COKETOWN – ANALYSIS

The text is an extract from chapter 5 of the novel “Hard Times” by Charles Dickens. Considering the title I suppose the text will deal with a place Coketown, which may be an industrial city. As a matter of facts the name is a compound word made up of “coke” and “town”. Thus literally the word means: town of coal.

The text may be divided into two sequences: the first one is an introduction , wheras the second sequence is a description of the city. Right from the introduction the city is defined a “triumph of fact”, word which will be important at the end of the text too, where the concept is underlined by the repletion of this term. The narrator introduces the text saying: “Let us strike the key-note, Coketown, before pursuing our tune”, so he uses a metaphor comparing the description of Coketown to the keynote of a song. Indeed the writer uses a lot of figures of sound in the text, in particular repetitions such as: “it was a town…”, “black”, “red”, “fact”, “same”, “like”, “another” and it ends with the word “amen” too, which reminds to a religious song.

First of all the narrator focuses on colours of Coketown: red and black. The first one is covered by the second, as the blue of the river is covered by the purple of pollution: they represent the negative changing of the city because of industrialization. Afterwards, to the many figures of sound the narrator adds the sound of steam engine, which is “rattling and a trembling” with monotony, as suggested before by repetitions too. Moreover Dickens underlines the struggle between the luxury which the city produced and the condition in which its citizen are forced to live, so paradoxically the life of the town is so linked to work that it doesn’t include the exploitation of those needs the work produces. On the contrary, is exaggerated the monotony of the city through hyperboles: “If the members of a religious persuasion built a chapel there - as the members of eighteen religious persuasions had done - they made it a pious warehouse of red brick, with sometimes (but this is only in highly ornamental examples) a bell in a birdcage on the top of it”. From the sentence is clear the irony, conveyed through an exaggeration of reality and so linked to the grotesque technique, but at the same time the writer’s purpose is to raise awareness about industrial city conditions. It seems that the hope for an improving of social conditions has been banned from Coketown, substituted for a sad and depressing reality:”what you couldn't state in figures, or show to be purchaseable in the cheapest market and saleable in the dearest, was not, and never should be, world without end”. Thus, the final word “amen”, linked to the religious world based on the hope, may be ironic and another denounce of Victorian society.