

“DON'T LET THE BASTARDS GRIND YOU DOWN”:
ECHOES OF *HARD TIMES* IN *THE HANDMAID'S*
TALE

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“[R]ight now I'm halfway through *Hard Times*, by Charles Dickens,” says Offred, the protagonist of *The Handmaid's Tale*, as she describes her illegal reading in the study of her Commander (184; ch. 29). Despite this clue, however, with the exception of a few passing allusions to dystopian or humorous affinities between these two novels, critics seem to have largely overlooked *The Handmaid's Tale's* significant connections with *Hard Times*.¹ A probable explanation for the paucity of critical examination of this relationship lies in the obvious differences between the two works. A frightening fictional vision, published by Canadian writer Margaret Atwood in 1985, *The Handmaid's Tale* takes place in an imaginary society of the future, where the United States has become the theocratic Republic of Gilead, women have lost nearly all rights except a few narrowly defined domestic ones, and human fertility is so reduced that individuals like Offred, with “viable ovaries” (143; ch. 24) are in demand as “Handmaids” to bear children for high-ranking men of state. Published by Dickens 131 years earlier, “as a moral fable” (to use Leavis's famous phrase, 364) of a society saturated with fact, *Hard Times* occurs in what its original readers would have recognized as a contemporary British Victorian industrial setting, regardless of the imaginary name “Coketown” and Dickens's deliberate exaggeration to make his satiric point. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, there is no beneficent circus. In contrast to Gradgrind's change of heart at the end of *Hard Times*, there is also no repentant recognition of error by any of the policy-makers of Gilead in Atwood's book. Yet, despite these evident differences between the two novels, there are a number of parallels, including one that seems especially striking. Both works feature a woman – Louisa in *Hard Times* and Offred in *The Handmaid's Tale* – victimized by a totalitarian system that attempts to control her thoughts and deny her humanity. Furthermore, in developing this theme in *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood appears to echo a number of Dickens's details as well as his larger concern with imagination and love in *Hard Times*.

A bit of background information is relevant. Atwood has called Dickens one of her “favorite authors” and stated that she “was trained as a Victorianist” (“A Conversation”, 233). After graduating from the

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