton's words. Slack of work: it is a provincialism. What will your aunt Shaw say if she hears you use it on her return?

Edith picked up all sort of military slang form Captain Lennox and aunt Shaw never took any notice of it". (p.233)

So, Margaret claims that the use of Milton words could be compared to her cousin Edith's use of posh military slang, picked up from her husband.

"But yours is factory slang", by saying so, Mrs Hale is shocked by the comparison, according to her factory slang and upper-class words cannot and must not be compared, revealing a deeply ingrained prejudice that treats industrial language as inherently vulgar and unworthy of comparison with upper-class forms of expression: *"*and if I live in a factory town I must speak factory language when I want it. Why Mamma I could astonish you with a great many words you never heard in your life. I don't believe you know what a knobstick is*"*.

Margaret renames slang (what her mother has defined as vulgar), as language; this new Milton language, which she may need, symbolizes her change: for middle class speakers to do so is to change the whole orientation of the narrative in relation to class: *"*not I child. I only know it has a very vulgar sound and I don't want to hear you using it. Very well dearest mother, I won't". (p.233)

By centering the narrative on Margaret's experiences, Gaskell highlights the strikingly direct manner of the northern factory workers and their lack of traditional deference. Their openness with strangers and their willingness to engage on equal terms challenge Margaret's assumptions, underscoring the profound cultural differences between the agrarian South and the industrial North, and revealing how industrialization reshapes not only economic relations but also language, social behavior, and moral values.

The following passage illustrates how Gaskell explores social justice and class difference through everyday encounters in public space. The streets of Milton become a site of class confrontation, where factory workers' collective presence and unrestrained behavior challenge the codes of restraint and deference that Margaret associates with social superiority. Her initial fear reflects not inherent danger but the shock of encountering a class unregulated by middle-class norms of politeness. Gaskell carefully qualifies this response by stressing the workers' "innocence" and lack of malicious intent, suggesting that their openness stems from social exclusion rather than moral inferiority. By contrasting Margaret's discomfort with her later amusement, the novel exposes how class prejudice is produced through distance and unfamiliarity. The episode thus reinforces Gaskell's argument that social justice depends on recognizing different social codes as human rather than threatening, and on dismantling the moral hierarchies that sustain class division. (Ingham, 1998)

> The side of the town on which Crampton lay was especially a thoroughfare for the factory people. In the back streets around them there were many mills, out of which poured streams of people two or three times a day. Until Margaret had learnt the times of their ingress and egress, she was very unfortunate in constantly falling in with them. They came rushing along with bold, fearless faces, and loud laughs and jests, particularly aimed at those who appeared to be above them in rank or station. The notes of their unrestrained voices, and their carelessness of all common rules of street politeness, frightened Margaret a little at first. The girls, with their rough, but not unfriendly freedom, would comment on her dress, even touch her shawl or gown to ascertain the exact material; nay once or twice she was asked questions relative to some material which they particularly admired. There was such a simple reliance on her womanly sympathy with their love of dress, and on her kindliness, that she gladly replied to these inquiries, as soon as she understood them; and half smiled back at their remarks. She did not mind any number of girls, loud and boisterous though they might be. But she alternately dreaded and fired up against the workmen, who commented not on her dress, but on her looks, in the same open, fearless manner. She, who had hitherto felt that even the most refined remark on her personal appearance was an impertinence, had to endure undisguised admiration from these outspoken men. But the very outspokenness marked their innocence of any intention to hurt her delicacy, as she would have perceived if she had been less frightened by the disorderly tumult. Out of her fright came a flash of indignation which made her face scarlet, and her eyes gather flame, as she heard some of their speeches. Yet there were other sayings of theirs, which, when she reached the quiet safety of home, amused her even while they irritated her (p.72)

3.3.2 The evolution of characters through the recognition of human dignity in work.

In the novel, the main aim is reconciliation between classes. However, this reconciliation is not achieved through theoretical systems or mechanical solutions, as proposed by Carlyle[23], but rather through the slow and hesitant operation of human sympathy, against the odds of inherited prejudice and self-interest, despite the operations of misunderstanding.

While Gaskell clearly acknowledges Carlyle's influence, she also confronts the difficulty of transforming his abstract vision into responses to the social problems of her time. Carlyle emphasizes the primacy of individual insight and the critique of what he sees as the "mechanical" tendencies of modern life. He challenges the overly scientific calculations of political economy and insists on a more intuitive, morally driven approach to understanding society (Campbell,1980, pp. 234-235).

In contrast, Gaskell shows how Carlylean analysis, though intellectually stimulating, often falters when faced with the complexities of a divided industrial community. Her characters, most notably Margaret Hale and John Thornton, struggle with their beliefs, which prove insufficient for overcoming entrenched social tensions (Campbell, 1980, p.247).

This process occurs within the limitations of the existing social system, despite the challenges posed by inherited prejudice and self-interest. Gaskell illustrates that interpersonal contact and understanding between different social classes are possible, but they require effort and cultivation through difficulties.

For instance, the relationship between Margaret and Higgins exemplifies how spontaneous gestures can bridge social gaps, but these moments must be nurtured over time. The reconciliation between characters like Thornton and Higgins is depicted as a gradual process, where both parties show a willingness to work together without a complete transformation of their characters or social roles. (Campbell, 1980, p.242).

Gaskell may have drawn from the contemporary discourse on factory paternalism. But Gaskell does at least present an alternate solution to the problem: breaking down the barriers between classes through personal communication between individuals. In doing so, *North and South* precisely illustrates the model of inter-class cooperation that Dickens considered essential for social reform.

Although Dickens often uses exaggerated, almost caricature-like characters to highlight what he sees as broken in society, focusing more on exposing flaws than on offering real redemption, Gaskell, by contrast, shows people as capable of growth and moral change, suggesting that compassion and understanding can genuinely heal social divisions. Her style is marked by densely rendered realism, where characters and events are minutely delineated, allowing for a portrayal of complex feelings and a middle

[23] Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881) was a Scottish historian, essayist, and social critic whose ideas strongly influenced Victorian debates about industry, morality, leadership, and the meaning of work. He believed that modern society was drifting into spiritual emptiness, what he called the "Age of Machinery", and argued that people needed duty, discipline, and purposeful work rather than passive faith in laissez-faire economics. His philosophy of work centers on the idea that work is not just economic activity but a moral and spiritual calling. For Carlyle, meaningful labor gives life order, dignity, and direction; through work, individuals discover their purpose and contribute to the greater good. In short, while laissez-faire celebrates freedom from interference, Carlyle saw disciplined, purposeful work as the path to genuine human fulfillment. (Shelston, 1989, p.50)

ground between extremes. This difference in style reflects their respective thematic concerns, Gaskell advocating for compromise through communication, while Dickens's work often emphasizes caricature and social critique (Schaub, 2013, pp. 186-197).

