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| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Stunted and Starved: The Human Cost of Nineteenth-Century Educational Thinking in Dickens and Eliot

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| ABSTRACT

Education was one of the most hotly debated topics of the Victorian era. As industrialization reshaped British society, questions about what children ought to learn—and for what purpose—engaged philosophers, reformers, novelists, and politicians alike. Charles Dickens, in Hard Times (1854), and George Eliot, in The Mill on the Floss (1860), center their narratives on the educational ideologies of the nineteenth century, using them as a framework to explore broader themes of identity, class, gender, and the tension between reason and emotion. While Dickens employs satire to critique the utilitarian approach to education promoted by thinkers such as Jeremy Bentham and James Mill, Eliot offers a more psychologically nuanced examination of the consequences of being denied education on the basis of gender. Collectively, these two novels present a profound critique of Victorian educational philosophy and its impact on individuals. This study explores the detrimental effects of a restrictive education that privileges intellectual conformity over emotional development. In Mr. Gradgrind's system, education becomes an instrument of self-interest—a narrow vision of facts and measurable knowledge—that fails to cultivate genuine human engagement. Eliot, in turn, critiques the educational system that discriminates against women, perpetuating the notion that females are inherently passive and intellectually inferior. Denied the tools of knowledge necessary for maturity, female characters remain trapped in a perpetual state of intellectual childhood.

| KEYWORDS

Educational philosophy, Charles Dickens, George Eliot, Victorian era, emotional intelligence, industrialization, gender and education, utilitarianism

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. INTRODUCTION

Nineteenth-century thinking on education forms a central theme in both Hard Times and The Mill on the Floss. During the mid-Victorian period, the concept of what constituted education had undergone considerable transformation. Before the nineteenth century, relatively few children attended school; the Church organized the framework for most available schooling, and the school's chief rationale was religious. The sweeping changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution—in technology, agriculture, demography, transportation, and class structure—necessitated an entirely new educational model. Schools for the lower classes became sites for teaching the barest basics of reading, writing, and arithmetic, while the rising middle class adhered to the severely traditional curriculum of the ancient grammar and public schools.

Charles Dickens engaged directly with contemporary debates about educational reform. He raised the question of what kind of education best serves the child, opposing any system that neglects children's genuine needs and capacities. His embrace of reform reflects the broader social shift of the nineteenth century—a movement from strict moral discipline toward greater recognition of children as distinct individuals deserving of nurture and respect. Vineta Colby indicates that Dickens absorbed the increasingly accepted ideas about the treatment of children that had emerged since the late eighteenth century, and that he was

convinced of the ideals of childhood purity and innocence, while being implacably opposed to utilitarian notions of child-rearing and education.

Dickens devoted considerable attention to the emotional effects of education on children. In a speech delivered some years after Hard Times was published, he lamented the school that discourages bright childish imagination and reduces young pupils to "little parrots and small calculating machines" (qtd. in Collins 77). His defense of fancy and imagination runs throughout his fiction and his public life alike.

At the heart of Hard Times lies a sustained critique of utilitarian education—portrayed as dehumanizing in its exclusive focus on quantifiable facts at the expense of creativity and feeling. The novel's opening scene, in which Thomas Gradgrind commands his classroom to concern itself with nothing but Facts, establishes the philosophical target of Dickens's satire. Gradgrind's very name functions as Dickensian shorthand for the grinding reduction of human individuality to abstract, measurable data, while his educational system caricatures the Benthamite principles that had significantly shaped English schooling through reformers such as James Kay-Shuttleworth.

George Eliot's engagement with Victorian educational thought is both deeply personal and philosophically intricate. In The Mill on the Floss, the question of education cannot be separated from the question of gender. Maggie Tulliver possesses remarkable intellectual gifts evident from childhood, yet she inhabits a society that systematically denies girls access to the education readily available to boys. Tom Tulliver is sent to Mr. Stelling's school to receive a classical education designed to prepare him for a career; Maggie, equally gifted and far more inclined toward scholarship, is excluded from this opportunity. Eliot's irony is piercing: Mr. Stelling's methods prove unsuitable for Tom's practical intelligence, yet Tom is the one who receives an education, while Maggie—who would undoubtedly excel in such a setting—is forced to seek knowledge wherever she can.

This study employs a comparative literary approach to explore how both novels critique nineteenth-century educational ideologies, drawing on the intellectual traditions of Rousseau, Wordsworth, and Freud to illuminate the psychological and social dimensions of that critique.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarship on Victorian educational fiction has long recognized Hard Times and The Mill on the Floss as foundational texts for understanding the ideological tensions of mid-nineteenth-century schooling. Critics have approached both novels from sociological, psychological, and feminist perspectives, tracing the influence of contemporary educational theory on Dickens's satire and Eliot's psychological realism.

