

An Exploration Study into the Fictionalisation of Educational Theory and Practice in Victorian Novels

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Abstract

This article is an exploration into how Victorian writers portray education in their novels. The content of syllabi as well as details of how children were taught in different schools, using different educational ideologies is not the focus of this article. This article will illustrate how Charles Dickens and Thomas Hughes represent education differently although they were writing during the same period. Dickens' *Hard Times*, henceforth referred to as *HT*, was first published in 1854 and Hughes' *Tom Brown's school Days*, henceforth *TB*, was first published in 1857. The article refers to a range of Victorian writers but Charles Dickens' *Hard Times* and Thomas Hughes' *Tom Brown's School Days* are the main focus.

Introduction

Many aspects of the portrayal of Victorian education are to be found in the literature including unusual aspects like homoerotic elements. In her article "The Public School Experience in Victorian Literature," Banerjee mentions this aspect in *David Copperfield* and *The Adventures of Harry Richmond*. In both novels the hero has to break his attachment to his role model to develop effectively as the hero of his own life (par. 13). Steerforth in *David Copperfield* and Heriot in *Harry Richmond* are both reduced in importance as the novels progress so that the hero of the novel can regain his importance and independence.

Some critics like Terry Eagleton write from a Marxist perspective and class and the different strata in society are the main focus. Eagleton's chapter one, "The Rise of English" from his book *Literary theory, An Introduction* contains many references to class and struggle like "Literature, in the meaning of the word we have inherited, is an ideology. It has the most intimate relations to questions of social power" (19). For Eagleton education and literature is used by those in power to control the masses. He states that "By the mid-Victorian period, this traditionally reliable ideological form [religion] was in deep trouble...under the twin impacts of scientific discovery and social change its previous unquestioned dominance was in danger of evaporating. This was particularly worrying for the Victorian ruling class..." (20).

He continues in the same vein later in the chapter by stating that "As religion progressively ceases to 'cement' affective values and basic mythologies by which a socially turbulent class-society can be welded together, 'English' is constructed to carry this ideological burden from the Victorian period onwards" (21).

This article however, attempts to explore why Dickens and Hughes depicted the effects of education differently although they were writing at the same time. It must be realised that Dickens saw the education of his time as bad for a child and Hughes saw it as a positive influence. We need to understand two different ideologies prevalent at the time as well as the different school systems that were functioning in Victorian England.

In his article *Victorian Lessons: Education and Utilitarianism in Bentham, Mill, and Dickens*, Patrick Bradley describes utilitarianism as one of the ideologies behind Victorian education.

Jeremy Bentham and his followers formulated Utilitarianism to address the impact of the Industrial revolution on British society. His philosophy stated that institutions should provide “the greatest happiness to the greatest number” (69).

He believed that good resulted when “pleasure, defined by each individual’s enlightened self-interest, predominated”(69). Unfortunately his idea was corrupted by industrialists “to justify their disregard for anything except social usefulness and economic gain”(69).

Added to this, conservative opinion was against popular education in Victorian England. Factory owners and farmers were against it as their labour force consisted of semi-educated or uneducated children since child labour was cheap. The schools for the poor were working – class schools and were run by Benthamites. They rather resembled factories where pupils were “...little vessels...arranged in order, ready to have imperial gallons of facts poured into them until they were full to the brim” (Altick 249).

Girls education was devoid of intellectual content and they were simply taught things which accomplished women of the age should know. We see this in Miss Pinkerton’s letter in Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair* :

Those virtues which characterise the young English gentlewoman, those accomplishments which become her birth and station, will not be found wanting in the amiable Miss Sedley . . . in music, in dancing, in orthography, in every variety of needlework, she will be found to have realised her friend’s fondest wishes. (par. 9)

Negative attitudes towards uneducated children of the lower classes were prevalent and Dickens gives a clear example of this from the mouth of Miss Monfathers in *The Old Curiosity Shop*:

“And don’t you think you must be a very wicked little child . . . to be a wax-work child at all?”

Poor Nell had never viewed her position in this light . . .

“Don’t you feel how naughty it is of you”, resumed Miss

Monfathers, “to be a wax-work child, when you might have the proud consciousness of assisting, to the extent of your infant

powers, the manufacturers of your country; of improving your mind by the constant contemplation of the steam-engine . . .” (240).

