Hard Times: People Trapped During Industrialization

Industrial revolution marked an important period through history, particularly for Great Britain, the first place the movement took place in. During the industrialization, there were more and more machines appearing in the society due to the advanced technology. However, not only the physical machines appeared, but also humans became machines. People becoming machines and gradually lost their ability to have emotions instead of focusing on the cold facts. “Hard Times” was written by Charles Dickens, and was published in 1854 which was after the establishment of reformed laws for industrialization. Clearly, although government did try to improve the situation, there were still serious problems in Great Britain. In “Hard Times”, Dickens describes how people’s lives under the society based on facts are, how do the people are forced to abandon their creativity, and how it turns out to hurt themselves. Dickens expressed his opposed attitude toward industrialization by telling the readers how industrialization persecutes people’s lives, people were trapped under the industrialized vibe no matter which social class they were in. Lousia was living in the middle class during industrialization, but she still could not have a satisfied life. Her father, Mr. Gradgrind is a typical model of people who lived in industrialization. He only believes in facts, and despised anything related to creativity, fancy, and emotions. Stephan Blackpool is the worker in industrialization who faces the unequal treatment from the society. Mr. Bounderby is the successful owner of bank and factories, but never lives like a human. The life under this kind of society really drives everyone crazy, and being confused between being a machine or a human.

Louisa has been taught not to have any creativity, not to “wondering”, by Mr. Gradgrind, who views the “facts” the most. However, Louisa is different from her father even under this kind of parenting. Once she and her brother, Tom, are caught by their father for looking into the circus, a fancy and creative place. When Louisa is asked about her motivation of her behavior, she expresses her exhaustion about everything. Although she doesn’t explicitly tell what “everything” means, it probably means the cold-facts world Mr.Gradgrind build for her. After hearing her daughter’s feeling, instead of trying to understand deeper, Mr. Gradgrind behaves like all the other time, he suppresses her thoughts. Nevertheless, Louisa doesn’t really grow as her father’s expectation. When Tom talks to her the idea of escaping from this home, she tells him that she cannot control herself from wondering. “ ‘I have such manageable thoughts,’ returned his sister, ‘that they will wonder’.”(Dickens, 49). Mr. Gradgrind’s attempt of suppressing Louisa’s thoughts and emotions doesn’t work. Louisa cannot live like a machine. However, Louisa is trapped with her confusion of whether should her follow her father’s expectation or not. When Mr. Bounderby proposes to Louisa, Mr. Gradgrind ignores Louisa’s questions about love. Instead, he asks her to focus on the statistics of unequal-ages marriage to see if it is going to work out. Eventually Louisa accepts the proposal, mostly for her brother, but her world is kind of collapsing that she tries to send out her message. “You have dealt so wisely with me, father, from my cradle to this hour, that I never had a child’s belief or a child’s fear.” (Dickens, 85). Louisa has never experienced the life of being a child, but Mr. Gradgrind interprets wrongly about her words. He perceives it as a huge success of his parenting. Mr. Bounderby is the extreme version of Mr. Gradgrind that he is too cold to have human’s emotions. He emphasizes his own efforts of becoming a member of high social class, and he never has sympathy for others. Of course, Louisa’s marriage with him is a disaster, and after she falls in love with another man, she returns to tell her father how her life of being a robot is.

“....to exercise my fancy somewhat, in regard to them; I should have been a million times wiser, happier, more loving, more contented, more innocent and human in all good respects…”(Dickens, 174). If Louisa has the chance to be more human and to engage to her fancy thoughts, she will not have such a miserable life. This is how the industrialization sabotages people’s life. Since the advanced technology makes people’s lives easier, they become obsessed with it, with the idea of pursuing facts can give them better lives. Furthermore, spending lots of time with machines makes people become machines. But they forget that they are actually humans instead of machines. They need emotions and thoughts to live with. Louisa spends her whole life fighting not to become a machine, and finally after her confession, Mr. Gradgrind realizes his fault. She can really live like a human.

Not only the upper class people fall into the trap produced by industrialization, but also the working class people that their situations are even worse. Stephen Blackpool is the character represents the working class people during industrialization in “Hard Times”. His story tells how it is to be a labor at that time period. They have terrible lives in the factories, and also out of the factories. When Stephen asks Mr. Bounderby for divorcing advice, Mr. Bounderby makes it clear that only rich people can get a divorce, and he does not even feel bad for Stephen. That is another problem during industrialized period, people tend to focus on their own good, and barely care or show empathy for others. In “The Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844”, Friedrich Engles points out this problem. The reason that the working class people have terrible lives is because the upper and middle class never think about their situation. The workers at late 19th century even had worse lives than slaves before. They were forced to sell themselves to the middle class. Although they seemed to have more freedom than the slaves before, the freedom meant there were no others were responsible for their lives. The only people care about their survival are themselves. The society was lack of connection between people that people were cold as machines.