The philosophical tradition against which both novelists write is most visibly that of utilitarianism. Jeremy Bentham's insistence on measurable utility as the criterion of value, extended into educational practice by James Mill and institutionalized through reformers such as James Kay-Shuttleworth, provided Dickens with his central satirical target. Gradgrind's classroom represents, in exaggerated form, the logic of a system that reduces human beings to calculable units of productive capacity. Critics including Philip Collins (1963) and David Grylls (1978) have documented the historical accuracy of Dickens's portrait, showing that H.M. Inspectors of Schools in the 1840s and 1850s applied a heavily utilitarian framework to the evaluation of elementary education.

The influence of Rousseau on both novels has received sustained critical attention. Jean-Jacques Rousseau's Emile (1762) proposed that education must follow the natural development of the child, protecting innocence from corrupting social influences and prioritizing sensory experience over abstract verbal instruction. David Grylls notes that Rousseau's ideas, adapted and enlarged by Pestalozzi and Froebel, underpin much of what later became known as child-centered education, and that his influence extended beyond schools to the domestic treatment of children by parents. Both Dickens and Eliot draw on this tradition in their critiques of premature intellectualism and the suppression of childhood wonder.

Wordsworth's The Prelude—particularly Book V, concerned with the natural goodness of children and the damage wrought by artificial schooling—offers another literary-philosophical context for both novels. Wordsworth's celebration of imaginative freedom, his condemnation of educators who subordinate nature to abstract knowledge, and his insistence that childhood is a necessary developmental stage rather than an incomplete version of adulthood all find resonance in the fictional worlds of Dickens and Eliot.

Feminist scholarship has focused especially on The Mill on the Floss and its treatment of gendered educational exclusion. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, among others, have analyzed Maggie Tulliver as a figure whose intellectual aspirations are systematically thwarted by patriarchal structures that define female intelligence as threatening or inappropriate. The novel has been read as a sustained argument that denying women education does not merely limit their opportunities but damages their inner lives in ways that are finally irreparable.

The Freudian dimension of both texts—the significance of early childhood experience to the formation of adult personality—has also attracted critical interest. Peter Coveney's influential study The Image of Childhood (1957) argues that Freud's emphasis on the child's consciousness as determinative for adult psychic life created an intellectual climate within which Victorian literary treatments of childhood can productively be read, even though the novelists themselves wrote before the formal elaboration of psychoanalytic theory.

The present study builds on these critical traditions while offering a comparative reading that brings the two novels into sustained dialogue, examining the ways in which Dickens and Eliot respond to shared intellectual concerns through different narrative strategies—satire and psychological realism, respectively.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a comparative analytical literary methodology, bringing together close textual reading with intellectual-historical contextualization. The primary texts—Charles Dickens's Hard Times (1854) and George Eliot's The Mill on the Floss (1860)—are analyzed in relation to the dominant educational philosophies of the Victorian era, including utilitarianism, Rousseauvian naturalism, Wordsworthian Romanticism, and Freudian developmental psychology.

The comparative framework is justified by the historical and thematic proximity of the two novels: both were published within a six-year span at a moment of intense public debate about educational reform; both center their narratives on the formation—and deformation—of young minds by inadequate or actively harmful educational systems; and both draw on a shared body of educational and philosophical thought, though they respond to it through markedly different fictional modes.

The analysis proceeds on three levels. At the textual level, close reading is used to identify the specific narrative and rhetorical strategies through which each novelist articulates an educational critique—satire, irony, characterization, symbolic naming, and structural patterning. At the intertextual level, the novels are set in dialogue with one another, identifying convergences and divergences in their treatment of shared themes: the suppression of imagination, the gendering of educational access, the harm of premature intellectualism, and the relationship between childhood experience and adult identity. At the contextual level, the educational philosophies and intellectual traditions that inform the novels are reconstructed through reference to primary and secondary historical sources.

The study does not seek to reduce the novels to illustrations of pre-existing philosophical positions, but rather to illuminate the ways in which Dickens and Eliot transform historical and philosophical material into fiction of psychological depth—fiction whose critique of education is effective precisely because it is embodied in characters whose suffering makes abstract arguments concrete and emotionally compelling.

4. RESULTS AND FINDINGS

4.1 THE UTILITARIAN CLASSROOM: GRADGRIND'S SYSTEM IN HARD TIMES

Hard Times is centrally concerned with the conflict between fact and imagination in education, and with the deforming effects of a system that privileges the former to the total exclusion of the latter. Mr. Gradgrind's educational philosophy is encapsulated in the novel's famous opening lines: "Now, what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts" (7). His school in Coketown is a space in which children are treated not as human beings but as vessels to be filled with measurable data.