Yet the novel also presents this solution as deliberately limited in scope: the aim is not to eliminate class divisions altogether, but rather to diminish their "bitterness". Such moderation appears attainable, and indeed the conclusion of the narrative offers a cautiously optimistic vision in which renewed channels of communication promise improved industrial relations. This tempered hope suggests that, while structural inequalities remain, everyday realities can nonetheless be modified through mutual understanding and pragmatic negotiation (Schaub, 2013, p. 185).

As previously mentioned, the main characters of the story go through an emotional development, especially Margaret and John Thornton. Bessy becomes crucial for the narrative but also for Margaret's moral and emotional development. Their friendship humanizes the working class for Margaret, shows her dignity and suffering of industrial workers and pushes her to engage more deeply with the social issues of Milton. Margaret initially approaches the poor from a position of genteel benevolence, but her interactions with Bessy teach her *empathy* rather than *pity*. Margaret does not "save" Bessy; instead, Bessy helps Margaret grow. Indeed, their conversations often revolve around suffering, hope, and the meaning of life, creating a philosophical layer in the narrative that elevates industrial reality to a moral and spiritual reflection. Consequently, Margaret realizes that the recognition of others as unique human beings, separate from their class or station, is essential to effective communication. She would never have learned this if she had not actively engaged with the people of Milton on an individual level. Because of her bold attitude and confidence in her assertions, Margaret is able to put this knowledge to good use in a way that someone like her father cannot (Anderson, Satalino, 2013, p.120).

In her analysis of *North and South* Valerie Wainwright underscores the centrality of self-reflection and of what she terms the "vital and often vehement interaction" between individuals in resolving the narrative's socioeconomic tensions. Her discussion concentrates on Margaret's and Thornton's gradual reassessment of their respective paternalistic and liberal frameworks governing the factory owner and worker relationship. Wainwright argues that their evolving perspectives reveal an emerging capacity to transcend "orthodox modes of thought," and she contends that their eventual union should not be read as a simple synthesis of opposing ideologies. Rather, it signifies a shared recognition of the need for autonomy and authenticity, qualities that enable both characters to move beyond rigidly conventional stances.

However, such processes of introspection and dynamic interpersonal exchange extend far beyond the central protagonists. They operate throughout the novel and are presented as essential mechanisms for both personal growth and broader social progress. These critical perspectives illuminate the literary conventions and cultural concerns that shaped Gaskell's narrative strategy, and they collectively

highlight the novel's insistence on the transformative potential of communication for societal improvement (Anderson, Satalino, 2013, p.110).

John Thornton is portrayed as a "Captain of Industry," reflecting the recognition of human dignity at work. Thornton embodies the complexities of industrial leadership and the moral responsibilities that come with it. However, as previously mentioned, as Gaskell emphasizes the resolution of social conflict through an operation of human sympathy, John Thornton illustrates this as he has to navigate the problems of being an industrialist while trying to maintain a sense of human dignity and respect for his mill workers. In fact, throughout the narrative, Thornton learns how to be more cautious and more "human" as an industrial leader. Gaskell is able to portray his journey through a process of "moral education", where he has to re-evaluate his values, indeed he has to reconcile his business decisions with his workers' condition and needs, suggesting that true leadership involves compassion, understanding, valuing and recognition of human dignity at first.

For instance, his relationship with Higgins is marked by tension but also by recognition of the workers' needs, reveling a gradual recognition of the workers' perspective, signaling also an emerging balance between authority and compassion (Campbell, 1980, p.244).

However, Higgins's character evolves as he interacts particularly with Margaret and Thornton. Through these interactions, he begins to reassess his prejudices and assumptions about others. For example, after learning about Boucher's struggles, Higgins feels a sense of responsibility for his family and takes it upon himself to care for them, demonstrating a newfound compassion and social responsibility (Anderson, Satalino, 2013, p. 117).

Moreover, Higgins's relationship with Thornton evolves from one of antagonism to mutual respect. As he recognizes Thornton's humanity and the complexities of his character, Higgins becomes more willing to collaborate and engage in constructive dialogue, ultimately leading to a more equitable relationship between workers and management (Anderson, Satalino, 2013, pp. 117-118), so Higgins's journey reflects a transformation from a rigid, judgmental stance to a more empathetic and socially responsible outlook, influenced by his interactions with others and the recognition of shared humanity.

To sum up, *North and South* affirms that social reconciliation does not arise from abstract theories or rigid economic systems, but from the recognition of human dignity across class boundaries and from sustained, reciprocal exchanges between individuals; through dialogue, empathy, and everyday acts of moral engagement. Gaskell envisions a society in which conflict is not eradicated but humanized, and in which progress becomes possible precisely because citizens learn to see one another not as representatives of opposing classes, but as fellow human beings.

Chapter 4

H.G. Wells

4.1 H.G. Wells' The Time Machine

Herbert George Wells (1866-1946) was one of the most influential public intellectuals of the first half of the twentieth century. Although he is now best known as a pioneer of modern science fiction, during his lifetime he was widely regarded as a visionary social and political thinker. Questions of global order occupied a central position in his work. From the early years of the century until the end of the Second World War, Wells consistently advocated the creation of a world state, which he imagined as the ultimate guarantor of universal peace and justice (Bell, 2018, p. 867).

The Time Machine is Wells' debut novel, published in 1895 and it is among his more political publications; later he published *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896), *The Invisible Man* (1897), and *The War Of The Worlds* (1898); for his early novels, he had been declared as "the father of science fiction" together with Jules Verne, the author of *Journey To The Centre Of The Hearth* (1864). But Wells' novels pushed the boundaries of scientific imagination, making fantastical notions such as genetic engineering, invisibility and extra-terrestrial life forms, seem alarmingly real. Crucially, his novels continue to present nightmarish visions of a future that is defined by selfishness, inequality and conflict; qualities Wells hoped humankind might yet do away with (Crompton, 2017, pp. 6-7).

Moreover, thanks to his novels of social realism, such as *Kipps* (1905) and *The History of Mr. Polly* (1910), which depict lower-middle-class English life, it was suggested that he was a worthy successor to Charles Dickens (Brome, 1951, p.99).

In the novel *The Time Machine*, the author offers a dystopian vision of the future society, reflecting on the worsening of workers' conditions in late industrial society. This dystopian novel portrays the division between social classes brought to the extreme: the rich and the poor division, that was entrenched in 19th century society, has led to humankind splitting into two different species, in a society where the exploitation of workers and the denial of fundamental rights are the main concerns.

