

ENGLISH: *HARD TIMES*

“I am sure you know that the whole social system is a question of self-interest.” How does Dickens create a dystopian picture of Victorian England in *Hard Times*? Discuss.

In his social commentary, *Hard Times*, Dickens offers a scathing critique of an immoral society that has been despoiled by industrialisation. Through the use of setting, Dickens paints a grim portrait of the destructive impact of industrialisation on humanity and individuality. The novel is structured according to the Christian philosophy, ‘Whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap’, and this underpins Dickens’ criticism of Industrial England. Characterisation is employed to depict the dominant social attitude that valued self-interest at the expense of compassion and fancy, whilst language and imagery serve to reinforce the horrific image of Victorian England.

Coketown is portrayed as a wholly unnatural, polluted and over-populated town in which human nature cannot thrive. Nature is perverted, with the ‘summer hum of insects’ being replaced by the ‘whirr of machinery’ and ‘Nature is as strongly bricked out as killing airs and gases are bricked in’. Through his bleak portrayal of the reckless waste and pollution resulting from industrialisation, Dickens asserts that industrialisation has not only tainted the environment but also human nature. Self-interest has replaced the Christian values of ‘Hope, Faith and Charity’ and compassion has been discarded in favour of the zealous pursuit of profit. The noxious fumes and chemicals that have dyed the ‘ill-smelling river’ purple have also destroyed man’s capacity for empathy. Moreover, the uniformity of Coketown’s infrastructure is symbolic of the loss of individuality in the Coketown Hands. Coketown is depicted as a ‘severely workful town in which the jail might have been the infirmary and the infirmary might have been the jail’. Dickens encourages readers to draw parallels between the regularity of the buildings and monotony of the Coketown inhabitants, through his portrayal of the ‘same streets all very like one another’ which are ‘inhabited by people equally like one another’. Thus Dickens employs the fictional setting of Coketown to depict Victorian England as a place in which human nature cannot flourish and individuality is discouraged.

The Christian philosophy that governs the structure of *Hard Times* serves as a contrast between Dickens’ dystopian portrait of Coketown. In accordance with the Christian philosophy, ‘Whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap’, the novel is structured in three sections – ‘Sowing’, ‘Reaping’ and ‘Garnering’. Through this structure, Dickens asserts that those who sow the seeds of devastation will inevitably suffer the consequences of their actions, thus affirming the immortality of Victorian England. Furthermore, Dickens parallels the development of human lives with the natural cycle of agriculture rather the terminology of machinery, suggesting that nature will never be completely annihilated by machinery. The novel’s structure and the Christian philosophy that underpins it reinforces Dickens’ grim warning that those responsible for creating the dystopia that clean Industrial England must ultimately reap the consequences of their actions.

Dickens’ portrayal of one-dimensional characters focused solely on self-interest emphasises his assertion that economic progress has distorted the heart of Victorian England. Gradgrind and Bounderby are both caricatures whose very appearances, a man with a ‘square wall of a forehead’ and a man ‘inflated like a balloon’ respectively, invite ridicule and are suggestive of their perverse adherence to fact. Central to the Gradgrind philosophy is the notion that ‘the whole social system is a question of self-interest’ and that ‘gratitude was to be abolished’. Gradgrind trains his students and pupils to ‘view everything from the strong dispassionate ground of reason’ and in doing so, prevents them from achieving the emotional maturity proper to adulthood. Meanwhile Bounderby is a hypocritical and callous employer who regards imagination as a dangerous faculty which may lead to social unrest and thus represses any ‘imaginative sentimental humbug’ in his workers. The ease with which he dismisses Stephen Blackpool is alarming and reflects the disparity between the wealthy and impoverished. Through his depiction of characters who dismiss creativity and empathy in favour of intellect, Dickens reinforces the dismal image of Victorian England.

Through the use of language and imagery, Dickens creates a vivid portrait of the monotonous and lives led by the inhabitants of Coketown and the oppressive nature of fact. The repetitive language used to describe Gradgrind, a man with a 'square wall of a forehead...square coat, square legs, square shoulders', is juxtaposed with the exciting and vivid description of the circus, 'graceful equestrian Tyrolean act' which was 'among the other pleasing but always strictly moral wonders which must be seen to be believed'. This contrast emphasises Dickens' advocacy of fancy and criticism of the utilitarian philosophy. Destructive imagery is pervasive in the novel: Gradgrind is a 'cannon loaded to the muzzle with facts'; Tom wished to collect all the facts and 'blow them up into a thousand pieces'; Mrs Gradgrind is frequently 'stunned' by 'collision with some fact'; and Stephen's loom is a 'crashing, smashing, tearing piece of mechanism'. This violent imagery underlines the destructive potential of fact whilst language reinforces the dreariness of life in Industrial England.

Dickens creates a bleak and horrific image of Victorian England through the use of setting, structure, characterisation and imagery. Consequently he impresses upon readers the need for reform in social attitudes and instead champions an approach to life which values 'those subtle essences of humanity that will elude the utmost cunning of algebra'.