

## ***Hard Times* by Charles Dickens**

### **Background**

*Hard Times*, written by Charles Dickens, was originally published in serial form in 1854. Serialized weekly in Dickens' own publication, Household Words, *Hard Times*, proved popular with audiences, and it was published in novel form soon after completion. It is one of Charles Dickens' shortest novels, amounting to 110,000 words. It is also the only Dickens novel that doesn't feature a scene in London.

The title of the novel is a reference to the phrase 'hard times' meaning 'to suffer economic difficulties'. *Hard Times* is a social commentary on the effects of the Industrial Revolution on society.

Charles Dickens was said to be inspired by a trip he took to Preston, an industrial town in the north of England. Dickens warns of the dangers of rapid industrialization on the community and how laborers in the industry can become dehumanized as a result.

### **Brief Summary**

Charles Dickens' "Hard Times" offers an incisive critique of Victorian society. Published in 1854, it examines the harsh realities of industrialization and its effects on humanity. The story centers on Thomas Gradgrind, a **utilitarian** who believes in facts above all else (**Utilitarian means based on the idea that the morally correct course of action is the one that produces benefit for the greatest number of people**)<sup>1</sup>. He raises his children, Louisa and Tom, in a sterile environment devoid of imagination. Their lives unfold in Coketown, a bleak industrial town characterized by soot-choked air and grim factories. Dickens uses the plight of Gradgrind's family to illustrate the perils of a life governed solely by facts. The novel serves as a powerful indictment of 19th-century industrial practices. Gradgrind's philosophy fails to account for human emotion and creativity. His children, devoid of love and moral guidance, drift into despair. Louisa marries Josiah Bounderby, a wealthy banker, without affection or choice. Tom, meanwhile, spirals into a life of crime, betraying an innocent man. Gradgrind ultimately confronts the consequences of his rigid beliefs, realizing they have led to his children's ruin.<sup>2</sup>

## **Point of view**

The narrator speaks in the third person and has a limited omniscience. He knows what is going on in all places and at all times, but he sometimes speculates about what the characters might be feeling and thinking, suggesting, at those times, that he does not actually know.

## **Tone**

The narrator's tone varies drastically, but it is frequently ironic, mocking, and even satirical, especially when he describes Bounderby, Harthouse, and Mrs. Sparsit. When describing Stephen and Rachael, his tone is pathetic, evoking sympathy.

## **Themes**

*Hard Times* is considered a dystopian satire of the Victorian genre. The importance of one's **imagination** and the dangers of **industrialization** are two main themes and takeaways of the novel. Dickens reportedly used his novel to offer commentary on the horrors he'd witnessed in the factories of England and the issues with growing industrialization and its effects on people. He was known to use his novels to help shed light on various social conditions and problems.

## **Quotes Explained**

**“Now, what I want is Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the mind of reasoning animals upon Facts: nothing else will ever be of any service to them.”<sup>3</sup>**

These are the novel's opening lines. Spoken by Mr. Gradgrind, they sum up his rationalist philosophy. In claiming that “nothing else will ever be of service” to his pupils, Gradgrind reveals his belief that facts are important because they enable individuals to further their own interests. However, Tom and Louisa's unhappy childhood soon calls into question their father's claim that “[f]acts alone are wanted in life.” Ironically, while Gradgrind refers to the pupils in his school as “reasoning animals” and compares their minds to fertile soil in which facts can be sowed, he treats them like machines by depriving them of feeling and fantasy. His jarringly short sentences and monotonous repetition of the word “Fact” illustrate his own mechanical, unemotional character. Finally, it is significant that Gradgrind's call for facts

opens a work of fiction. By drawing attention to the fact that we are reading fiction, Dickens suggests to us that facts alone cannot bring intellectual pleasure.

## Sources

1. <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/utilitarian>
2. <https://newbookrecommendation.com/summary-of-hard-times-by-charles-dickens-a-detailed-synopsis/>
3. <https://www.sparknotes.com/lit/hardtimes/quotes/>