Gradgrind's reduction of individuality to abstraction is evident in his refusal to acknowledge Sissy Jupe's nickname, insisting instead on calling her "girl number twenty" and renaming her Cecilia. His insistence that her circus-performer father be described as "a veterinary surgeon, a farrier, and horse breaker" (9) reveals the deeper logic of his system: reality must be translated into official, quantifiable categories, and anything that resists such translation—emotion, imagination, individual identity—must be suppressed or eliminated.

The episode of the horse definition crystallizes Dickens's critique. Sissy Jupe, who has grown up among horses and loves them, is unable to produce the required utilitarian description; Bitzer, the exemplary student, recites a clinical anatomical classification with mechanical efficiency. The contrast is not merely comic but philosophically pointed: Bitzer's answer could have come from any textbook, while Sissy's inability to answer reflects a knowledge that is embodied, affective, and experiential—precisely the kind of knowledge that Gradgrind's system cannot accommodate or recognize.

Gradgrind's children, Louisa and Tom, bear the most direct consequences of his educational philosophy. Raised on facts and deprived of wonder, they are forced into a premature adulthood that deforms their innocence. The novel describes them as having been "lectured at, from their tenderest years, coursed, like little hares" (12–13), and their emotional and imaginative faculties are described in terms of deprivation and starvation. No little Gradgrind has ever seen a face in the moon, heard a

nursery rhyme, or experienced wonder at the natural world; their rooms are stocked with science books and equipment, and imaginative literature is treated as destructive nonsense.

The consequences of this education become fully apparent in Louisa's adult life. Raised without the emotional and imaginative resources that would allow for self-knowledge, she enters a loveless marriage with Bounderby almost as if in a trance, unable to comprehend her own desires. Her eventual collapse—"What have you done with me, father?"—stands as one of the most powerful indictments of educational malpractice in Victorian literature. Tom, similarly deformed by his upbringing, becomes a thief and a figure of moral emptiness, the logical product of a system that cultivated self-interest and calculation while starving the heart.

Bitzer, who ultimately betrays Gradgrind himself by applying the principles of self-interest his teacher inculcated, represents the system's logical conclusion: an individual in whom the moral and affective dimensions of human life have been entirely extinguished. His betrayal is not a failure of Gradgrind's system but its most perfect expression.

Mr. M'Choakumchild, the classroom teacher, embodies a different but related failure. Trained in a "factory" alongside a hundred and forty other schoolmasters, he has been drilled in an immense range of subjects—orthography, etymology, geography, algebra, modern languages, and more—yet his very over-stuffedness renders him incapable of genuinely educating. Dickens invokes the figure of Morgiana from the Arabian Nights to suggest that M'Choakumchild's method risks not merely containing but killing the imaginative life of his pupils: "dost thou think that thou wilt always kill outright the robber Fancy lurking within—or sometimes only maim him and distort him?" (12).

4.2 GENDER AND EDUCATIONAL EXCLUSION IN THE MILL ON THE FLOSS

In The Mill on the Floss, the critique of Victorian education takes a different but complementary form. Where Dickens attacks the content of education—its exclusive focus on facts at the expense of imagination—Eliot attacks the structure of educational access, showing how the denial of education to women on the basis of gender is both intellectually absurd and psychologically devastating.

Maggie Tulliver possesses intellectual gifts that far surpass those of her brother Tom, yet Tom is sent to school and Maggie is not. The irony of this arrangement is sharpened by the fact that Mr. Stelling's classical curriculum proves entirely unsuited to Tom's practical, non-abstract intelligence: he struggles with Latin grammar and Euclid, forgetting lines, mispronouncing words, and failing to grasp the underlying logic of the subjects he has been sent to master. Maggie, by contrast, finds the Latin Grammar interesting, grasps its principles quickly, and delights in discovering that words have multiple meanings and connotations—a linguistic sensitivity entirely beyond Tom's capabilities.

Eliot's irony throughout these scenes is precise and unsparing. Tom asserts his superiority through social convention and physical confidence, dismissing Maggie's intelligence as "silly" and her interest in learning as presumptuous. Yet it is Tom who cannot recall his Latin lesson, who mispronounces words and stammers, and who lacks the imagination to see beyond the denotative function of language. The "donkey," as Eliot implies, is Tom rather than Maggie—yet Tom retains all the privileges of formal education while Maggie is confined to whatever knowledge she can acquire through unofficial channels.

