

HARD TIMES

Background

Hard Times is unusual in several respects. It is by far the shortest of Dickens' novels, barely a quarter of the length of those written immediately before and after it.^[1] Also, unlike all but one of his other novels, *Hard Times* has neither a preface nor illustrations. Moreover, it is his only novel not to have scenes set in London.^[2] Instead the story is set in the fictitious Victorian industrial Coketown, a generic Northern English mill-town, in some ways similar to Manchester, though smaller. Coketown may be partially based on 19th-century Preston.

One of Dickens's reasons for writing *Hard Times* was that sales of his weekly periodical, *Household Words*, were low, and it was hoped the novel's publication in instalments would boost circulation – as indeed proved to be the case. Since publication it has received a mixed response from critics. Critics such as George Bernard Shaw and Thomas Macaulay have mainly focused on Dickens's treatment of trade unions and his post-Industrial Revolution pessimism regarding the divide between capitalist mill owners and undervalued workers during the Victorian era

Prevalence of utilitarianism

The Utilitarians were one of the targets of this novel. Utilitarianism was a prevalent school of thought during this period, its founders being Jeremy Bentham and James Mill, father to political theorist John Stuart Mill. Theoretical Utilitarian ethics hold that promotion of general social welfare is the ultimate goal for the individual and society in general: "the greatest amount of happiness for the greatest number of people." Dickens believed that in practical terms, the pursuit of a totally rationalised society could lead to great misery.

Bentham's former secretary, Edwin Chadwick, helped design the Poor Law of 1834, which deliberately made workhouse life as uncomfortable as possible. In the novel, this attitude is conveyed in Bitzer's response to Gradgrind's appeal for compassion.

Dickens was appalled by what was, in his interpretation, a selfish philosophy, which was combined with materialist *laissez-faire* capitalism in the education of some children at the time, as well as in industrial practices. In Dickens's interpretation, the prevalence of utilitarian values in educational institutions promoted contempt between mill owners and workers, creating young adults whose imaginations had been neglected, due to an over-emphasis on facts at the expense of more imaginative pursuits.

Dickens wished to satirise radical Utilitarians whom he described in a letter to Charles Knight as "see[ing] figures and averages, and nothing else." He also wished to campaign for reform of working conditions. Dickens had visited factories in Manchester as early as 1839, and was appalled by the environment in which workers toiled. Drawing upon his own childhood experiences, Dickens resolved to "strike the heaviest blow in my power" for those who laboured in horrific conditions.

John Stuart Mill had a similar, rigorous education to that of Louisa Gradgrind, consisting of analytical, logical, mathematical, and statistical exercises. In his twenties, Mill had a nervous breakdown, believing his capacity for emotion had been enervated by his father's stringent emphasis on analysis and mathematics in his education. In the book, Louisa herself follows a parallel course, being unable to express herself and falling into a temporary depression as a result of her dry education.

Adapted from <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hard_Times>