The main protagonist is a time traveller, a complex Victorian gentleman-inventor, who has invented a time machine that allows him to move through time. One of his voyages is set in the future around the year 802 701; there he discovers that human kind has evolved into two different species: the Eloi and the Morlock.

At first, the time traveller believes that the Elois are the dominant class, but soon he discovers the truth thanks to his friendship with one of the Eloi, Weena: the Morlocks control the machinery of society and as soon as it gets darker they go onto the surface to hunt for food, therefore, since they are cannibals,

the Elois have become their preys. The time traveller faces them multiple times: he explores dark tunnels, witnessing the Morlocks' predatory behaviour, and during a night-time struggle in a forest, Weena is likely killed when a fire spreads out of control, and they attack him too.

Most importantly, the Morlocks steal his time machine and hide it in the White Sphinx, a huge statue of white marble, standing on a bronze pedestal, with a door at its base, which serves as a central landmark for the story. Like the mythological Sphinx, it represents an unresolved riddle, reflecting the unknowable nature of humanity's destiny; at the same time, it functions as a silent witness to the degeneration of humankind, standing immobile as civilizations decline.

While searching for his time machine, the Morlocks attempt to trap him, but the Time Traveller recovers his machine and manages to escape. He then travels even farther forward in time, witnessing not only the slow death of the Earth under a red sun but also the extinction of life. Finally, he returns to his own time and recounts his story to sceptical guests, who find it hard to believe him. Soon after, he departs again on the time machine and never returns, leaving the truth of his journey uncertain.

His stay in this future reveals Wells' central warning: extreme social division leads not to progress, but to dehumanization and decay. Wells hoped that his audacious vision of the future would stimulate new ways of thinking about the urgent need for social reform. In a performative sense, he believed that his narrative might contribute to preventing, or at least reshaping, the social and evolutionary degeneration he depicted, particularly the deepening class divisions (Bell, 2018, p. 868).

With this novel, Wells was engaging with a theme that was widely present in *fin de siècle* political thought. From the mid-nineteenth century, and especially from the 1880s onwards, the development of new communication technologies, most notably the electric telegraph and the ocean-going steamship, encouraged reflections on the shrinking of distance and the speeding up of social and political life. These changes also raised questions about the need for new forms of international, imperial, and global organization (Pemberton 2001; Bell 2007; Deudney 2008).

Wells drew on these debates in developing his vision of world transformation. He argued that the large "synthetic" communities of the future would differ significantly, both in form and in scale, from those of the past. In this perspective, "mechanism" functioned not only as the material infrastructure through which the world could be reorganized, but also as the ideological foundation of a new ethos. By elevating scientific rationalism to a guiding principle, Wells envisioned the emergence of new forms of subjectivity and new practices of social and political control (Bell, 2018, p.869).

Most importantly, Wells was able to anticipate and warn future generations about the centrality of social questions in any project of global transformation. His work emphasized that technological progress, if not accompanied by ethical reflection and social responsibility, could deepen inequalities and produce new forms of domination rather than collective emancipation.

By foregrounding issues such as social justice, political authority, and the organization of knowledge, Wells invited his readers to critically assess the social consequences of modernity. In this sense, his vision functioned not merely as a speculative projection of the future, but as a normative intervention aimed at shaping the moral and political consciousness of coming generations, urging them to confront the challenges of globalization with foresight, responsibility, and a commitment to the common good.

4.1.1 Eloi and Morlocks as metaphors for the alienation of labor.

Wells' works are deeply embedded in the social context of the 1890s, and his literary fantasies reflect the anxieties characteristic of the era, particularly concerns about labor and the effects of rapid social change on humanity. Wells explicitly connects his metaphors of bodily alteration to contemporary social conditions, using them not merely as sensational devices but as symbolic expressions of social degeneration and instability (Youngs, 2013, p. 107).

In the novel, Wells' first aim is to describe a society in which the two different classes, Elois and Morlocks, are "descendants" of a human kind divided by classes, therefore they represent the upper classes and the working-class in the late Victorian society. *The Time Machine* could be considered as a premonition of a future in which the Victorian class system has run rampant at the expense of humanity.

Moreover, the imagery of *The Time Machine* establishes an association with the "white" sphinx and Wells' subterranean proletariat of the future, underlines the relevance of the social or labour question.

In the novel, the Elois are described as "little people", fragile, child-like and simple beings, characterized by proportionality and beauty, which serve to reassure the reader that they are not at risk of degenerating into something monstrous, indeed this physical description contributes to the initial perception of their world as an "utopia" (Beaumont, 2006, p. 238).

Furthermore, they have a language which is "excessively simple, almost exclusively composed of concrete substantive and verbs. There seemed to be few abstract terms or little use of figurative language, their sentences were usually simple and of two words" (p. 41)[24].

Moreover, they seem to live a life of comfort and leisure, without working, they "displayed no vestige of a creative tendency. There were no shops, no workshops no signs of importations among them. They spent all their time in playing gently, in bathing in the river, in making love in a half-playful fashion, in eating fruit and sleeping" (p. 43). Through these words, Wells tries to convey symbolically the traits the Elois share with the Victorian upper classes: the time traveler initially perceives their world as a "too

[24] Wells, H.G., 1895, Collins classics, 2017, p.41. Further references to this edition will be given in the text

perfect triumph of man," suggesting an idealized version of society that masks deeper issues, they seem to live in a perfect society, and the encounter with them does not create a sense of panic or of terror, but an easy sense of intimacy. This idyllic existence reflects a superficial utopia, which can be seen as a critique of the upper class's detachment from the realities of the working class (Beaumont, 2006, p. 236).

Nevertheless, they embody the consequences of social change and the labour question; rather than representing progress, they have evolved into a fragile and dependent species. Although they are physically beautiful, they are also weak, and this fragility reflects a profound loss of vitality and strength. As Youngs (2013) observes, their "lack of curiosity matches their unproductiveness" indicating the erosion of both intellectual engagement and practical agency. Having lost their vigour and resilience, the Eloi subsist primarily on fruit, as they neither breed cattle nor engage in productive labour, and animal life itself has become extinct (p.111).

Another defining trait of the Eloi is their profound apathy. The Time Traveler recalls the episode of a girl who was drowning, yet no one made any attempt to rescue her, a scene that exposes their lack of empathy and their complete absence of purposeful action; in fact, this moment not only illustrates their emotional detachment but also reinforces Wells' portrayal of a society that has lost both moral responsibility and the capacity for collective intervention.

