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Charles Dickens's *Hard Times*: Foreseeing De-Humanisation, Oppression and the Mechanisation of Society against Humanism

Introduction:

The following activity is designed for students of 19th Century English literature. It centers on specific questions and debates stemming from critiques and re-evaluations of realism and the working class condition in England through the literature produced in the mid-19th century. We will focus on Charles Dickens's novel *Hard Times* as case study. The questions for debate relie on the text itself, but also on the nature of narrative and its intrinsic potential to underscore the challenges of real life.

Objectives:

1. To acquaint and engage students with debates arising in Victorian literature about literature's ability to reflect "real life" in a text.
2. To examine the narrative techniques used by Dickens to reflect "real life" and the commodification of the working class.
3. to reflect on the so-called "condition of England novel" when applied to literature or narrative in general: What is it about fiction or narrative that makes it "real" for readers? What conditions and literary tropes prove to be useful for us to perceive a story as reflecting our own social reality?

Materials

− Charles Dicken's *Hard Times*
− Task with discussion questions

Task

1. Read *Hard Times* having in mind the following themes: condition of the working class, debates about the condition of England, the woman question and the importance of utilitarianism vs the potential of imagination and art.

2. From the topics discussed in the novel, can you establish any relation between the description of the character, the description of the setting and the aforementioned competing ideologies of the mid-19th century? Find parallelisms with current debates involving capitalism and the mechanisation of humanity and society against the cultural relevance of art and humanism. You may use examples, pictures or other texts to convey your analysis and ideas. 400-450 words.

3. What is your view on this precise excerpt of the novel? <u>How do you think it lays out the de-humanisation of people and cities, especially relevant in the current pandemic situation?</u>

"In the hardest working part of Coketown; in the innermost fortifications of that ugly citadel, where Nature was as strongly bricked out as killing airs and gases were bricked in; at the heart of the labyrinth of narrow courts upon courts, and close streets upon streets, which had come into existence piecemeal, every piece in a violent hurry for some one man's purpose, and the whole an unnatural family, shouldering, and trampling, and pressing one another to death; in the last close nook of this great exhausted receiver, where the chimneys, for want of air to make a draught, were built in an immense variety of stunted and crooked shapes, as though every house put out a sign of the kind of people who might be expected to be born in it; among the multitude of Coketown, generically called 'the Hands,'—a race who would have found more favour with some people, if Providence had seen fit to make them only hands, or, like the lower creatures of the seashore, only hands and stomachs—lived a certain Stephen Blackpool, forty years of age. Stephen looked older, but he had had a hard life. It is said that every life has its roses and thorns; there seemed, however, to have been a misadventure or mistake in Stephen's case, whereby somebody else had become possessed of his roses, and he had become possessed of the same somebody else's thorns in addition to his own. He had known, to use his words, a peck of trouble. He was usually called Old Stephen, in a kind of rough homage to the fact. A rather stooping man, with a knitted brow, a pondering expression of face, and a hard-looking head sufficiently capacious, on which his iron-grey hair lay long and thin, Old Stephen might have passed for a particularly intelligent man in his condition. Yet he was not. He took no place among those remarkable 'Hands,' who, piecing together their broken intervals of leisure through many years, had mastered difficult sciences, and acquired a knowledge of most unlikely things. He held no station among the Hands who could make speeches and carry on debates. Thousands of his compeers could talk much better than he, at any time. He was a good power-loom weaver, and a man of perfect integrity. What more he was, or what else he had in him, if anything, let him show for himself."

Bibliography:

- Bloom, Harold, ed. *Charles Dickens*. NY: Chelsea House Publications, 1987.
- Dickens, Charles. *Hard Times*. Oxford: University Press, 2006.