

THE EVOLUTION OF THE MORAL IDEAL IN CHARLES DICKENS: FROM JOURNALISM TO THE NOVEL IN THE LIGHT OF HARD TIMES

Nodira N. Jalalova

Is'hoqxon Ibrat

Namangan State Institute of Foreign Languages, Namangan, Uzbekistan

e-mail: jalalovanodira3@gmail.com

Abstract: *This article examines the evolution of the moral ideal in the work of Charles Dickens, tracing its trajectory from the writer's journalistic and publicistic statements towards its mature artistic embodiment in the novel. Whereas earlier scholarship has tended to treat Dickens's moral concerns either biographically or as a static humanist creed, the present study argues that his moral ideal undergoes a discernible three-stage development: from the individual reformist optimism of the early period, through the institutional critique of the mature period, to the dialectic pessimism of the late period. Taking the novel *Hard Times* (1854) as a focal case study, the article demonstrates how the abstract moral position articulated in Dickens's non-fiction is transposed into concrete poetic structures — characterization, spatial imagery (the topography of Coketown), and the symbolic opposition between fact and fancy. The analysis employs close reading and comparative-historical methods. The findings indicate that in *Hard Times* the moral ideal is no longer asserted didactically but is realized through the very architecture of the text, in which evil is institutionalized in the utilitarian system and good is preserved in the faculty of imagination. The study contributes to a more precise, diachronic understanding of Dickensian poetics and of the relationship between ethical content and aesthetic form in the Victorian social novel.*

Keywords: *Charles Dickens, moral ideal, aesthetic ideal, *Hard Times*, utilitarianism, institutional evil, Coketown, fact and fancy, Victorian novel, poetics.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The moral dimension of Charles Dickens's fiction has long been acknowledged as central to his artistic identity. Yet the precise manner in which his ethical convictions are translated into aesthetic form, and the way in which those convictions themselves change across his career, has received comparatively little systematic attention. Much existing criticism treats Dickens's morality as a fixed humanist sentiment — a generalized sympathy for the poor and an instinctive hostility to cruelty — rather than as a developing position that acquires new conceptual content and new artistic instruments at successive stages of his work.

This article proceeds from a different premise. It contends that the moral ideal in Dickens is not a constant but an evolving category, and that its evolution can be most clearly observed when his journalistic and publicistic writings are read alongside his novels. In his non-fiction — articles, speeches, and editorial interventions in *Household Words* — Dickens frequently states his ethical positions directly. In the novels, by contrast, these positions are dissolved into the texture of the narrative: into the system of characters, the organization of plot, and, above all, the symbolic ordering of space. The relationship between the explicit moral statement of the journalism and the implicit moral structure of the fiction therefore offers a privileged vantage point from which to study the development of his thought.

The central claim of the study is that Dickens’s moral ideal passes through three distinguishable stages. In the early period it is governed by an individual reformist optimism, in which evil is personified in particular villains and virtue triumphs at the level of plot. In the mature period this optimism gives way to an institutional critique, in which evil is no longer the property of individuals but is lodged in social structures and systems. In the late period the institutional critique deepens into a dialectic pessimism, in which the moral picture of the world becomes irreducibly complex and the victory of good is achieved, if at all, only at an ever greater cost.

To test this hypothesis the article focuses on *Hard Times* (1854), a novel that occupies a strategic position in the second stage of this development and in which the transposition of journalistic argument into novelistic form is unusually transparent. The aim is not to offer a comprehensive reading of the novel but to demonstrate, through a single concentrated case, how the abstract moral ideal articulated in Dickens’s non-fiction is realized in concrete poetic structures. The originality of the approach lies in its diachronic framing: rather than describing Dickens’s morality as a single creed, it reconstructs its movement, and rather than treating ethics and aesthetics as separate domains, it shows their organic unity within the text.

2. Materials and Methods

The primary material of the study is Dickens’s novel *Hard Times* (1854), examined in relation to the broader corpus of his fiction — in particular *Oliver Twist* (1837–1839), *Bleak House* (1852–1853), *Little Dorrit* (1855–1857) and *Our Mutual Friend* (1864–1865) — and to his publicistic legacy. These additional works are introduced not as objects of equal analysis but as comparative reference points that allow the position of *Hard Times* within the larger evolution to be established.