As a consequence of this, their initial appearance as a perfect society is overcome: the Eloi represent a degenerate evolutionary status, and reflect Wells' complex views on class relations, highlighting the potential outcomes of social evolution and the dangers of a complacent upper class (Beaumont, 2006, pp. 236-242).

As the narrative unfolds, it becomes evident that the Eloi's apparent paradise is underpinned by a darker reality, since they are not the only inhabitants of the future as they coexist with the Morlocks, ape-like creatures, who live underground, operating machines and living in darkness.

The Eloi exhibit a fear for the Morlocks, indicating the exact power dynamic in the society: hence this fear suggests a reversal of power, they are not the dominant force in the world, but, on the contrary, the Morlock, despite their grotesque appearance, are the "superior" class, in stark contradiction from the first impression of the Time Traveler (Beaumont, 2006, p. 247).

Therefore, as Suvin (1973) states, the two species serve as metaphors for the alienation of labor, reflecting the social class dynamics of the Victorian era. The Eloi represent the upper class, characterized by their apparent ease and comfort, while the Morlocks symbolize the working class, who toil in the shadows and are essential for the survival of the Eloi. This relationship illustrates a profound inversion of power dynamics, where the upper class, despite their dominance, becomes powerless in the face of the Morlocks, who have evolved into a separate biological species.

The Time Traveler's realization that the capitalists and workers have not only inverted their roles, but also differentiated into separate biological entities, underscores the theme of devolution and the alienation

inherent in class struggles. This inversion of roles and the resulting alienation reflect Wells' commentary on the socio-economic conditions of his time, where the exploitation of labor leads to a loss of humanity and identity (Suvin, 1973, pp. 339-348).

Indeed, the Morlocks are described with different connotations if compared to the Eloi: the Time Traveler describes them as "ghosts" or "white figures" or "white ape-like creatures running rather quickly up the hill" (p.46) "queer little ape-like figure (…) with strange large bright greyish-red eyes" they are like "human spider" or "little monster" and, as the inhabitants of the upper-world, they are descendants of humankind, but if compared to the Eloi, the time traveler evokes a sense of disgust and terror from their physical characteristics, "this bleached, obscene, nocturnal thing was also heir to all the ages" (p. 48).

The interpretation of the time traveler has to do with the development of the Morlock both from a physical and social point of view, but mostly economical: their physical appearance, their whiteness, is seen as a "natural" reaction to their subterranean life, they live underground, in absence of light, and consequently their pigmentation has disappeared in order to adapt to the environment in which they live and work. Therefore, the Morlocks are depicted as having adapted to their underground environment, which is a reflection of their labor conditions (Youngs, 2013, p.117).

So, the time traveler starts to realize the nature of the Morlocks and their role in this society:

> this second species of man was subterranean, there were three circumstances in particular which made me think that its rare emergence above the ground was the outcome of a long-continued underground habit, in the first place there was the bleach look common in most animals that live largely in the dark. Then those large eyes with that capacity of reflecting light are common features of nocturnal-things. And last, that evident confusion in the sunshine, that hasty yet fumbling awkward flight towards dark shadow (pp. 48-49).

Even if they live in this "artificial underworld", their work was necessary to the comfort of the daylight race:

> At first proceeding from the problems of our own age, it seemed clear as daylight to me that the gradual widening of the present merely temporary and social difference between the capitalist and the labourer, was the key to the whole position. There is a tendency to utilize underground space for the less ornamental purposes of civilization, there is the metropolitan railway in London, for instance, there are new electric railways there are subways, underground workroom and restaurants and they increase multiply, evidently, I thought this tendency had increased till industry has gradually lost its birthright in the sky. I mean that it had gone deeper and deeper into larger and ever larger underground factories, spending a still-increasing amount of its time there in, till, in the end! Even now, does not an east-end worker live in such artificial conditions as practically to be cut off from the natural surface of the earth? (pp. 50-51)

With this description, Wells tries to portray the Morlocks as the laboring class, adapted to their underground existence, as east-end workers who live in artificial condition, for instance, underground in mines; also, Wells refers to a contemporary "tendency to utilize underground space for the less ornamental purposes of civilization," citing as examples the Metropolitan Railway in London, the growing number of electric railways and subways, as well as underground workrooms and restaurants; in this case, the Morlocks are like the miners who worked underground to meet society's energy needs, the Morlocks work underground for the benefits of the Eloi.
Furthermore, the Traveler notes that the widening social differences between the capitalist class and laborers are key to understanding the emergence of the Morlocks as a distinct species.

> Again, this exclusive tendency of richer people-due to the increasing refinement of their education and the widening gulf between them and the rude violence of the poor-is already leading to the closing in their interest of considerable portions of the surface of the land(pp.50-51)

He reflects on how the aristocracy distanced themselves from the working class, leading to a situation where the Morlocks, who represent the labor force, have become adapted to their oppressive conditions (Youngs, 2013, pp.117-118).
Finally, he concludes that

> the above ground you must have the Haves, pursuing pleasure and comfort and beauty and below ground the have nots, the worker getting continually adapted to the conditions of their labour. Once they were there they would no doubt have to pay rent and not a little of it for the ventilation of their caverns and if they refused they would starve or be suffocated by arrears (pp. 50–51).

This division between "Haves" and "Have-nots" is clearly embodied in the two opposing human species and directly reflects the class stratification of nineteenth-century industrial England. Through this vertical separation of space and class, Wells projects contemporary social inequalities into the future, suggesting that unchecked industrial capitalism may evolve into a fully dystopian society (Youngs, 2013, pp. 117–118).
The following paragraph will discuss this issue.

4.1.2 The vision of a dystopian future as the result of increased social inequalities.

In *The Time Machine*, Wells constructs the Time Traveler's visions of the future as a geometrically progressive series of evolutionary "devolutions" that can be interpreted through a Lévi-Strauss' structural framework based on binary oppositions. Drawing on the assumptions of late-Victorian social Darwinism, particularly the belief in linear evolutionary progress, stable social hierarchies, and the

"naturalness" of dominance, Wells adopts this conceptual model only to invert its conclusions. Rather than confirming a secure evolutionary order, the projected futures expose its instability: each dominant class is ultimately transformed into prey in the following stage. This process unfolds from the division between the Eloi and the Morlocks to the eventual disappearance of humanity itself, through a sequence of oppositions that move from humans to animals, terrestrial to marine life, animals to plant-like organisms, and finally from organic life to inorganic matter. The final journey told by the time traveler, marked by the eclipse of the sun and the survival of only the most elementary forms of life, telescopes the entire oppositional paradigm into an "entropic conclusion that denies any teleology of progress". In this way, Wells employs the logic of social Darwinism to demonstrate that its rigorous extrapolation leads not to evolutionary perfection, but to the total dissolution of life and power (Suvin, 1973, pp. 341-342).

