



## INTERTEXTUALITY AND THE POLYPHONIC STRUCTURE OF CHARLES DICKENS *HARD TIMES*

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### ABSTRACT



Intertextuality as it is coined by Julia Kristeva indicates the interrelationship and the interaction between texts. Accordingly, there are almost always traces of other texts that are in dialogue with one another through the process of sameness and difference. Seen like this, literary texts, then, interact, erase and create one another. In this very respect, Charles Dickens' *Hard Times* is an example of a literary text that abounds with instances of intertextuality. In this paper, then, I will study the intertextual relationship of *Hard Times* to other literary and non-literary texts mainly the Bible. In the process, I will demonstrate that intertextuality is not used for the sake of mimesis and referentiality but rather it is quite significant in accounting for the text's dialogic structure and the multifarious voices and discourses that contest and contrast each other to yield meaning in the text. As such, I will have recourse to Mikhail Bakhtin's theorizing of the novel and I will assert the semiotic function of intertextuality.

**Keywords:** *Intertextuality, Dialogic, Mimesis, Referentiality, Semiotic.*



Intertextuality as it was first coined by Julia Kristeva in 1966 means that there is no independent or isolated literary text. In other words, any literary text, to use Kristeva's words, is the "absorption and transformation of another" (1980, 66). The literary text according to Kristeva is "an intersection of textual surfaces rather than a point (a fixed meaning), as a dialogue among several writings" (1980, 65). The text, therefore, is not autonomous and self-contained rather it is a kaleidoscope of texts. One corollary of this assumption is that the authority of the author is at stake given the fact that the meaning of a text is not to be yielded by its writer. Rather it is to be found in the interaction between the multiplicity of intertexts and discourses in a given text. It is yielded via its relations to other texts. In this vein, Linda Hutcheon posits that:

As later defined by Barthes (1977, 160) and Riffaterre (1984, 142-3) intertextuality replaces the challenged author-text relationship with one between reader and text, one that situates the locus of textual meaning within the history of discourse itself. A literary work can actually no longer be considered original; if it were, it could have no meaning for its reader. It is only as part of prior discourses that any text derives meaning and significance (126).

In relation to *Hard Times*, there are multifarious juxtaposed discourses and texts which enter into a mutual dialogue and contest. The most illustrative example of intertextuality in *Hard Times* is the frequent biblical allusions and references which haunt the text. As such, the three titles of the books of the novel – Sowing, Reaping, Garnering– are drawn from the Bible. They are meant to dialogically set the values of Christianity against the utilitarian Gradgrind's philosophy of fact.

It is also obvious that Sissy's answers to her teacher's questions on political economy have a biblical echoing. According to Sissy Jupe, "the first principle of" political economy is "to do unto others as I would that they should do unto me" (*Hard Times* 44). With reference to this statement, it is obvious that Sissy's answer is drawn from the Sermon on the Mount. However, what should be emphasized in this particular context is that this biblical echoing is not

arbitrarily opted for; but, on the contrary, it is purposefully used. It serves Dickens's intention of showing "that uncorrupted nature and The New Testament speak with one voice" (Dyson 198). In this way Dickens biblical references serve to mount his blatant attack of the utilitarian and capitalist policies that were prevalent in the Victorian period, these very policies that have created more bad than good and have disposed of all principles but the principle profit.

The description of Coketown is also tainted with biblical allusions. According to the narrator, "everything was fact between the lying-in hospital and the cemetery, and what you couldn't state in figures, or show to be purchasable in the cheapest market and salable in the dearest, was not, and never should be, world without end, Amen" (*Hard Times* 19). Through this echoing of the biblical language, Dickens bitterly attacks the laissez-faire policy and its reducing of everything to arithmetic and calculations. Everything in Dickens fictional town is to be contained and calculated. Figures, therefore, loom large in the realm of the novel and what can't be calculated is dispensed with and abandoned.

Another example of biblical echoing in the novel is the reference to the parable of the Good Samaritan. As the narrator observes, Mr Gradgrind "sat writing in the room with the deadly statistical clock, proving something no doubt –probably, in the main, that the Good Samaritan was a Bad Economist" (*Hard Times* 168). In fact, this parable is a Christian lesson of charity and love which Mr Gradgrind –blind to human emotions and love– is unable to comprehend and assimilate. In this vein, Samuels posits that in a materialist society based on selfishness, "the lesson of the Good Samaritan may be an interesting spiritual idea, but, in *Hard Times*, it seems to be made into an idea which only those on the edges of decent, bourgeois society, such as the circus entertainers, can adopt and use. It has literally 'no meaning' for the other inhabitants of Coketown" (89).

In addition to the biblical allusion, there are other various texts which are echoed throughout the novel. Chief among these texts are Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, Jeremy Bentham's writings about utilitarianism, and Thomas Carlyle's *Signs of the*



*Times* as well as *Past and Present*. Indeed, these texts are scattered throughout *Hard Times*, albeit not directly. For instance, there are references to Bentham's ideas about the utilitarian philosophy and Smith's tenets of political economy so much so that at times the narrator self-consciously adopts the very language of utilitarianism and political economy to ironically interrogate their premises and tenets. In this very respect, Schacht observes that "one strategy –most plainly visible in *Hard Times*– is to turn the language of political economy against itself, to contest its scientific pretensions using the vocabulary of science" (79).

