Hard Times

C. Dickens (1854)
**Guided study**

Answer these questions about *Hard Times*

1. Where does this novel take place?
   
   1. This novel is set in an imaginary industrial town named *Coketown*

2. Who are the protagonists?

   2. They are Thomas Gradgrind, an educator who believes in facts and statistics; his two children, Louisa and Tom; Josiah Bounderby, a rich banker of the city, who marries Louisa.

3. What dichotomy does the novel highlight?

   3. It highlights the difference between the rich and the poor, or factory owners and workers, who were forced to work long hours for low pay in dirty, loud and dangerous factories.

4. What does the novel denounce?

   4. It denounces the gap between the rich and the poor.
5. What does it suggest?

5. It suggests that the materialism and narrow-mindedness of Utilitarianism were turning human beings into machines by avoiding the development of their emotions and imagination.

6. What is Dickens’s primary aim in this novel?

6. Dickens’s primary aim in this novel is to illustrate the dangers of allowing humans beings to become like machines, suggesting that without compassion and imagination, life would be unbearable.
Utilitarianism

Ethical doctrine according to which: the moral worth of an action is determined by its outcome — i.e. the ends justify the means.

Utility — the good to be maximized — has been defined by various thinkers as happiness or pleasure (versus suffering or pain).

The origins of Utilitarianism, as a specific school of thought, are generally credited to the philosopher and social reformer Jeremy Bentham (1748 – 1832).

Bentham found pain and pleasure to be the only essential values in the world: "nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure."

From this he derived the rule of utility, that the good is whatever brings the greatest happiness to the greatest number of people.
1. Read up to line 25 and say what kind of town Coketown was and what it contained.

*It was a town of red brick, full of machinery and tall chimneys. It contained several large streets that were all like one another, and many small streets. It had a black canal and a river.*

2. Find the **colours** Dickens uses to describe this town. Then underline the words referring to **smell** and **sound**.

*Red and black* (bricks lines 6–7); *black and purple* (water line 9), *red* (brick, pious warehouse line 31), *black and white* (public inscriptions, lines 35-36); *Not gold*, which is mentioned as a simile (line 50) and not as a colour adjective.

The sounds are “rattling” and “trembling” (lines 10-11); “same sound” (line 16); “jangling (=tintinnio/stridio) of bells” (line 53); “low singing and low dancing” (lines 70-71);

The words referring to smell are: “smoke and ashes” (line 5); “chimneys” (line 7); “serpents of smoke” (line 7); “ill-smelling dye” (line 9).
3. Which two words are used to describe how the product of the industry of Coketown improved the lives of those who bought them? How do these two adjectives contrast with the description of the town and its people?

The two words are “comforts” and “elegancies” (lines 20-21). Dickens shows the hypocrisy of the fine lady who enjoys these things but despises the place where they are made. He describes the town negatively – the total opposite of anything elegant or comfortable.

4. How did the other residents of Coketown wish to change the behaviour of the workers? What did they want them to do and what did they want to stop them from doing.

The other (middle class) residents of Coketown wanted to force the workers to go to church (lines 58-61); they wanted to stop them from drinking and from getting drugs – indeed from any rest or enjoyment (lines 61-71).
5. The school has a strange name. It is made up and sounds like the phrase “Choke the child”. Look up the vocabulary and explain why this name is a kind of joke.

The name of the school is “M’Choakumchild” (line 41). To choke means to have food which you cannot swallow and that stops you from breathing. Dickens’s joke is suggesting that the school gives the children so many unnecessary facts that it chokes them – not only do they learn nothing useful, but that experience actually damages them. This is satire.

6. Study the last few lines. Dickens seems to agree with Gradgrind and Bounderby that the poor had good lives and were ungrateful, but, by exaggerating, Dickens shows that it is not true. Which words exaggerate the diet of the poor.

It was well-known that the poor lived on weak tea (which was cheap, coffee was expensive) and bread with little or no protein, certainly not butter or good meat. The words which show exaggeration are, therefore, “fresh” butter (line 84), as poor people in towns never got really fresh agricultural products, and “prime” parts of meat, as the poor rarely ate meat and never the “prime” parts.
Structure and Style

7. Define the type of narrator

*Third-person omniscient narrator.*

8. What is the key word of this passage in your opinion?

“Facts” is repeated several times. This word is used to emphasize the value of factual knowledge.

9. There are some surprising images in the description of the town. Find those about the savage, the serpent, and the elephant and explain them. What do these images have in common?

- The red brick stained with the black (of the soot (fuliggine) produced by the coal burning steam engines which powered the factories) is likened to the painted face of a savage (line 6); this image is negative, describing something alien and frightening.
- The image of the serpent refers to the coils (spirali) of smoke from the chimneys of the factories (lines 7-8). Once again the image is negative and suggest something animate and evil (it goes on forever and therefore never dies) rather than the product of machinery.
- The elephant image is used to describe the functioning of a steam engine, which was a very large machine and swung up and down pulling and pushing pistons – thus seeming to be an enormous animal with a long trunk, but performing a movement which was unnatural and, therefore, melancholy and mad.
All three images are drawn from the animal world and share the connotation of wilderness. The process of industrialization is criticised. In other words, Dickens is here suggesting that industrialization has plunged humanity back into a state of savagery.

10. How does Dickens show the monotony of the workers’ lives?

He uses repetition of the words:
- “same” (lines 15-17);
- “like one another” (lines 13-15);
- “counterpart” (line 18);
and in describing the public buildings, such as the infirmary, the jail or the town hall, he emphasises that they all looked the same and could be mistaken for each other. (lines 36-39).

11. How does Dickens emphasise the materialism and inhumanity of the town with his words and phrases?

He repeats the word “fact” and shows that it is applied to both the material and the immaterial world, just to say that the spiritual, emotional side of life does not exist in Coketown. He even says that nothing is considered important unless it can be “purchasable” (bought) or “saleable” (sold).
He further underlines the idea that materialism permeates any aspect of life by making it sound like a religious truth, using the phrase “world without end, Amen” (line 46).

In addition, he repeats the phrase “tabular statement” several times to refer to the statistics which the various pressure groups presented in order to justify their attitude to the workers seen as drunkards or drug takers. Finally, Dickens presents Mr Gradgrind and Mr Bounderby who are ready to provide the readers with other “tabular statements” to prove that the members of the working class are a worthless race and that whatever you do for them they will never be grateful.


The spiritual sphere is completely neglected in this type of society. People have, therefore, undergone a process of alienation: they have been transformed into machines that do the same actions repeatedly. They have been deprived of their human warmth and lost their emotions and sentiments.
13. Compare Dickens’s view of an industrialised town with William Blake’s.

Both Blake’s London and Dickens’s Coketown are presented as dirty, polluted, unpleasant and monotonous places to live in. They are places of suffering and exploitation. However, the solutions they propose to solve the problems they see in their societies is completely different: Blake suggests that the only way to eliminate poor people’s sufferings is through a violent transformation of society, while Dickens proposes a moral change in the attitude of rich people towards the poor.