Furthermore, using the Time Traveller's voyages through time, Wells takes existing urban and social conditions and projects them forward through Darwinian and quasi-Marxist frameworks, all framed by fin de siècle anxieties and imagery that enables a critical scrutiny of contemporary life.

As the Traveler attempts to interpret this society, Wells foregrounds the instability of interpretation itself. The narrative, in this sense, operates from what might be termed a "fifth dimension," exposing the limits of human understanding across time.

Focusing on the uniformity of the Eloi, the Traveler deduces that he is witnessing a communistic society, inferred from the apparent "absence of private houses and family structures" (p. 29). He speculates that gender differences, the family unit, and occupational specialization are merely "militant necessities" that will disappear in a more secure and balanced society (p. 30). Almost immediately, however, he undermines his own theory by admitting that it "fell short of the reality" (p. 30). What the Traveler initially considers as progress would (for many contemporary readers) signify regression. Although unsettled by the Eloi's intellectual state, he briefly consoles himself with the idea that he is observing a communistic utopia.

Yet theorists such as Herbert Spencer[25] had argued that specialization and hierarchy were the very markers of progress. According to Suvin (1973), Spencer's theories translated differences in socioeconomic positions into biological terms, emphasizing the survival of "the fittest", a theory widespread and used by social Darwinists to advocate for social peace among the privileged classes while neglecting the struggles of colonial people or "lower races" (p. 339). For Spencer (1864), civilization advanced through increasing differentiation, a view fundamentally at odds with the

[25] Herbert Spencer (1820–1903) was an English philosopher, sociologist, and political theorist, best known for developing social Darwinism. In *Principles of Biology* (1864) argued that social inequality resulted from natural evolutionary processes and opposed state intervention in welfare and labor regulation, promoting laissez-faire individualism. His ideas became central to what is now termed **social Darwinism,** an ideology often used to justify class hierarchy, industrial exploitation, and imperial expansion. (Bannister, 1979, p.111).

Traveller's interpretation. Wells exploits this tension to generate uncertainty, positioning the Traveller as a "floating interrogative" within a chronotope that destabilizes clear distinctions between advancement and degeneration.

Nevertheless, Wells, influenced by his personal experience and philosophical readings, tried to reframe these theories in terms of social classes rather than pseudo-biological terms, criticizing the implications of Spencer's theories and their possible application in society (Suvin, 1973, p. 339).

This resistance is embodied in Weena, whose emotional significance transcends material and evolutionary change. Her individuality reflects Darwin's emphasis on variation as the engine of evolution, a principle Wells explicitly endorses. Through time travel, uncertainty, and interpretative instability, Wells challenges dominant classificatory systems and undermines assumptions of type, wholeness, and certainty.

As previously mentioned, the dynamic between Eloi and Morlock illustrates the consequences of a class system that has evolved into a dystopian future, where the Eloi's simplicity and beauty serve to neutralize the defamiliarization experienced by the Time Traveler upon his arrival.

Wells critiques the bourgeois liberal notion of progress by showing that the two separated descendants of humankind have degenerated from their human origins into distinct species, highlighting the consequences of social and economic disparities.

Apart from the labour condition, the two "species" have symbolic features that help the readers understand the main objective of Wells. On one hand we have the Eloi, a class of beings who have evolved into a state of "degeneration", they are depicted as a classless society that has lost its vitality and ability to defend itself, ultimately becoming the prey to the Morlocks. So, this inversion of social roles illustrates the consequences and the heritage of a society that has neglected its responsibilities and allowed class division to evolve into biological differences.

Nevertheless, at first, the time traveler's observation about the Eloi lead to various hypotheses regarding their society, ranging from a communist classless society to a degenerated class society. Therefore, the portrayal of this species or class serves as a cautionary tale about the dangers of complacency and the loss of social consciousness, ultimately presenting a bleak vision of the future where a class has become powerless and vulnerable to the "predatory classes" (Suvin, 1973, p. 339).

On the other hand, however, we have the Morlocks. The Morlocks are also associated with the darker aspects of evolution and societal decay, as they represent a regression from the civilized state of humanity. They also represent the working class that has evolved into a predatory species; their existence serves as a critique of social Darwinism and the bourgeois values of Wells' time, since they embody the fears of a future where the working class has turned against the upper class (Suvin, 1973, p. 340).

In Wells's vision of the future, the Morlocks reverse the traditional power dynamic: those who once labored to support society now dominate it, preying upon the class that previously held power. This

transformation reflects a deeply pessimistic view of progress, suggesting that social change alone does not guarantee moral improvement.

In contrast, the Eloi symbolize a degenerate and passive upper class that has lost its vitality, intelligence, and capacity for self-defense. The Eloi rely entirely on the Morlocks to maintain their lifestyle, yet they remain unaware of the danger beneath the surface. Their passivity ultimately leads to their downfall, illustrating how a privileged class can decay when it is no longer challenged or required to "struggle".

Overall, the Morlocks symbolize the fears of societal collapse and the darker side of human nature, contrasting sharply with the more idyllic but ultimately superficial existence of the Eloi, who represent the emptiness and the weakness of a society built on comfort and inequality. The stark contrast between the two groups reinforces Wells'central warning: without balance, ethical responsibility, and genuine social harmony, human evolution may lead not to progress, but to dehumanization (Suvin, 1973, pp. 347-348).

One important aspect to consider is the potential outcomes of unchecked class disparities, the relationship between the two species is based upon the lack of respect for culture exhibited by the Eloi and represent the future of the working-class as descending into cannibalistic Morlocks. Wells wanted to warn the readers on the future of art and society if society does not take into consideration social and political changes (Dryden, 2013, p. 226).

The "great triumph of humanity" initially imagined by the narrator reflects a familiar nineteenth-century faith in education, cooperation, and social harmony as the inevitable outcomes of scientific and industrial development:

> "The great triumph of humanity I had dreamed of took a different shape in my mind. It had been no such triumph of moral education and general co-operation I had imagined. Instead, I saw a real aristocracy armed with a perfected science and working to a logical conclusion the industrial system of to-day. Its triumph had not been simply a triumph over nature, but a triumph over nature and the fellow-man." (p.51)

and he continues "the balanced civilization that was at last attained must have long since passed its zenith, and was now far fallen into decay" (p.52)

However, this expectation is abruptly dismantled and replaced by a far more unsettling vision: a "real aristocracy armed with a perfected science," whose power rests not on moral improvement but on technological domination.

Wells's language emphasizes the perversion of progress. The "triumph" described is no longer ethical or collective; instead, it is a triumph "over nature and the fellow-man," suggesting that scientific advancement has intensified social hierarchy rather than abolished it.