The society is unfair for the working class people. Stephan is a person no more than honest and trustworthy, but the world is being mean to him. When he refuses to join the union because of his promise to Racheal to stay out of trouble, the other workers isolate him. When he chooses to protect those workers and does not rat out their union to Mr. Bounderby, he gets fired. He stands out to tell Mr. Bounderby how it their working situation, but Mr. Bounderby just does not care about it. “Most o’aw, ratin’ em as so much Power, and reg’latin ‘em as if they wa figures in a soom, or machines: wi’out loves and likeins, wi’ out memories and inclinations, wi’out souls to weary and souls to hope—”(Dickens, 124). The workers are treated as machines in the factory instead of humans, and that is why the workers want to create an union to change. However, the factory owner probably only wants to suppress instead of listening to them. Furthermore, division between social classes becomes more and more obvious. People judge others based on their social class. When Mr. Bounderby’s bank is robbed, the main suspect is Stephan, and even other workers inclined to believe this idea than the person who they actually spend lots of time together. Ironically, Tom actually is the one who robs the bank, whose social class is higher than the workers. Stephan is the victim of the industrialized society. Generally, all the working class people are. No one cares about their needs, but maybe they are the small portion of people who remain like “human” at that time. Stephan fails to form his own family because of his social status, and he even gets injured and died from his way to clear his name for the robbing which he will never do.

While there is another issue had been debated during the industrialization period that Dickens doesn’t mention in “Hard Times”, which is the children laboring issue. Industrialization

successfully brought women and children's working place from home to the factories. Children spent most of their day working in the factories drove people's attention toward them. Robert Owen found it was unnatural for the children to spend their childhood working instead of enjoying the amusements. " The children now find they must labour incessantly for their bare subsistence: they have not been used to innocent, healthy, and rational amusements;.....They know not what relaxation means, except by the actual cessation from labour." (Owen, p.151) This quote shows how factories lives deprived children's right to relax and to have their time playing. Children were forced to experience the lives which they should not have until they grew up, the working lives. . They were trapped into the lives in factories and also the economic dilemma that their lives would become monotonous because they did not have leisure time to explore the world as a child should do. Childhood are not reversible that they can never have the chance to live like kids anymore. However, there are others disagree with the situations that the children labors meet. In " The Philosophy of Manufactures", Andrew Ure expresses his opposite thoughts about child labor comparing to Owen's ideas. Owen views working at the factories as a threat for the children to experience happiness. Meanwhile, Ure sugguests the children can experience their happiness in the factories. "They seemed to be always cheerful and alert, taking pleasure in the light play of their muscles— enjoying the mobility natural to their age." (Ure, 159). During Ure's visit to the factories, he actually describes the working situation as a cheerful experience for the child labor. Children are not trapped in the factories. Instead, they are having a good time working there. Although their childhood are different from the typical type of childhood, such as play around, the degree of happiness they enjoy can be the same. The other aspect of concern for child labor is their healthiness. The poor air quality, which contains a great amount of smoke, could be a serious threat for the child workers, especially when they work twelve hours a day. However, Ure comes up with the official report from the appointed surgeon regarding the healthiness for the child labor. ".....I find that the average annual sickness of each child is not more than four days;" (Ure, 161). It's surprising that the children who are working in the factories are actually quite healthy that they seldom get sick.

Comparing with Dickens' points, people during industrialization are easily trapped into a fixed life. Workers, such as Stephan and the child labors, wake up everyday to work in the factories, middle class people who originally have lots of creativity, such as Louisa, live in the world which requires her to be trapped in a machine, to abandon her emotions. There seem to be no way for them to change their lives. The working class people seldom have chances to improve their social status, and people like Louisa needs to try her everyday to break the society's vibe to be like a human. However, just like Ure, there are also others who can see the positive side about industrialization, Jame Wilson. In the article "The First Half of the Nineteenth Century: Progress of the Nation and the Race", Wilson compares multiple aspects of living between 1800s and mid-nineteenth century. The savings in the banks had been through a large growth, and education had become more accessible for people, and the advanced transportations could be able to bring people to farther places. These are all the improvements after the industrialization. Thus, it comes to a question: there are lots of complaints about the industrialization, but whether or not people are willing to give up the convenience gained by industrialization and go back to live in the time period before? "But we see no reason to be discontented either with our rate of progress or with the actual stage which we have reached…." (Wilson, 164). Wilson views the industrialization as a progress which brings more advantages than disadvantages to people, and there is no need to complain about. He is a supporter for industrialization. On the other hand, Dickens wrote the "Hard Times" after a series of reform done by the government shows that the regulations were not enough. Dickens does not completely disagree with the effort and result about industrialization, but he strongly suggests the regulation are not enough, and there

needs to be some changes for the society.

At the end of the “Hard Times”, Dickens tells the readers how the characters end up. Interestingly, the characters who realize the lesson of having emotions is not a bad thing all end up happier than before, such as Louisa and Mr. Gradgrind. The characters who remain committed to their original thoughts of concentrating on facts like a machine end up in a tragic way, such as Mr. Bounderby. Most importantly, Sissy, the character who has everything contradict with the ideal industrialized model, ends up having a happy family. She is the one being creative and emotional at the beginning and to the end, and she somewhat influences Louisa to make her better. We can infer from the outcomes of the characters the messages Dickens wants to send out. The only way to live happily during the industrialization is to escape from the trap, and that is the society needs to work on and change. Although some people still view industrialization as a successful progress and don’t need to modify, Dickens and others point out how people are suffering from the industrialization, and ask the society to solve the problems.