Maggie's self-education, pursued through reading and through the intellectual companionship she seeks wherever she can find it, becomes both a source of vitality and a cause of suffering. Her longing for intellectual engagement and for acceptance as an equal participant in learning torments her throughout the novel. The various adults in her life—Tom, Mr. Stelling, and the Dodson relatives—consistently devalue her intelligence, reducing it to "prattle" or treating it as an inappropriate deviation from proper femininity. Mr. Stelling assigns all women the "dreadful destiny" of being "quick and shallow," unable to go "far into anything"—a judgment that reflects not observed reality but the ideological requirements of patriarchal social organization.

Philip Wakem and Stephen Guest represent, each in their own way, the unchosen paths and the unrealized intellectual possibilities that result from Maggie's exclusion from formal education. Philip offers intellectual companionship of a kind she cannot find elsewhere; her attraction to him is partly an attraction to the kind of educated, cultivated mind that her own society refuses to cultivate in women. The tragedy of Maggie's life is shaped not, as Louisa Gradgrind's is, by an education that suppressed her inner life, but by the absence of an education that might have given her inner life legitimate forms of expression and fulfillment.

4.3 EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY IN CONTEXT: ROUSSEAU, WORDSWORTH, AND FREUD

Both novels engage with the major strands of educational philosophy that informed nineteenth-century thinking about childhood and schooling. The influence of Rousseau is particularly evident. Rousseau's argument in Emile that education must follow the natural development of the child—protecting innocence, prioritizing sensory experience over abstract verbal

instruction, and allowing children to learn through direct engagement with the world—finds direct echo in both novels' critique of premature intellectualism and the suppression of imagination.

Rousseau's insistence that "what do they teach after all? Words, more words, always words!" (108–09) anticipates Dickens's satirical portrait of M'Choakumchild, whose vast accumulation of verbal knowledge has not equipped him to genuinely educate but only to pour facts into passive receptacles. The analogy between misunderstanding and no knowledge at all—the principle that half-knowledge is worse than ignorance—is central to both novelists' critiques of a schooling system that mistakes the recitation of information for genuine learning.

Wordsworth's influence is equally significant, particularly Book V of The Prelude, which concerns the natural goodness of children and the damage wrought by artificial schooling. Wordsworth's condemnation of educators who know the inside of the earth and can spell the stars but have no appreciation of imagination, wonder, or the moral teaching of the natural world resonates directly with both Dickens's portrait of Gradgrind's system and Eliot's depiction of Mr. Stelling's irrelevant and ineffectual teaching. The Wordsworthian ideal of the child of Winander—free, spontaneous, richly imaginative, responsive to the natural world—finds its fictional counterparts in Sissy Jupe and Maggie Tulliver, both of whom preserve their imaginative vitality precisely because they have not been fully subjected to the deforming influence of the educational systems the novels critique.

Freudian psychology, though formally articulated after both novels were published, provides a retrospective theoretical framework for understanding the psychological damage they portray. Freud's concept of infant determinism—the claim that the adult's psychic life is decisively shaped by the earliest experiences of childhood—illuminates the trajectory of characters such as Tom and Louisa Gradgrind. Tom becomes a thief and an embodiment of moral emptiness; Louisa experiences confusion, emotional paralysis, and the disintegration of her marriage. Maggie Tulliver's psychological suffering—her constant need for love and acceptance, her inability to reconcile her intellectual aspirations with the roles available to her—culminates in her death, the ultimate consequence of a childhood in which her identity was systematically devalued.

Peter Coveney's observation that Freud created an intellectual climate within which Victorian literary treatments of childhood can productively be read is borne out by both novels: their portraits of damaged childhoods are not merely social criticism but psychological insight, documenting the inner costs of educational systems that suppress the natural development of the human person.

5.CONCLUSION

Read together, Hard Times and The Mill on the Floss constitute a comprehensive critique of Victorian educational philosophy. They converge in their opposition to a system that treats children as incomplete adults, subordinates emotional and imaginative development to the acquisition of abstract or utilitarian knowledge, and fails to recognize the individuality of the child as the foundation of genuine education. They diverge in their emphases: Dickens is primarily concerned with what is taught (facts at the expense of imagination), while Eliot is primarily concerned with who is taught (boys rather than girls). Together, they demonstrate that the educational failures of Victorian society operated simultaneously on the axes of content and access.

Both novelists also share a commitment to the view that the consequences of educational failure are not merely social or intellectual but psychological and moral. The damaged characters they create—Louisa's emptiness, Tom Gradgrind's selfishness, Tom Tulliver's narrowness, Maggie's unfulfilled longing—are not simply illustrations of abstract educational arguments but fully realized human beings whose suffering indicts a social system that has failed them. In this sense, the novels' power as social critique derives directly from their power as fiction: it is the depth and specificity of their characters' inner lives that makes the abstract critique concrete, urgent, and affecting.

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