

Elements of political and social protest writing: Text overview – *Hard Times*

This resource gives you an explanation of some of the ways this text can be considered in relation to the genre of political and social protest writing. It is intended to provide a starting point for teachers in their thinking and planning by giving an introductory overview of how the text can be considered through the lens of political and social protest writing. We haven't covered every element of this genre. We hope this will provide a useful starting point and a springboard for thinking about the text in more detail.

Overview

Dickens has long been perceived as a critic of society and one who wanted social reform. In *Hard Times* he explicitly addresses a number of contemporary political and social issues, particularly education, marriage and divorce and the working conditions of the poor. *Hard Times* first appeared in 1854 in *Household Words* in twenty weekly instalments in the form of a leading political article. The form suggested that Dickens was merging fiction with political journalism. The novel focuses on issues of power and powerlessness in the repressive educative system of Mr Gradgrind and in the oppressive industrial world of Coketown, where people have become mere machines and where the wealthy industrialist Bounderby is concerned more with his own profit and appearance than he is with the lives of those who labour under him. In the public sphere, Dickens provides us with a bleak portrayal of the negative effects of the Industrial Revolution, of Utilitarianism and of a society that seems to increasingly value profits, statistics and power over human lives and happiness. It is the proletariat who particularly suffer and women, of whatever class, are regarded as the property of men. In the private sphere there is no happier fortune for most of the characters. In the Gradgrind home there is no place for the imagination and Louisa is valued for what she can bring to the Gradgrind empire through a useful marriage to Bounderby.

Education

The opening chapters of *Hard Times* are set in a private, non-fee-paying school where the ridiculous name of the schoolmaster, Mr M' Choakumchild, conveys the restraining, constrictive nature of the education the students receive. This education is based on "nothing but Facts", as the proprietor, Mr Gradgrind, believes that "nothing else will ever be of any service to them." The 1840s saw an increased interest in education; there was support for the education of the

working class and as a result new teaching colleges were established to improve educational standards. Graduates began to emerge from these in 1853. However, Dickens' satirical portrait of the schoolmaster suggests that he viewed these new graduates as inept. The kind of utilitarian education championed by Gradgrind requires the rejection of "fancy" or any kind of imaginative behaviour (which he perceives as "destructive nonsense"), in favour of scientific and factual discourse, and this results in severe ennui in the children and a lack of emotional understanding. Such an education, where students are regarded as mere numbers and empty vessels to be filled with dry, factual information, is criticised and satirised at different points in the novel. Some readers may feel it is comparable to contemporary debates about the use of levels and targets in modern day secondary schools, where students are seemingly reduced to impersonal data. The three graduates of the school in *Hard Times*, Bitzer, Louisa and Tom, illustrate what a failure their education has been. Bitzer becomes a money-grabbing, conniving individual; Louisa, Bounderby's apt successor, is forced into a restrictive and loveless marriage and effectively denied a family of her own and emotionally crippled by the perversions of her husband (he kisses Louisa on the cheek when she is still a child and she spends five minutes in an act of self-harm trying to rub off the kiss). Tom becomes a gambler, thief and renegade. None achieve the prosperity or real knowledge that a true education should provide and the fact that their education fails to provide them with any emotional or imaginative outlet results in the creation of individuals who are unable to form satisfying personal relationships and who ultimately behave in an immoral fashion. By the end of the novel, even Gradgrind, the symbolic representative of this utilitarian educative system, comes to recognise the errors of his own school of thought and admits "I must bear the responsibility of its failures."

As such, Dickens could be seen to be criticising the kind of philosophy promoted by John Stuart Mill and to be using the novel to voice his views on education. Education, he felt, should have more purpose than simply imparting factual information that might be useful to a capitalist society.

Marriage

In demonstrating Stephen's desperate desire to separate from a drunken wife to whom he is "bound hand and foot", Dickens was also addressing contemporary political concerns about divorce that he would vocalise more fully in his October 1856 article *The Murdered Person*. Dickens is critical of an institution that traps two individuals in an unhappy union and all four marriages depicted in the novel, those of the Gradgrinds, Bounderbys, Blackpools and even the Sparsits – are unhappy and spiritless. Although divorce was possible in this era, it required an act of Parliament and was thus only available to the wealthiest of individuals, (as Bounderby informs Stephen, "it would cost you...I suppose from a thousand to fifteen hundred pound"), a fact that was addressed by an 1853 Royal Commission, but opposed by the House of Lords. The misery of being married where there is no love is explored in Stephen's marriage and his emotive

description of his years of tribulation with a wife who is an alcoholic and who has repeatedly abandoned him and stolen from him. He cannot understand that if “great folk...are not bonded together for better or worst so fast, but that they can be set free from their misfortunate marriages, and marry over again”, why he too cannot do the same and marry Rachael, who seems to epitomise all that is good, moral and loving and who has so patiently waited for him. The fact that this is impossible, and as a result brings both Stephen and Rachael such grief, tragically dividing the only truly loving couple in the novel, is surely a criticism of the binding laws of marriage and the inequality of a system that enables the rich to sever their marital ties, but not the poor.

