

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS: THE DEFINITION OF A HORSE (P.309)

The extract is taken from Charles Dickens's *Hard Times*.

Thomas Gradgrind, an educator who believes in facts and statistics, has founded a school where his theories are taught.

The extract opens with the proper name of the teacher that will be repeated so many times in the text: it creates a monotonous anaphoric repetition which creates a phonological parallelism.

Stylistic choices and narrative strategy all together contribute to the image of a repressive and claustrophobic system of education.

The third person omniscient intrusive narrator involving the reader does not any space to gain a different prospective on British way of teaching at the time. Furthermore the narrator speaks directly to the reader using the expression "Sir": Dickens's aim is to involve his public into the story.

The stylistic choice of semantic field referred to geometry and mathematics and the use of the grotesque to describe Mr. Gradgrind are a clear criticize to Victorian society: Dickens plays irony and criticizes bourgeois society based on facts and statistics only. The concept is reinforced by the name the teacher uses for the children "little pitchers": it appears immediately clear that Mr. Gradgrind does not consider the children people, but associates them to objects to set up. It is a clear reference to the Victorian society that imposes a rigid life-style code. Children are educated in order to be machines: Victorians' aim is massive production and they do not give importance to people; children are deprived of their childhood: during the Victorian age there was a wide exploitation of child labour. This is why the narrator presents them without a specific identity.

In particular Dickens uses the narrative technique of grotesque to describe the character of Sissy Jupe: she appears an unidentified object for the teacher who calls her "girl number twenty". The narrator focuses on the contrast between the formal language adopted by Mr. Gradgrind and the informal one used by the girl: the rigid rhetorical communicative style, together with verbs that all belong to semantic field, total neglect of emotion and involvement return to the reader an almost unbearable picture of a sadistic teacher who sounds afraid of losing his patronizing position.

Dickens's critique is embodied in the exchange between the educator, and the pupils, Bitzer and Sissy Jupe, over the proper definition of a horse. Bitzer, who has learned the definition by heart, classifies it as a "Quadruped" and "Gramnivorous" whereas Sissy, the horseman's daughter, is reproached for possessing "no facts, in reference to one of the commonest of animals". Once

more Dickens uses the grotesque to describe Bitzer: indeed he looks like a ghost, incredible pale and total lacking of personality. The answer that Bitzer gives to the teacher is exactly the one he was expected to provide: he is a little pitcher filled of facts and deprived of his own identity. The narrator uses pathos that provokes empathy on the reader and makes him partially identify with the character. In short he becomes aggressive as a way to maintain his asymmetric position, totally devoid of any chance to make up relationships of many times.