It should also be noted that Dickens's questioning and denouncing of utilitarianism and political economy is not original given the fact that Carlyle before him talked about similar issues. In *Past and Present* –written in 1843–, for example, Carlyle had portrayed "the alienating effects of a society based on 'laissez-faire, and Every man for himself'" (Schacht 89). In his essay *Signs of the Times* –written in 1829– Carlyle had also attacked "the contemporary worship of 'Mechanics' in place of 'the mysterious springs of Love, and Fear, and Wonder, of Enthusiasm, Poetry, Religion'" (James 549). Seen in this way, then, Dickens's text relies on a multiplicity of texts that contest, deny and even assert each others.

At this point, it is worth noting that the various intertexts and allusions are not reiterated for the sake of mimesis and referentiality, but they serve the thematic preoccupations of the novel. They are at the heart of the overall meaning of the text. Consequently, these very intertexts are re-contextualized and re-appropriated. They are semiotic because they are used in a new modern context. That is, the context of mid-nineteenth century industrial England with its socio-economic evils engendered by utilitarian industrial capitalism.

As such, through intertextuality different discourses are set against each others. In this very respect, Bakhtin's approach to the novel is highly pertinent. In line with his concept of ideologeme, the literary discourse is fraught with struggles and conflicts. According to Bakhtin, the novel stages struggles among different social voices. Hence, his concepts of "dialogism" and "heteroglossia" which

mean that "every utterance is potentially the site of a struggle: every word that is launched into social space implies a dialogue and therefore a contested interpretation. The relations between signifiers and signifieds" are constantly loaded with intrusion and clash (Selden 75).

With regard to *Hard Times*, there are assorted discourses and voices at work. Thus, the discourse of utilitarian capitalism is in dialogue with the discourse of Christianity. For instance, Bitzer's rationalism and selfishness are contrasted by Sissy's notions of love and caring that are at the heart of Christianity. In this respect, Fowler's reading of *Hard Times* is highly pertinent. According to him, unlike other English novels of the mid-nineteenth century –such as Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*– *Hard Times* has a dialogic and polyphonic structure which "fits Bakhtin's description" of the novel (115). Diverse clashing voices and opinions, then, are at work in the world of the novel. In this sense, the world of Sleary's circus is juxtaposed against the Coketown's factories. Sleary's philosophy is set against the Gradgrind's philosophy of fact. Sissy's goodness and love is contrasted with Bitzer's calculation and selfishness. The world of the novel abounds, therefore, with heteroglot styles and clashing voices that are at the heart of shaping meaning throughout the text. Meaning as such is not to be yielded by the text itself rather it is created through this dialogue and interaction with other texts.

Even speech styles are diverse and opposed. Thus, Sleary's speech together with Stephen's, are tainted with "working-class morphology and lexis" (Fowler 108). Outstandingly enough, the strange spellings and colloquial language in Sleary's speech is suggestive. The most illustrative example of the clashing speech styles is in chapter eleven of Book the First and chapter five of Book the Second of the novel where Stephen's working class style is juxtaposed against Bounderby's middle-class speech. Thus, on the one hand Stephen's language is characterised by its vernacularism and weird spelling. In his second visit to Bounderby's house, Stephen says: "Sir, I were never good at showing o't, though I ha had'n my share in feeling o't. ... Look how we live, and where we live, an in what numbers, an by what chances, and wi' what sameness; and look how the



mills is awl a goin, and how they never works us no higher to ony dis' ant object –ceptin awlus,Death” (*Hard Times* 118). On the other hand, Bounderby’s speech is bullying and formal. He says to Stephen “I told you, the last time you were here with a grievance, that you had better turn about and come out of that. And I also told you, if you remember, that I was up to the gold spoon lookout” (*Hard Times* 119-20).

It follows, then, that the working class speech is in dialogue with the middle class speech. Indeed, as Fowler posits, the contrast between “a very oral modal of language” and another “formal, written model” is deliberately undertaken to reveal “a contrast of values” (111-2). Hence, whereas working-class characters are represented as sympathetic, kind and innocent, middle-class characters are portrayed as cruel, selfish and hypocrites.

Seen like this, these speech styles’ contrasts shape “a text articulated in a multitude of voices. These voices are, overall, discordant and fluctuating in the kaleidoscope of views they express” (Fowler 111-2). Convincingly enough, *Hard Times* has a dialogic structure given the fact that there are multi-voices and texts which are in dialogue with one another. In the light of Bakhtin’s view, then, literature is a cultural product moulded by language, discourse and society. Drawing on this last account, it is obvious that the literary text is fraught with ideological as well as social struggles that are created through this discursive interplay between various voices and texts. In this way intertextuality is at the core of creating meaning in the text. Its function is rather semiotic than merely mimetic through this process of textual di/deferral and interaction.

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