Dickens also criticises the manner in which women are treated in the marriage market (though interestingly he treated his own wife appallingly so he was not without hypocrisy). Louisa is objectified and seemingly “prepared” all her life as a prize for Bounderby, despite their thirty year age difference. Her father dismisses her question “do you think I love Mr Bounderby?” as inconsequential, advising her rather to consider only the “Facts” and the material gains such a marriage would bring. The fact that the marriage proves to be so disastrous, making Louisa miserable and encouraging her to turn to the scoundrel Mr Harthouse who is attractive and seemingly shows her affection, further illustrates Dickens’ criticism of marriages that are driven by materialism, as well as the precarious position of women forced into such institutions because there were no other options available to them and because fathers and brothers and husbands had such power.

Anti-industrialism and the treatment of workers

In *Hard Times*, Dickens criticises both the treatment of workers and the increasing industrialisation of Britain, which had resulted in the creation of vast amorphous factories such as Bounderby’s. These factories had sprung up throughout the country but were particularly condensed in the midlands and north, anonymising people and forcing them to live in appalling conditions. Having spent some time in Preston in January 1854 researching the novel, Dickens thus chose to set *Hard Times* in the fictive Coketown, a place of “unnatural red and black...a town of machinery and tall chimneys, out of which interminable serpents of smoke trailed themselves forever and ever and never got uncoiled”. As this initial description implies, it is a fallen Eden where English life has been poisoned by industrial pollution and where the world itself has become colourless and corrupted, resulting in a horrid sense of claustrophobia. In contrast to the natural environment into which Stephen later wanders, this is a place where industry has destroyed the natural world and where Blake’s “dark, satanic mills” loom large. Perhaps worse still, the workers themselves have been made into mere automatons: every street is “like one another, inhabited by people equally like one another...to whom every day was the same as yesterday and tomorrow, and every year the counterpart of the last and the next.” Their repetitive lives mirror the repetitive nature of their work. They are only valued by their employers as long as they are useful and once they are believed to no

longer be of value, or if they are the cause of disturbance, like Stephen, they are cast out regardless of how many years of service they have given. While Dickens is clearly critical of the industrialists and their power, he does not show much sympathy for those who try to protest against it. The trade unionists are equally condemned in this text and although Dickens sympathises with the victim Stephen, he does not offer any political solution to the problems. In the world of the novel, which is clearly a representation of the world he saw in Preston, individuals are dehumanised. The power of industry and the money making machine are severely condemned. It is no coincidence that in the same month as *Hard Times* was launched in *Household Words*, Henry Morley's article criticising the treatment of industrial workers was also published and these publications were in the wake of Engels' *The Condition of the Working-Class in England*, published in 1845. There was clearly an appetite to attack those who had power and those who promoted a world where "what you couldn't state in figures, or show to be purchasable in the cheapest market and saleable in the dearest," was seen to have no value.

Indicting the wealthy and their abuse of power

Bounderby is a representation of all that is bad about wealthy industrialists. His name comically plays on the pejorative Victorian word for an ill-bred man, and through Bounderby's behaviour and attitudes, Dickens effectively criticises the ethos of Victorian industrialism which enabled the rise to wealth and power of those who owned the banks and factories. Bounderby, "banker, merchant, manufacturer", represents the worst of Victorian individualism. He is concerned with nothing but his own self-aggrandizement and material success, yet ironically repeatedly claims that it is the workers who are ambitious, wanting to be "fed on turtle soup and venison with a gold spoon" – a notion that is entirely at odds with the poverty in which they exist. Moreover, Bounderby's blustering repetitive claims to be a self-made man are ultimately exposed as fictitious with the appearance of his mother whom he has cast aside in favour of his own fiction, Dickens thereby painting him as entirely immoral, repulsive and self-serving. Bounderby's greed and callous inhumanity, evidenced in the manner he defends his exploitation of the workers and the contrast between their impoverishment and his affluence, is thus Dickens' primary means of criticising the new business world that had erupted with the Industrial Revolution. Likewise, the callous calculation of Bounderby and the machinations and spying of Mrs Sparsit, which are driven entirely by a desire to serve their own interests, are contrasted with Rachael and Sissy, whose goodness and kindness are spontaneous and driven by their loving spirits. Even after Stephen's death, for instance, Rachael assumes the role of carer for Stephen's alcoholic wife showing "compassion on a degraded, drunken wretch of her own sex". Thus whilst the wealthy are cast as villains and meretricious, those with little are presented in a far more moral light, perhaps conveying Dickens' desire for us to see the factory workers in a more human and compassionate way, in contrast to the manner in which their employers dehumanise them.