Consequently, the future he imagines is not a perfected society, but the logical endpoint of nineteenth-century industrial capitalism where progress rather than emancipating humanity, becomes a tool through which one class consolidates its control over others

Ultimately, the Traveler's unreliable theorizing mirrors Darwin's own admission that humans are "too blind" to fully grasp Nature's meaning, leaving both narrator and reader uncertain not only about the Eloi and Morlocks, but about the possibility of definitive knowledge itself.

4.1.3 Eloi and Morlock: metaphor of the colonizer and colonized

In Wells'novel, the story of time travel is mediated by a framing narrator who addresses an audience composed of educated professional men: a psychologist, a medical practitioner, a provincial mayor, a journalist, and an editor, figures who, like the narrator himself, attempt to interpret and evaluate the extraordinary account presented to them. This narrative structure foregrounds the problem of understanding and communicating experiences that exceed ordinary frames of reference, a difficulty explicitly articulated by the Time Traveller when he reflects on the impossibility of conveying his discoveries to those who have not shared his journey. By invoking the hypothetical example of an African returning from Central Africa to describe modern London to his tribe, Wells not only emphasizes the limits of cross-cultural and cross-temporal translation but also reverses the conventional direction of late-nineteenth-century travel narratives:

> Conceive the tale of London which a negro, fresh from central Africa, would take back to his tribe!..how much could he make his untraveled friend either apprehend or believe? Then, I think how narrow the gap between a negro and a white man of out own times, and how wide the interval between myself and these of the golden age! (p.40).

This inversion introduces the possibility of an alternative perspective while simultaneously challenging dominant racial and cultural hierarchies by suggesting a fundamental continuity between different human groups. As a result, readers are encouraged to question their own assumptions and interpretative frameworks. The Time Traveler's struggle to articulate his experiences is further underscored by his manner of speech, described by the narrator as 'feeling his way among his words'.

In this way, Wells establishes a close connection between spatial exploration, verbal expression, and textual interpretation, prompting readers from the outset to remain alert to the uncertainties and instabilities of meaning that the narrative unfolds (Youngs, 2013, pp.108-110).

Wells' portrayal of the Eloi and Morlocks, therefore, can also be interpreted as a commentary on the British Empire. The Morlocks, often seen as the oppressed, can symbolize the colonial subjects of Britain seeking revenge on their imperial masters, while the Elois are described as embodying the archetype of the "good

native" in imperialist romance. They are portrayed as docile, gentle, and childlike, which reflects a common motif in imperialist literature where non-European natives are depicted as inferior and in need of European guidance. The Time Traveller describes the Eloi as having "a graceful gentleness" and a "certain childlike ease" that inspires confidence in him (Cantor, Hufangel, 2006, p. 43).

Additionally, the Eloi are depicted as living a paradise-like existence, reminiscent of the idyllic South Seas islanders. They are shown to spend their time in leisure activities such as playing, bathing, and eating fruit, with no signs of agriculture or property rights. This portrayal suggests a critique of the British belief in their own superiority, as the Eloi's idyllic life comes at the cost of their moral and intellectual development, indicating a degeneration from their human ancestors (Cantor, Hufnagel, 2006, pp. 39-42).

This perspective suggests that Wells was warning his contemporaries about the potential decline of their imperial power and the cyclical nature of empires, which rise and fall over time.

Upon his arrival in the future, the Traveler wonders what transformations humanity may have undergone, questioning whether it might have “lost its manliness” and evolved into something inhuman, unsympathetic, and overwhelmingly powerful. He imagines that he himself might appear as “some old-world savage animal,” rendered even more terrifying by a shared humanity and therefore fit to be summarily destroyed (p. 23).

In this moment, the Traveller potentially occupies the position of the “savage,” a post-Darwinian reversal that exposes the fragile foundations of contemporary claims to superiority. While racial hierarchies are unsettled by this reversal, gender values remain firmly intact. “Manliness” continues to be associated with vigour and is presented as the defining quality of humankind. Further evidence of this gendered framework emerges with the introduction of the Eloi.

Significantly, the first Eloi the Traveller encounters is described as “very beautiful and graceful,” yet “indescribably frail,” resembling “the more beautiful kind of consumptive” familiar to nineteenth-century readers (p. 24). As previously mentioned, the Eloi’s physical beauty is quickly equated with both physical and intellectual weakness, reinforcing existing gender hierarchies. Their “child-like ease,” lack of facial hair, and “Dresden-china type of prettiness” render them superficially attractive yet fundamentally deficient (p. 25). This deficiency becomes more disturbing when the Traveller realizes that they believe he arrived from the sun in a thunderstorm, revealing a level of superstition commonly attributed to so-called “primitive” peoples. Consequently, the Eloi are deemed intellectually comparable to “one of our five-year-old children” (p. 26). The shock lies in the disjunction between linear time and progress: for the Traveller to be superior to the Eloi appears as aberrant as for a “savage” to be superior to a modern subject.

The Eloi’s lack of curiosity mirrors their unproductiveness, another trait frequently ascribed to “savages” in imperial discourse and often used to justify colonial appropriation. The Traveller describes their world as resembling “a long-neglected and yet weedless garden” (p. 26). Their

exclusively fruit-based diet, in a world where domesticated animals are extinct, further signifies a loss of vigour. In Wells' time, meat consumption was often associated with masculinity, although this association was contested by proponents of vegetarianism, who viewed meat-eating as degenerate and potentially leading to cannibalism (Youngs, 2013, p. 110).

According to Cantor and Hufnagel (2006), the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized in the novel could be understood by examining the dynamics between the Eloi and the Morlocks. The Eloi represent the colonizer, while the Morlocks symbolize the oppressed lower class and colonial subjects. The Time Traveler's journey into the future reveals a reversal of power dynamics, where the Morlocks, once subjugated, have become the dominant force, preying on the Eloi.

This shift can be interpreted as a commentary on the fate of empires, suggesting that the British Empire, at its peak, may not remain powerful indefinitely. The Morlocks' revenge on the Eloi serves as a metaphor for the potential uprising of colonized peoples against their imperial rulers. The narrative reflects on the cyclical nature of empires, where periods of dominance are often followed by decline and reversal of fortunes, drawing parallels to historical empires like Rome.

Wells' portrayal of the Time Traveller also critiques the Eurocentric perspective, as he attempts to understand the future world through the lens of his Victorian values, ultimately revealing the limitations of such a viewpoint. This narrative structure raises questions about truth and perspective, aligning *The Time Machine* with modernist themes.

