

Angela Renzi © 2014

HARD TIMES

By Charles Dickens

Hard Times is a novel set in the age the industrial revolution. It is one of Dicken's most popular works. It was written in **1854**. This novel is a denunciation of the evils of the industrial society. It shows the negative effects of industrialization.

The novel is set in an imaginary town called **Coketown**. Coketown is the typical model town of the industrial revolution. It is represented by different colors such as, the black and red of the bricks, the purple of its river and the black of its canals. Through the use of these colors the authors aims at emphasizing the **atmosphere of pollution** that dominates the town. The inhabitants of the town look sad and seem to have lost their personality. One of the major character of the novel is **Mr. Gradgrind**, a schoolmaster who believes in facts and has a very material view of life. Mr. Gradgrind thinks that imagination is a waste of time, as it represents a distraction from real life. Indeed, real life, in his opinion, is based on practical matters. For this reason he decides to ban fancy from his young pupils' minds and educate them in a rational way. He stops their imagination, he rejects the value of human heart and he teaches his pupils only rational rules. Only at the end of the novel, he will admit that his theory on life and children education is completely wrong.

In **HARD TIMES**, Dickens also focuses on nineteen century class system, which can be divided into four groups: the fading aristocracy, the vulgar rising middle class, the struggling labor class, and the itinerant group, the circus people. This social group is represented by Cecilia, **Sissy Jupe**. She is one

of Mr. Gradgrind's pupils. She is the daughter of a circus worker, a place in contrast with Mr. Gradgrind's theory of life.

Sissy is a loving person, able to bring warmth. By the end of the novel, she will get married, she will have children, and she will be the only one to reach happiness.

Read this short passage from the novel:

"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 minds of reasoning animals upon Facts: nothing else will ever be of any service to them. This is the principle on which I bring up my own children, and this is the principle on which I bring up these children. Stick to Facts, sir!"

The scene was a plain, bare, monotonous vault of a schoolroom, and the speaker's square forefinger emphasized his observations by underscoring every sentence with a line on the schoolmaster's sleeve. The emphasis was helped by the speaker's square wall of a forehead, which had his eyebrows for its base, while his eyes found commodious cellarage in two dark caves, overshadowed by the wall. The emphasis was helped by the speaker's mouth, which was wide, thin, and hard set. The emphasis was helped by the speaker's voice, which was inflexible, dry, and dictatorial. The emphasis was helped by the speaker's hair, which bristled on the skirts of his bald head, a plantation of firs to keep the wind from its shining surface, all covered with knobs, like the crust of a plum pie, as if the head had scarcely warehouse-room for the hard facts stored inside. The speaker's obstinate carriage, square coat, square legs, square shoulders, — nay, his very neckcloth, trained to take him by the throat with an unaccommodating grasp, like a stubborn fact, as it was, — all helped the emphasis.

"In this life, we want nothing but Facts, sir; nothing but Facts!"

The speaker, and the schoolmaster, and the third grown person present, all backed a little, and swept with their eyes the inclined plane of little vessels then and there arranged in order, ready to have imperial gallons of facts poured into them until they were full to the brim.

(Hard Times, Chapter I)

Answer the following questions:

1. When is the novel "Hard Times" set?
2. When was it written?
3. What is the name of the town where the story takes place?
4. How is the town described?
5. Who is Mr. Gradgrind?
6. What is his theory of life about?
7. Why does he think that imagination is a waste of time?
8. Does Mr. Gradgrind change his opinion?
9. Who is Sissy?
10. What is the aim of the author in this novel?