

ENGLISH TEXT SUMMARY NOTES
“Hard Times”

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AREA 1:
READING & RESPONDING:
HARD TIMES

Chapter 1
GENRE

‘Hard Times’ is a Victorian novel, set in the middle of the nineteenth century, which deals with the topical issues of the time. This is often done through a range of characters, through whom Dickens makes satirical social commentary about the nature of life in an industrial town. He also uses black humour to comment on the different social classes represented in the text. It is a novel which examines and reflects the effects of utilitarianism on both individuals and the community. It takes the form of social realism, but in many ways is a cautionary tale, which aims at arousing our conscience.

Chapter 2
STRUCTURE

The novel generally conforms to a linear structure; however, the plot is often obscured by the metaphors and symbols which are central to the meaning of the text. It is allegorical in structure, where each story is organised into books, which explore and present particular themes, which are highlighted by the title of the books and chapters.

The story revolves around and explores several phases of the lives of the Gradgrinds and focuses on their education and adulthood. Often, other characters are introduced as personifications of Dickens’ ideas, perceptions and values.

Chapter 3

HISTORICAL ISSUES

The novel is set in Coketown, which is a mythical industrial town, based on the town of Preston, in Northern England. The effects of the Industrial Revolution are most apparent in the many bleak descriptions of the town's appearance. There are several references to the smoke and grime of the factory and the town, which highlights the pollution and environmental destruction, that were a by product of the progress in industry.

It is set in Victorian England, in the mid to late nineteenth century, which was a time of dramatic social, political, environmental and economic changes. It was a period when people were moving away from being self sufficient and living off the land, to becoming workers who had to be subservient to the factory owners who employed them.

Living standards during the Industrial Revolution generally improved, but it also was harmful as it created dramatic pollution, which is highlighted through Dickens' descriptions of Coketown. He presents it as a spiritual wasteland. He highlights the fact that the working conditions were poor; with many of the men, women and young children who worked in the factories being exploited by the capitalists who owned them.

Chapter 4

STYLE

'Hard Times' is written in the third person and is generally written in the past tense, except at the end of the novel, where Dickens alludes to what the future will bring to the central characters. It is allegorical in many ways and characters are used to espouse Dickens' views on social issues, trends, and ideas, as well as professions. He was particularly scathing of politicians and the divorce laws.

Although the novel deals with complex social issues and ideas, it is an accessible novel. Dickens was described by 'The London Times' as 'a writer of the people for the people'. This to some extent can be attributed to his career as a journalist.

In many ways, it is bleak, dystopic portrayal of the social, political and economic climate of his time. Through irony and a mocking tone, Dickens highlights how capitalism, represented by factory owners such as Mr Bounderby, was betraying the rights and needs of the working class.

Characters, such as Gradgrind, are used to represent what Dickens saw as morally questionable attitudes and values. Dickens uses a mocking tone in his portrayal of characters such as Harthouse, Bounderby and Mrs Sparsit, who are almost caricatures. He often focuses on the characters physical appearance and dress sense to make a mockery of them. These descriptions often highlight his negative attitude towards the prevailing ideologies and the social classes that they represent; however, in his representation of Rachael and Stephen, his tone is empathetic, which aims to evoke sympathy in the reader.

The novel utilises a number of recurring motifs and symbols which include: the staircase, Pegasus and fire and smoke to serve as metaphors of important ideas and values.