The investigation is qualitative and text-analytical. It does not rely on quantitative measurement but on the interpretation of literary structures, and it combines several complementary procedures. First, close reading is used to analyse selected passages — programmatic monologues, descriptions of space, and characterological oppositions — at the level of diction, syntax, and figurative

organization. Second, the comparative-historical method situates the novel within the trajectory of Dickens’s career and within the ideological context of mid-Victorian England, in which an older Christian social ethic was being displaced by a new utilitarian and commercial morality. Third, a contextual procedure relates the explicit ethical statements of Dickens’s journalism to the implicit moral architecture of the fiction, in order to trace the transposition of argument into form.

Methodologically, the study treats the moral ideal as a category that pervades all structural levels of the work rather than as a paraphrasable “message.” Following the principle that a moral content acquires artistic value precisely through the degree of its creative reworking, the analysis attends not to what Dickens asserts but to how the assertion is embodied — in the symbolic value of place, in the system of characters, and in recurrent imagery. The selection of passages was guided by their programmatic character: each chosen text is one in which the novel’s moral and aesthetic logic is condensed and made visible.

3. Results

3.1. From journalism to the novel: the transposition of the moral argument.

The analysis confirms that the ethical positions Dickens states discursively in his non-fiction reappear in *Hard Times* in a transformed, structural guise. In his journalism the critique of a narrowly rationalist and commercial conception of life is delivered as direct argument; in the novel the same critique is enacted through the opposition of two principles — “fact” and “fancy” — that organize the entire fictional world. The discursive thesis of the publicist becomes the structural antithesis of the novelist.

3.2. The institutionalization of evil. The reading of *Hard Times* shows that evil is no longer concentrated in a single malevolent individual, as it had been in the early fiction, but is distributed across a system. The pedagogical philosophy of Thomas Gradgrind is the clearest instance. His programmatic opening pronouncement makes the point with maniacal insistence: “*Now, what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life.*”⁴⁸ The obsessive repetition of the word “Facts” is itself a form of violence against a reality that is incomparably richer than any system of facts. Gradgrind is not a villain in the older sense; he is sincere, and this very sincerity identifies the evil as systemic rather than personal — a quality of a value-system, not of a wicked heart.

3.3. The moral topography of Coketown. A second result concerns the symbolic ordering of space. In *Hard Times* the industrial town becomes a moral landscape in which the description itself functions as ethical judgement. The narrator renders Coketown through images of unnaturalness, mechanism and poisoned colour:

⁴⁸Dickens, Ch. (1854). *Hard Times*. London: Bradbury and Evans, Book I, Ch. 1.

*“It was a town of red brick, or of brick that would have been red if the smoke and ashes had allowed it ... It had a black canal in it, and a river that ran purple with ill-smelling dye.”*⁴⁹ The “interminable serpents of smoke” and the “purple river” are not decorative but diagnostic: they translate an abstract critique of industrial utilitarianism into a concrete, sensory image of a life deformed by an inhuman system. The place embodies the moral condition it represents.

3.4. The preservation of good in the faculty of imagination. Against Gradgrind’s system the novel sets Sissy Jup, the daughter of a travelling circus performer, who is the embodiment of living, unextinguished feeling and imagination. Her inability to assimilate the lessons of the utilitarian philosophy is presented not as intellectual weakness but as a sign of moral health. The circus, in turn, stands for play, vitality and fancy — for everything the utilitarian order seeks to abolish. The result is a clear poetic equation: in *Hard Times* good is bound up with imagination, and evil with its absence. The moral ideal is thus realized not as a precept but as a structural opposition pervading the whole novel.

3.5. The position of *Hard Times* within the evolution. Read against the early and late fiction, *Hard Times* belongs unmistakably to the mature, institutional stage of Dickens’s development. It lacks the relatively unambiguous personified villains of *Oliver Twist*, and it does not yet reach the deep, anonymized darkness of the late works such as *Bleak House*, where evil dissolves into the impersonal mechanism of the Court of Chancery⁵⁰. It occupies, rather, a transitional and clarifying position, in which the shift from individual to systemic evil is stated with maximal polemical sharpness.

4. Discussion

The findings support the study’s central hypothesis that the Dickensian moral ideal is a developing rather than a static category. The case of *Hard Times* demonstrates how a position first formulated discursively in journalism is reconceived as artistic structure in the novel. This has an important consequence for the interpretation of Dickens’s realism: his novels are not merely moral sermons illustrated by fictional incident, but social diagnoses in which ethical evaluation is built into the represented world itself. The description of Coketown is the clearest case — a passage in which the boundary between depiction and judgement effectively disappears.