Another ideology underpinning education at the time was that of “Muscular Christianity”. This term was first used in the 1850’s to portray the characteristics of Charles Kingsley and Thomas Hughes’ novels. The basic idea behind Muscular Christianity was that participation in sport could develop physical fitness, “manly” character and Christian morality (Watson, Weir and Friend). Hall (qtd. in par. 18) states that “...a significant number of the Protestant elite, notably Kingsley and Hughes, advocated the use of sports and exercise to promote the harmonious development of mind, body and spirit.”

It is interesting to note that the Modern Olympic Games, developed in 1896 by Baron Pierre de Coubertain, is strongly linked to the ideology of Muscular Christianity (par. 28). De Coubertain read a French translation of *TB* and also visited Rugby School, the setting of the novel. He was impressed by the athletic traditions of the English public school system and saw this as “a vehicle for rebuilding the character of France after the Franco-Prussian war and as a perfect model for the rebirth of the Ancient Olympics” (par. 29).

These two differing ideologies, Utilitarianism (Benthamism) and Muscular Christianity, were intimately linked with the different schools functioning at the time. Dickens wrote about education influenced by Benthamism and as a result portrays it in a negative light. We see this in *Nicholas Nickleby* (boarding school), *Great Expectations* (a country school) and the Gradgrind school in *Hard Times* where Dickens satirizes the Benthamite philosophy of “usefulness” and “facts” over all else. In sharp contrast to working-class schools stood the public schools. These provided the sons of a privileged few a secondary education, where the emphasis was on the classics. The classics were studied for their presumed disciplinary value (Altick 252).

Eventually a little science, modern history and French or German were introduced due to the efforts of Dr. Thomas Arnold at Rugby. Other public schools later adopted these too (252).

Hughes wrote about Muscular Christianity in Public schools and how it could positively develop the youth, in his novels *Tom Brown's School Days* and *Tom Brown at Oxford*.

With these facts in mind it now becomes possible to examine Victorian writer's views on education.

Dickens' depiction of working- class schools and utilitarianism

Dickens detested books which discounted the wonderful and bizarre in favour of precept and homily. He declares, “In an utilitarian age, of all other times, it is a matter of grave importance that Fairy tales should be respected” (Ackroyd 689).

Dickens was very critical of education that lacked imagination and concentrated solely on facts. It is no coincidence that the opening words of *HT* are Gradgrind's “Now what I want is facts” (13). In this book Dickens attacks what he saw as an incorrect and unhealthy approach. In his search for ideas and material evidence in which to base his attack he asked W. H. Wills, once a secretary of the *Daily News*, and a person with considerable experience in the administrative side of publishing, to obtain for him “the Educational Board's series of questions for the examination of teachers at schools” (Ackroyd 689).

“‘Facts’ in an utilitarian age meant the vogue for statistics and figures which was even then being used to abstract and atomise the suffering of the urban poor” (689). Dickens central themes for *HT* were a childhood devoid of *Fancy* and the horrors experienced by the urban poor and working-class people in large industrial cities.

He believed that the poor relations between employers and employees were the result of insufficient education. He attended a strike by the Preston weavers and saw that there was a lot of aggression between the strikers and their employers. He ascribes this to a lack of *Fancy* in their lives. It is for this reason that Dickens was

interested in supporting educational institutions in large industrial cities (691).

In the opening pages of *HT* Dickens attacks an educational body known as the Department of Practical Art. The art superintendent, Richard Redgrave, published a lecture in which he stated that taste depended upon “acknowledged principles” and “rules” rather than “innate feeling or perception”. He also declared that “colours must be arranged together in specific and absolute quantities to be agreeable to the eye . . .” (Ackroyd 692).

Dickens rejected and despised statements of this kind and we see his reaction to Mr Redgrave’s views early in *HT* in the section aptly entitled ‘murdering the Innocents’. Mr Gradgrind says:

“You are to be in all things regulated and governed . . . by fact . . . You must discard the word Fancy altogether . . . You must use . . . for all these purposes, combinations and modifications (in primary colours) of mathematical figures which are susceptible to proof and demonstration. This is the new discovery. This is fact. This is taste” (18).

Here we see Dickens’ horror in not seeing the world of *Fancy*.

Without *Fancy* the world would be a dreary and a nasty place, as indeed it is for the little Gradgrinds. Louisa expresses this when she says that *Fancy* could have become” . . . my refuge from what is sordid and bad in the real things around me . . .” (215)

It should not be thought that the Gradgrind system (facts only) is exaggerated. Dickens got his idea for Gradgrind’s school from the Birkbeck schools, founded by William Ellis, a utilitarian and friend of John Stewart Mill. His intention was to equip the poor for their social role in an industrial society.