The trade unions

For all his sympathy for the impoverished workers, Dickens is not sympathetic towards the organised rebelliousness of the trade unions, perhaps due to an awareness of the increasing fears of the bourgeois concerning the possibility of mass, potentially violent, revolt by the working classes. During his time in Preston, Dickens had observed a much publicised strike and even attended union meetings and it is likely that his critical presentation of Slackbridge is based on Mortimer Grimshaw, one of the leaders of the Preston strike. Slackbridge is depicted as tyrannical and cruel, not least in his treatment of Stephen, and Stephen's humility and honest words of careful reservation concerning strike action are juxtaposed to the domineering oratory of Slackbridge, who encourages violent action through his vehement language. It is Slackbridge who encourages the workers to "crush the viper" and "happily cast him out", despite Stephen's innocence. In this respect he is one of the novel's villains. The novel seems to be condemning "all Slackbridges" as troublemakers and as immoral as their employers. This is a limiting factor, perhaps, in seeing the novel as an exemplar of political and social protest writing.

Utilitarianism versus aestheticism

Dickens was passionate about the theatre: he performed and stage-managed many of his own plays as well as offering dramatic readings of his novels. He fervently believed in the value of entertainment and in *Hard Times* most openly propounds the need for art for art's sake. His views are given voice through Sleary who defends the need for popular entertainment, when his circus is criticised by Gradgrind. The circus may have been inspired by groups such as Barnum and Bailey, who argued that there needed to be respite from the monotonous drudgery of everyday labour. Dickens also displays the redemptive power of the imagination, symbolised by Sissy.

The cold misery of Coketown and the Gradgrind household is juxtaposed with the unity, humour and vibrancy of Sleary's Circus. Whilst the villains of the novel, such as Bounderby, Gradgrind and even Mrs Sparsit, appear coldly inhuman and self-absorbed and as a result live in a loveless world, Sleary's Circus embodies the opposite of these principles. It is a hodgepodge family defined by its sense of spontaneous exuberance and human kindness. Even their loving leave-taking of Sissy, where Mr Sleary embraces Sissy and wishes her well before warmly welcoming her back many years later as a favourite, is the antithesis of the cold, unnatural relationships shared between the Gradgrinds, where there is even a suggestion of something incestuous between Tom and Louisa. Moreover, they are driven by a loving, moral principle that is the opposite of expedient individuals such as Tom, who not only steals money from the bank but also manipulates Stephen into being cast as the offender thus bringing about his tragic death. By contrast, the Slearys willingly disguise and protect Tom, helping Gradgrind to shield his son (even though this is nearly thwarted by the equally self-serving Bitzer).

Likewise, the morally and imaginatively sterile nature of Tom and Louisa's upbringing, which results in their inability to emotionally engage with those around them, is thrown into relief by the almost angelic figure of Sissy. From the outset, she is unable to conceive of the world in purely factual terms. Her vitality is evident in Dickens' initial description of her: "the girl...so dark-eyed and dark haired that she seemed to receive a deeper and more lustrous colour from the sun when it shone upon her." This is contrasted to the lifeless pallor of the other children such as Bitzer with his "cold eyes" and skin that is "unwholesomely deficient". She thus comes to symbolise generosity, goodness and vitality and it is noticeable that in the temporal leap forward that the novel performs at its conclusion, it is only Sissy who finds true happiness: her "happy children loving her; all children loving her". Her goodness is rewarded and the principles she embodies are thereby elevated over those of industry, materialism and fact.

Dickens thus emphasises, in a clear political message that there is a need for art, entertainment and imagination in a world that can be cruel and bitter and where escape from the industrial grindstone is essential for the human spirit to flourish.