The institutionalization of evil identified in *Hard Times* also marks a significant departure from the traditional Christian conception of evil as sin or estrangement from God. In Dickens the principal antagonists are not the devil or original sin but

⁴⁹Dickens, Ch. (1854). *Hard Times*. London: Bradbury and Evans, Book I, Ch. 5.

⁵⁰Dickens, Ch. (1853). *Bleak House*. London: Bradbury and Evans, Ch. 1.

offices, workhouses and utilitarian pedagogues. This shift carries a programmatic implication: if evil is lodged in social structures, then it may be corrected not only through individual spiritual regeneration but also through social reform. It is precisely in this displacement that Dickens the reformer is to be located, and it is this that distinguishes the mature fiction from the more personalized moral schemes of the early novels.

At the same time, the analysis suggests the limits of the second stage and points towards the third. In *Hard Times* the opposition of fact and fancy, though powerfully drawn, remains relatively clear-cut; the moral poles are still legible. In the later novels this clarity dissolves: evil becomes anonymous and systemic, good ceases to be a given and becomes a value to be achieved, and the victory of virtue, where it occurs at all, is purchased at increasing cost and rendered with deepening bitterness. The reading of *Hard Times* thus not only confirms the existence of an institutional stage but also clarifies, by contrast, the dialectic pessimism that follows it.

A further implication concerns the unity of ethics and aesthetics in Dickens. The study indicates that, in his mature work, moral content and aesthetic form are not separable layers but a single structure: the moral meaning is the aesthetic organization, and the aesthetic organization is the bearer of the moral meaning. To read the topography of Coketown or the rhetoric of Gradgrind is already to read an ethical argument. This finding aligns with the broader claim, developed at greater length elsewhere in the present author’s research, that in Dickens the moral and the aesthetic ideal form an organic unity rather than a didactic addition of message to story.

5. CONCLUSION

This article has argued that the moral ideal in Charles Dickens is best understood not as a fixed humanist creed but as an evolving category that moves from the individual reformist optimism of the early period, through the institutional critique of the mature period, to the dialectic pessimism of the late period. By reading Dickens’s journalistic statements alongside his fiction, the study has shown how an explicitly stated ethical position is transposed into the implicit moral architecture of the novel.

The case of *Hard Times* has made this transposition unusually visible. In that novel the moral ideal is realized not through direct moralizing but through the symbolic opposition of fact and fancy, the institutionalization of evil in Gradgrind’s utilitarian system, the moral topography of Coketown, and the preservation of good in the faculty of imagination embodied by Sissy Jup and the circus. The novel’s position within the larger evolution — transitional, clarifying, situated between the personified evil of the early fiction and the anonymous, systemic darkness of the late works — confirms the proposed three-stage model.

The principal contribution of the study is twofold. Methodologically, it demonstrates the value of reading a writer’s non-fiction and fiction together in order to reconstruct the development of a moral ideal diachronically. Substantively, it shows that in Dickens’s mature work ethics and aesthetics form an organic unity, in which moral judgement is inseparable from artistic structure. Further research might extend this model to the late novels in order to specify more precisely the poetics of the dialectic-pessimist stage and the increasingly costly terms on which, in Dickens’s last works, the good is permitted to survive.

REFERENCES:

- 1.Auerbach, E. (1953). *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- 2.Dickens, Ch. (1854). *Hard Times*. London: Bradbury and Evans.
- 3.Dickens, Ch. (1853). *Bleak House*. London: Bradbury and Evans.
- 4.Dickens, Ch. (1838). *Oliver Twist*. London: Richard Bentley.
- 5.Forster, J. (1872–1874). *The Life of Charles Dickens*. London: Chapman and Hall.
- 6.Leavis, F. R. (1948). *The Great Tradition*. London: Chatto and Windus.
- 7.Stone, H. (1979). *Dickens and the Invisible World: Fairy Tales, Fantasy, and Novel-Making*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- 8.Khrapchenko, M. B. (1977). *The Creative Individuality of the Writer and the Development of Literature*. Moscow: Khudozhestvennaya Literatura.
- 9.Tyupa, V. I. (2009). *The Analysis of the Literary Text*. Moscow: Academia.