In *Household Words*, 25 December 1852, Henry Morley wrote about these schools. In his account there is even a Blitzler – “a little fellow, with light flaxen hair . . . was quite a luminary on all points that were mooted. There was not a question he did not answer . . .”

The syllabus of these Birkbeck schools was dominated by social economy. “The relationship of man to man was interpreted in terms of the cash-nexus; the applied form of self-interest” (Hobsbaum 177). It is in such terms that Gradgrind’s pupils, Bitzer among them, grew up to see human behaviour.

Gradgrind’s children are emotionally and imaginatively “stunted”. This can be identified in Louisa’s narrow world view and the fact that her only emotional outlet is her brother. Her brother finds consolation for his regimented life in compulsive gambling which eventually leads to him stealing from his employer to pay his debts. His lack of feeling, a direct result of the type of upbringing he has received, is seen in his laying the blame on an honest working- man , Stephen Blackpool.

He defends himself on being discovered by telling his father that he was governed by the System. He says:

“So many people are employed in situations of trust; so many people out of so many, will be dishonest. I have heard you talk, a hundred times, of its being a law. How can I help laws? You

have comforted others with such things, father. Comfort yourself!"
(Dickens 277)

Dickens illustrates beautifully the flaw in Gradgrind's utilitarian system here through the words of Tom who shows how individual responsibility is diminished in favour of conforming to abstract rules and statistics. Dickens' ultimate blow against utilitarianism, depicted here by the Gradgrind school, is when Bitzer, Gradgrind's "star" pupil, seizes Tom for his theft.

"Bitzer . . . have you a heart?"

"The circulation, sir," returned Bitzer, "couldn't be carried on without one . . ."

"What motive- even motive in reason- can you have for preventing the escape of this wretched youth," said Mr Gradgrind, "and crushing his miserable father?" See his sister here. Pity us! . . ."

"I am going to take young Mr Tom back to Coketown, in order to deliver him to Mr Bounderby. Sir, I have no doubt whatever that Mr Bounderby will then promote me to young Mr Tom's situation, and I wish to have his situation, sir, for it will be a rise to me, and will do me good."

"If this is solely a question of self-interest with you-" Mr Gradgrind began.

"I beg your pardon for interrupting, sir," returned Bitzer; "but I am sure you know that the whole social system is a question of self-interest . . ." (280)

The Gradgrind system is acting against itself here. Dickens is showing us this clearly in this confrontation between the head and his star pupil. Everyone, including Victorians, at some stage experience a situation where feeling plays a role. We see the same dilemma in Louisa's life. Gradgrind sees her marriage to Bounderby in economic terms and forgets to take into consideration the human element. Louisa's marriage is a disaster. This reminds us of poor Ernest Pontifex's situation in Butler's *The Way Of All Flesh*. Ernest fails in his marriage and in many ventures of his life due to an incorrect upbringing (education).

His father, the Reverend Theobald Pontifex, was a strict parent whose world-views were shaped by professional and parental egotism. He applied his be-cruel-to-be-kind code strictly shaping, or rather miss-shaping, Ernest for life.

Although Gradgrind is certainly a kinder, more 'whole' person than Theobald, the effect he has on Louisa's success in adult life is much the same.

The point Butler and Dickens are making here, although using different examples, is the same. The upbringing (education) of a child is not to be devoid of Fancy and the free, yet controlled, exercise of the child's own will.

Although Butler's *The Way Of All Flesh* is coloured by his own personal views on the institutions of marriage and family life, his arguments against incorrect education are similar to Dickens' and deserve attention.

One simply can't help wondering at the future of the youth educated under people like Gradgrind's school master Mr M'Choakumchild (Dickens), and the head of Roughborough, Dr Skinner, where Ernest is a pupil (Butler). The heads of both these widely different educational institutions are misguided and conceited educationists.

Butler says of Skinner that despite his literary accomplishments, if he became immortal ". . . it [would] probably be for some reason very different from the one which he so fondly imagined". Skinner is shown as a phoney and a charlatan. Butler goes on:

Could it be expected to enter into the head of such a man as this that in reality he was making his money by corrupting youth; that it was his paid profession to make the worse appear the better reason in the eyes of those who were too young and inexperienced to be able to find him out . . . that he was a passionate, half-turkey-cock, half-gander of a man whose sallow, bilious face and hobble-gobble voice could scare the timid, but who would take to his heels readily enough if he were met firmly; that his *Meditations on St. Jude*, such as they were, were cribbed . . . (100)

Butler is more critical of the character of heads of educational institutions than the institutions themselves.

