

Hard Times by Charles Dickens

Hard Times is a work of Victorian Literature, written by Charles Dickens in 1854. The book analyses the English society at the time, and all of its struggles and failures. The book openly speaks about the industrialization turning people into robots who don't have the ability to feel compassion towards other human beings, it tells us about borderline over-exaggerated rationality and similar problems.

The setting of the story is set in Coketown, an imaginary industrial Victorian town, somewhat similar to Manchester in certain points, but nevertheless, non-existent. Which is peculiar, since it's Dickens' first novel not set in London. The novel is written as a way to target utilitarianism, the school of thought which puts emphasis utility, rules and facts. Dickens made fun of utilitarians and called them "averages". Thanks to them and their influence on education, the children of that time grew up without having any imagination at all. The perfect example of that in the novel is Thomans Gradgrind, who is a politician, an educator and an incurable rationalist and even has a school for children who are not allowed to be creative or imaginative. At least to say that he has two children and both of them are stuck in that school. Louisa and Tom – Louisa is a total mess, confusion rules her thought process and Tom is a complete hedonist – the "positive bits" of growing up without being able to express your creativity and imagination are clearly visible here.

Other than these guys, there is also Gradgrind's friend Bounderby, who is a factory owner and a banker as well – a self made man, is what he likes to call himself. He is a tad "obnoxious" which is restated again after Louisa finds out she has to marry the guy. She is completely repelled by him. In Bounderby's factory, there is a certain guy called Stephen, who is the incorporation of decency. That guy, is of bad luck. He's married to a drunk which he later tries to divorce, but is unable since the Victorian system doesn't allow poor people to get a divorce, accused of robbing a bank (which he of course didn't) and thus fired from his job and rejected by his co-workers after doing the noble deed of refusing to help either to make an even greater gap between the mill-owners and workers. There's also James Harthouse, a wannabe politician, who likes to bolster about how he's good looking, well educated and rich. He falls for Louisa and at a point even declares his love for her. She then runs to her father, even more confused than before and finally, "Mister rational" himself sees for the first time that pure unshakeable rationalism won't get him out of this one and that everything he thought so far was right, was not. He also finds out his son is a criminal, a bank robber to be more precise, and tries to help him escape Coketown before he gets busted. Their plan gets thwarted by Bitzer who is of Gradgrinds school and has thus far only learned to look at his own self interest, meaning, catch the thief and collect a reward. Tom still manages to get away but that was the last straw as far as Gradgrinds school is concerned. I think even a complete ignorant self-centered rationalist should be aware of the faults of that way of thinking after everything that happened.