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The Restraints of Political Economy and Perverse Libido in Charles Dickens’s *Hard Times*

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**Abstract:** This essay purports to examine how Charles Dickens’s *Hard Times* depicts the unnatural and tragic relationships between utilitarian political economy and the individuals who are affected by the economic principle in both the private sphere and the public one. Special attention must be paid to the adverse impact of the novel’s character Thomas Gradgrind’s principle of utilitarian education on his children Louisa and Tom in the household. Under the influence of her father’s dogmatic rules, Louisa develops her perverse libido toward her brother Tom as a way of escaping from the restraints and repression imposed upon her, which can be explicated by the Freudian theory of the pleasure principle and perversion. The Gradgrind-Louisa-Bounderby triangular model can elucidate the operation of sexual exchange of Louisa as an economic property negotiated between her father and the industrialist, which can be theoretically supported by Eve Sedgwick’s arguments about triangular transactions between men. The tension between Stephen and Bounderby in the public realm also testifies to the domination of the economic logics of self-help and self-interest over the working-class people, which can be examined through the lens of the Foucauldian theory of governmentality. In contrast, Sissy Jupe’s adherence to fancy and her affectionate sympathy for the few ignored by and alienated from the arithmetic calculation of utilitarianism can serve as an antidote to the ideologies of male-centered political economy.

**Keywords:** Charles Dickens, *Hard Times*, utilitarianism, restraints, perversion

**I. Introduction**

Critics of Charles Dickens’s *Hard Times* have read the novel as an indictment of industrial capitalism, or the strictures on the world of Jeremy Bentham’s Utilitarian philosophy. F. R. Leavis asserts that the novel consistently assaul des both “the Utilitarian spirit in Victorian education” exemplified in the Gradgrind home and “Victorian ‘rugged individualism’” epitomized by Josiah Bounderby (228). In the same vein, Edgar Johnson contends that the novel does not only portray the ramifications of Victorian industrial power, but it also presents “an analysis and a condemnation of the ethos of industrialism” (802). The critics have testified in favor of Mr. Sleary who could be considered Dickens’s
mouthpiece and his remarks about the importance of pleasure. “[T]here is a love in the world, not all Thelf-intereth after all” and “People mutht be amuthed” (215, 36). On the other hand, Bitzer, who provided an encyclopedic definition of a horse in the Gradgrind school system, serves as a foil to Mr. Sleary’s philosophy of amusement and pleasure, especially when he declares that “the whole social system is a question of self-interest” and that “[w]hat you must always appeal to, is a person’s self-interest” (211).

The revisionist critics of *Hard Times*, on the other hand, pay particular attention to the ways in which the novel underscores the basic tenet of utilitarianism in political economy, arguing that even the novel’s underpinning of the importance of imagination, feeling, and amusement is placed in terms of the concept of utility or value-in-use in utilitarianism (Blake and Gallagher’s *Body Economic*). For them, Bitzer’s somewhat cynical but provocative statement of universal human desire for self-interest is perceptive enough to grasp the general matrix of political economy in the Victorian era. When Bentham provides the concept of utility as “benefit, advantage, pleasure, good, or happiness” as a prevention of “mischief, pain, evil, or unhappiness to the party whose interest is considered,” he advocates Adam Smith’s idea of the “invisible hand” as every individual’s sagacious judgment for gaining their own interests without the interference of the government (Bentham 12). John Stuart Mill is also in line with both Bentham’s principle of utility and Smith’s concept of invisible hand by saying that “people understand their own business and their own interests better, and care for them more, than the government does, or can be expected to do” (*Political Economy* 942). Although they acutely detect the nexus of utilitarian political economy and the principles of aesthetic pleasures, Blake and Gallagher seem to overemphasize the function of utility motivated by the logic of self-interest. By so doing, they tend to overlook more specific narrative examples of personal and social maladies aggravated by the principle of the utilitarian political economy. As Martha Nussbaum notes, what Dickens challenges in the novel is the distorted and perverted version of utilitarian political economy, as clearly exemplified in Gradgrind’s “sum-ranking” and “fact-calculating mind.” (23). Gradgrind’s economic policy thus simplifies both the complexities of human problems and the mystery of an individual life so that, as Nussbaum goes on to assert, “the person [the individual] becomes simply an input into a complex mathematical oper-