Hughes' depiction of public schools and Muscular Christianity

Having seen a working-class school system as run by Gradgrind, through Dickens' eyes, it now becomes necessary to examine the British public school system through the eyes of another author. As we have already seen, the emphasis in public schools was largely classical.

We see an example of this in Hughes' *TB*, "The lower –fourth . . . scattered about on the benches, with dictionary and grammar hammered out their twenty lines of Virgil and Euripides . . ." (140)

The exercise of construing was also a popular one:

The boy who was called up first was a clever merry School-house

Boy . . . and so was selected for the first victim. 'Triste lupus,

stabulis', began the luckless youngster, and stammered through some eight or ten lines.

"There, that will do," said the Doctor ; "now construe".

On common occasions, the boy would have construed the passage well enough probably, but now his head was gone.

"Triste lupus, the sorrowful wolf," he began.

A shudder ran through the whole form . . . (142)

Hughes' description of public school life is, on the whole, a positive one. He does, however, attack the system of bullying which was prevalent at the time. It would seem as if bullying was not only a form of social behaviour but that it was an integral part of the education system in all schools. In their book on bullying, *Bullying in Schools*, Tattum and Lane have a chapter (chap. 7) by Geoffrey Walford is entitled "Bullying in Public Schools: Myth and Reality" (81-88). Here the author states that "Bullying and violence were an integral part of the public school system"(82). He also states further that "[the] use of corporal punishment was part of the fabric of nineteenth-century English education...in all types of schools"(82).

In *TB* we see "Pater" Brooke condemning the practise of bullying in his parting speech:

Now, I'm as proud of the house as any one . . . But it's a long way from what I want to see it. First, there's a deal of bullying going on . . . there's nothing breaks up a house like bullying. Bullies are cowards, and one coward makes many; so goodbye to the School-house match if bullying gets ahead here. (110)

Thackeray in *Vanity Fair* also gives an illustration of public school bullying,

"Hold out your other hand, sir," roars Cuff to his little school-fellow, whose face was distorted with pain . . ."Take that, you little devil!" cried Mr. Cuff, and down came the wicket again on the child's hand. – "Don't be horrified, ladies, every boy at a public school has done it. Your children will so do and be done by, in all probability . . . Torture in a public school is as much licensed as the knout in Russia." (51)

The abuse of alcohol was also a worrying factor at public schools and both Hughes and Thackeray mention this evil. In his parting speech on leaving the sixth form at Rugby Brooke says:

"Then there's fuddling about in the public houses, and drinking bad spirits, and punch, and such rot-gut stuff. That won't make good drop kicks or chargers of you, take my word for it. You get plenty of good beer here, and that's enough for you; and drinking isn't fine or manly, whatever some of you may think of it" (Hughes 110).

The little boy being punished by Cuff in *Vanity Fair*

. . . had been instructed to get over the play-ground wall . . . to run a quarter of a mile; to purchase a pint of rum-shrub on credit; to brave all the Doctor's outlying spies, and to clamber back into the play-ground again; during the performance of which feat his foot had slipped, and the bottle was broken, and the shrub had been spilled . . . (Thackeray 50)

An important aspect of the public school experience was the development of a sense of honour, pride and self-respect among boys. The telling of tales was discouraged. Hughes shows this aspect of public school life when Tom refuses to tell the housekeeper or Dr. Arnold that it was Flashman and his friends who held him over the fire to get his lottery ticket .

Thackeray also mentions this aspect in *Vanity Fair*. Dr. Swishtail arrives on the scene after the fight between Dobbins and Cuff. He threatens to cane Dobbins who has beaten Cuff for bullying little Osborne. Instead of remaining silent and seeing his enemy punished Cuff says "It's my fault sir – not Figs's – not Dobbins'. I was bullying a little boy, and he served me right" (chap. V).

Good public schools attempted to develop the human spirit. Hughes uses Rugby, where Dr. Thomas Arnold was headmaster from 1827-1842, as an example. His aim was to produce young adults who would be "Christian gentlemen in working clothes" (Altick 143). This aim of his was derisively known as "Muscular Christianity" (143). Hughes, a broad Churchman, and one of the leaders of the Christian Socialist Movement (142) admired Arnold's approach and is full of praise for him in *TB*.