This effect suggests that Wells is not merely orientalizing a distant future, but specifically projecting this process onto the future of Britain itself. From this perspective, *The Time Machine* can be considered strikingly prophetic (Cantor, Hufnagel, 2006, pp. 45-46).

4.2 The representation of the non-English in literary works.

Although *The Time Machine* is often celebrated as a forward-looking and foundational work of science fiction, its imaginative power is deeply rooted in the ideological, cultural, and political context of late Victorian imperialism. Wells' vision of the future is shaped by the narrative structures and assumptions of nineteenth-century imperial romance, thus, by modeling time travel on the familiar experience of travel to the imperial frontier, Wells transforms the future into a space of colonial encounter, where the Time Traveler assumes the role of the European explorer confronting primitive societies. The representation of "non-English" people in *The Time Machine* must be understood not only within the framework of imperial discourse but also in relation to the systematic violation of human rights that underpinned British colonial expansion.

Even though the concept of "human rights" as a formal legal discourse emerged more fully in the twentieth century, Victorian imperial ideology denied colonized populations political agency, cultural autonomy, and even full moral personhood. Wells' depiction of the Eloi and the Morlocks reflects this

denial in symbolic form. The Eloi are infantilized and stripped of intellectual and political capacity, while the Morlocks are rendered "subhuman" through animalistic and cannibalistic imagery. Such representations echo colonial narratives that justified domination by portraying non-European people as either incapable of self-rule or inherently dangerous. From a human rights perspective, this literary strategy mirrors the ideological processes through which colonial violence, forced labor, and cultural erasure were normalized, as the humanity of the colonized was made conditional, partial, or altogether absent (Cantor, Hufnagel, 2006, pp. 40-41).

The Eloi and the Morlocks, while commonly read as exaggerated projections of Victorian class divisions, also reproduce the racialized binaries of imperial discourse: the "good" native and the "bad" native, the submissive and the savage, the childlike and the bestial. The Eloi, infantilized, erotically idealized, and incapable of self-governance, reflect colonial stereotypes that justified imperial domination as a benevolent and civilizing force, while the Morlocks, described in animalistic and cannibalistic terms, echo the dehumanizing representations of colonized peoples used to legitimize violence and control.

Through this framework, Wells exposes how imperial ideology depends on the systematic denial of full humanity to non-English subjects, a denial that constitutes a fundamental violation of human rights (Cantor, Hufnagel, 2006, pp. 36-37).

At the same time, *The Time Machine* complicates and partially destabilizes these imperial assumptions by mapping the colonial frontier onto Britain itself. The Orientalizing imagery that pervades the novel, evident in architectural descriptions, symbolic objects such as the sphinx, and the "Eastern" aesthetic of the future landscape, suggests that England has itself become the Other. This reversal anticipates a central concern of postcolonial theory: the idea that empire ultimately transforms the metropole as much as it transforms the colony. Wells thus envisions a future in which Britain has "gone native," succumbing to the very conditions of degeneration, passivity, and dependence that imperial discourse traditionally projected onto non-European societies. The fate of the Eloi, in particular, dramatizes Victorian anxieties about imperial decline, racial degeneration, and moral stagnation, suggesting that dominance and security breed weakness rather than progress. Moreover, the novel's depiction of the Time Traveler himself further critiques imperial arrogance. His assumption of cultural superiority, his readiness to appropriate resources and bodies, including his implicit claim over Weena, and his willingness to "dehumanize" the Morlocks reveal the ethical violence underlying the imperial mindset. In portraying the explorer's repeated misinterpretations and gradual, incomplete understanding of the future world, Wells undermines the colonial belief in transparent knowledge and absolute authority. (Cantor, Hufnagel, 2006, pp. 40-41).

In a certain sense, Wells anticipates one of the central themes of postcolonial literature: the notion that the Empire eventually "strikes back." During its imperial expansion in the nineteenth century, Britain

viewed itself as the dominant conqueror, imposing its language, literature, educational systems, and cultural values on its colonial subjects. Yet, paradoxically, Britain itself was transformed by the people it had colonized. The widespread incorporation of Indian, African, and Caribbean words into the English language offers a tangible example of this reciprocal influence.

Moreover, the movement of writers from the imperial periphery to the literary center of Britain, from Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936) in the late nineteenth century to Salman Rushdie (1947) in the twentieth, further illustrates this dynamic. Through both his fiction and essays, Rushdie has documented how Britain's colonial subjects have shaped and reshaped the cultural identity of the imperial "mother country." In *The Satanic Verses* (1988) for example, Rushdie explores the immigrant experience in Britain and highlights the "orientalizing" of London, noting how even the city's cuisine has absorbed Eastern influences.

Wells' *The Time Machine* similarly incorporates multiple orientalizing elements, presenting a Britain that has effectively "gone native," succumbing to the very forces it once sought to dominate on the imperial frontier. This notion of "going native" was a profound anxiety for imperial Britain. The legitimacy of British rule was predicated on the idea that British subjects were disciplined and orderly, in contrast to the supposed indiscipline of colonial populations. Yet British imperialists constantly feared that exposure to the seemingly carefree and unrestrained lifestyle of the colonized would lead British rulers to adopt these traits themselves.

This imperial anxiety is echoed in Alfred Tennyson's (1809-1892) poem *The Lotos-Eaters*, which likely influenced Wells' portrayal of the Eloi as passive and disengaged. Thus, *The Time Machine* can be understood as reflecting a deep-seated imperialist apprehension regarding the future of Britain, envisioning a scenario where the colonizer is transformed by the colonized, destabilizing traditional power structures (Cantor, Hufnagel, 2006, pp. 44-46).

In brief, *The Time Machine* functions as a parable of empire's self-destruction: the exploitation, dehumanization, and hierarchical thinking that sustain imperial power are shown to generate the conditions for its eventual collapse. Through its engagement with imperial romance, orientalism, and evolutionary discourse, the novel exposes the deep entanglement between Victorian representations of non-English peoples and the broader structures of domination that enabled the violation of human rights in both colonial and metropolitan contexts.

This reading of *The Time Machine* provides a critical foundation for the following section, which will examine how late Victorian and early modernist writers further interrogated the representation of non-English voices, particularly through narrative silence, linguistic exclusion, and the tension between domination and resistance in colonial and postcolonial contexts.

4.2.1 *Colonialism in Victorian fiction: the "non-English".*

In *The Time Machine*, literary representations challenge racial assumptions and offer a critical perspective on imperialism and colonialism. Colonialism can be understood as a system of political, economic, and cultural domination exercised by a foreign power over a territory and its people, justified through the ideology of the "civilizing mission" and grounded in the construction of hierarchical differences between colonizer and colonized.