He often assumes an authoritarian tone and speaks directly to boys who read the book as if it is Dr. Arnold himself speaking:

In no place in the world has individual character more weight than in a public school. Remember this, I beseech you, all you boys who are getting into the upper forms. Now is the time in all your lives probably when you may have more wide influence for good or evil on the society you live in than you ever can have again. Quit yourselves like men, then; speak up, and strike out if necessary for whatever is true, and manly, and lovely, and of good report; never try to be popular, but only do your duty and help others to do theirs, and you may leave the tone of feeling in the school higher than you found it . . . (144)

He goes on to say that they must" . . . make the School either a noble institution for the training of Christian Englishman, or a place where a young boy will get more evil than he would if he were turned out to make his way in London streets . . ." (144)

This then, is Dr. Arnold's idea of "Muscular Christianity" in a nutshell. The steadfastness of his character and what he stood for is further embroidered upon by Brooke :

And mind now, I say again, look out for squalls, if you will go your own way and that way ain't the Doctors, for it'll lead to grief

. . . he's a strong, true man, and a wise one too, and a public school man too! And so lets stick to him, and talk no more rot, and drink his health as the head of the house. (111)

Arnold's guiding and developing force on the lives of the boys, especially Tom, is illustrated throughout the novel. He gently reprimands Tom, East and "Tadpole" for being late in the dorms after a game of Big-side Hare-and-hounds, giving them time to learn and follow the rules. Later on when Tom has been caught illegally fishing, he flogs him soundly. After East and Tom have transgressed numerous times during the year the Doctor calls them in and warns them of possible expulsion. He later speaks to the master of their form about their behaviour and the two of them decide to make Tom responsible for a new boy. In this way his behaviour improves and he becomes responsible. Here we see Arnold as a mature, insightful and caring headmaster. Due to his attitude Tom becomes "steadier", takes care of young George Arthur, and eventually becomes a well developed adult.

The book *TB* ends where Tom returns to Rugby on hearing of the Doctor's death. He is deeply moved:

If he could only have seen the Doctor again for one five minutes;
have told him all that was in his heart, what he owed to him, how
he loved and revered him, and would by God's help follow his
steps in life and death . . . (305)

Clearly, as an educator and an example to the youth, Arnold has succeeded. Even after his death his example was seen and felt. We need only consider stanza 3 and 4 of his son Matthew Arnold's poem 'Rugby Chapel' to see this.

Fifteen years have gone round

Since thou arosest to tread,

In the summer morning, the road
Of death, at a call unforeseen,
Sudden. For fifteen years,
We who till then in thy shade
Rested as under the boughs
Of a mighty oak, have endured
Sunshine and rain as we might,
Bare, unshaded, alone,
Lacking the shelter of thee. (26-36)

O strong soul, by what shore
Tarriest thou now? For that force,
Surely, hast not been left vain!
Somewhere, surely, afar,
In the sounding labour-house vast
Of being, is practised that strength,
Zealous, beneficent, firm! (37-43)

Matthew Arnold continues speaking for all who knew the Doctor, saying that his purpose on earth was to help, guide and save. He did not live for himself alone.

If , in the paths of the world
Stones might have wounded thy feet,
Toil or dejection have tried

Thy spirit, of that we saw
 Nothing! to us thou wert still
 Cheerful, and helpful and firm.
 Therefore to thee it was given
 Many to save with thyself;
 And, at the end of the day,
 O faithful shepherd! to come,
 Bringing thy sheep in thy hand. ((134-144)

The poem ends by stating that those who knew him at Rugby and those who followed after him, in the legacy of Muscular Christianity he left behind at Rugby, would march on faithfully "to the City of God" (Arnold).

Conclusion

The issues that concerned Victorians about education still exist today. We still find rigid and prescriptive systems that concentrate on "facts" above all else and on the other side systems that encourage individuals to discover and develop their own potential in the fields they are interested in.

Dickens' novels played a large part in showing the public the wrongs of the system they were living in and helped bring about social change. Muscular Christianity has made a deep impression in many institutions in the Modern World and many Catholic colleges and universities have emphasised the importance of an education that includes sport activities. Evangelical groups like Christians in Sport have used the socializing effects of sport in the western world to pick up the mantle of the original muscular Christians.

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