At its core, colonialism functioned as a mechanism of economic exploitation. Colonies were integrated into unequal trade systems, forced to produce raw materials, and prevented from developing independent economies. Systems of slavery, indentured labor, and taxation sustained imperial expansion. Beyond economics, colonial rule imposed cultural and political control: indigenous governance structures were dismantled, European legal and administrative systems were enforced, and education promoted Western values while marginalizing local knowledge. Racial hierarchies legitimized inequality, and resistance was often met with violent repression (Said, 1993).

Victorian fiction often reflects the complex and frequently troubling attitudes toward non-English peoples and cultures within the context of British imperialism and colonial expansion; non-English identities in Victorian fiction were largely shaped by the imperial context and reflected the violation of human rights through their marginalization, stereotyping, and linguistic othering. While authors like Wells introduced moments of critical reflection, the dominant Victorian narrative generally reinforced the ideological structures that justified colonial oppression and cultural domination.

Wells' novel offers a particularly interesting entry point for this discussion, as it subtly addresses issues of cultural difference, racial assumptions, and the difficulties of cross-cultural understanding. Wells' depiction of the Time Traveler's reflection on how an African visitor might perceive London draws attention to the alienation and communication barriers between different cultures, highlighting the challenges in representing the "Other" or "non-English" in English literature. The novel reverses the usual colonial gaze by imagining how an African might interpret English civilization, thus inviting readers to question Eurocentric perspectives. However, it simultaneously exposes Victorian racial hierarchies, suggesting that while cultural differences exist, underlying assumptions about racial similarity or difference persist (Youngs, 2013, p.108).

In Victorian fiction more broadly, non-English characters and languages were often represented through a colonial lens that simultaneously exoticized and marginalized "foreign" people. Such representations reflected the period's imperialist ideology, which justified the domination and exploitation of colonized peoples through discourses of racial and cultural superiority.

Non-English speech was frequently depicted as unintelligible, primitive, or comic, reinforcing stereotypes that dehumanized colonized populations and rationalized their subjugation. Victorian narratives often portrayed non-English characters as victims of oppression or as threatening "Others," thereby reflecting the violation of human rights embedded in imperial practices.

Moreover, Victorian authors sometimes used non-English languages or dialects in their works, but usually in ways that reinforced power imbalances. For example, characters who spoke in nonstandard English or foreign tongues were often positioned as subordinate or exoticized figures. This linguistic representation not only marked cultural difference but also reinforced the social hierarchies of empire. (Brantlinger,1988, pp. 4-5). It has been argued that such portrayals contributed to the broader systemic denial of agency and voice to colonized peoples, as their languages and identities were filtered through English narratives that prioritized imperial interests (Said, 1993, pp. 66-67).

Wells' novel also participates in, and subtly critiques, the broader Victorian literary tradition that represented non-English subjects through a racialized and hierarchical lens. In Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), Africa is depicted as a space of temporal regression, a "prehistoric" world that challenges European claims to moral and cultural superiority, yet Conrad's narrative still struggles to grant African characters independent voice or interiority. For instance, the portrayal of African characters is emblematic of imperialist narratives that depict colonized peoples as primitive or inscrutable, reinforcing colonial domination through a process of racial and cultural othering. While Conrad's work is often debated for its complexity and ambiguity, many critics argue that it exemplifies how Victorian and Edwardian literature contributed to the systematic dehumanization of colonized subjects (Said, 1978).

Similarly, Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* (1901) presents Indian characters through the framework of imperial loyalty and service, embedding multilingualism and cultural difference within a narrative that ultimately affirms British imperial perspectives and authority, that emphasize loyalty or subservience to the Crown. Wells' *The Time Machine* draws on these narrative conventions but radicalizes them by projecting imperial hierarchies into the future and turning them back upon Britain itself. By imagining a future in which the English have become passive, dependent, and ruled by conditions resembling those imposed on colonized peoples, Wells destabilizes the assumption that imperial dominance is either natural or permanent (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2002, pp. 38-39).

Nevertheless, some Victorian works hint at the complexity of cross-cultural encounters and question the morality of imperial dominance. Wells' novel, by drawing attention to the difficulty of understanding across cultural and temporal divides, subtly critiques imperial arrogance and highlights the need for empathy. Yet, this critique remains ambivalent, as Victorian literature as a whole often struggled to move beyond entrenched racial and cultural prejudices.

Crucially, Wells anticipates a key insight of postcolonial and human rights discourse: that systems of domination ultimately dehumanize both the oppressed and the oppressor. The Time Traveller's behavior exemplifies this ethical collapse. His readiness to objectify Weena, his impulse to exterminate the Morlocks, and his belief in his inherent superiority reflect the moral logic of empire, in which violence becomes permissible once the Other is stripped of full humanity. This logic parallels real

historical practices of empire, where racialized subjects were excluded from legal protections and denied fundamental rights to life, freedom, and self-determination. Yet Wells does not present the Time Traveller as an unequivocal hero. Instead, his repeated misjudgments and partial understanding expose the epistemological arrogance at the heart of imperial knowledge production. The novel thus critiques the belief, central to Victorian imperialism, that English observers could fully comprehend, classify, and control non-English societies.

By orientalizing the future of Britain and depicting imperial decline through images of decay, degeneration, and reversal, *The Time Machine* offers a powerful warning against the moral complacency of empire. The novel suggests that the violations of human dignity inflicted on colonized peoples are not external to British civilization but are structurally embedded within it. In this sense, Wells's work forms a bridge between Victorian imperial fiction and modernist and postcolonial critiques of power, identity, and rights. The future he imagines is not merely speculative but ethically charged, revealing how the denial of humanity to the Other inevitably leads to the erosion of humanity itself.

The legacy of colonialism continues to shape the contemporary world through global economic inequalities, persistent racial hierarchies, and geopolitical tensions. Understanding colonialism as a comprehensive system of exploitation is therefore essential both for interpreting Wells' novel and for analyzing the enduring power structures that influence modern global relations.

Ultimately, *The Time Machine* demonstrates how Victorian representations of non-English peoples were inseparable from the imperial structures that enabled the systematic denial of human dignity and rights. By translating the logic of empire into a speculative future, Wells reveals the moral and ideological fragility of a civilization built on hierarchy, exclusion, and domination. The novel's portrayal of infantilized, silenced, or dehumanized Others exposes the mechanisms through which imperial power justified itself, while its vision of imperial decline underscores the unsustainability of such systems. In foregrounding the ethical consequences of imperial thought, Wells anticipates later critiques of empire and invites readers to reconsider Victorian fiction not merely as a product of its historical moment, but as a site where the tensions between progress, power, and human rights are profoundly and unsettlingly negotiated.

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