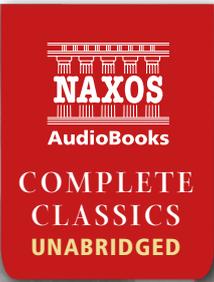


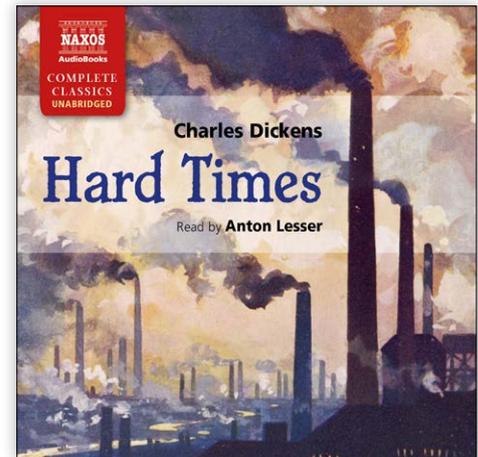
Charles Dickens

Hard Times

Read by **Anton Lesser**



Hard Times is Dickens's most political novel. Set in the industrial north of England, in the fictional Coketown, he examines the lives of working people, who are taught by the capitalists Gradgrind and Bounderby to think only of the facts of life and not to indulge in imagination. Gradgrind's own children have been educated thus, and as a result are dysfunctional and disconnected from their feelings. Only Sleary's travelling circus company seems to offer any hope of humanity in Coketown. *Hard Times* is a deeply moving story written in anger to strike a blow for the victims of the dehumanising processes of industry.



Total running time: 10:41:30 • 9 CDs

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Anton Lesser has played many of the principal Shakespearean roles for the Royal Shakespeare Company, including Petruchio, Romeo and Richard III. He starred in the Royal National Theatre production of *Wild Oats*. Appearances in major TV drama productions include *The Mill on the Floss* and *The Politician's Wife*. He also reads *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Great Expectations*, *A Christmas Carol*, *Nicholas Nickleby*, *Oliver Twist*, *The Pickwick Papers*, *David Copperfield*, *Paradise Lost*, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* for Naxos AudioBooks.

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12	1-12	'Pray', said Mr Gradgrind...	5:51	37	4-3	'Has it been a busy day, Bitzer?'	9:04
13	1-13	'Squire!' said Mr Sleary...	6:42	38	4-4	Here the visitor all unconscious...	5:27
14	2-1	'Be sure you know your own mind, Jupe;'	5:35	39	4-5	The inattention and indolence of his manner...	5:43
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22	2-9	'Always a muddle?'	5:41	47	4-13	'My brothers,' said Stephen...	5:22
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24	2-11	In the strength of his misfortune...	4:59	49	5-2	Chapter 5: Men And Masters	7:20
25	3-1	Stephen, subsiding into his quiet manner...	3:33	50	5-3	Stephen bent his head to the gentleman...	7:40



51	5-4	Chapter 6: Fading Away	7:63
52	5-5	Age, especially when it strives...	6:53
53	5-6	'I have come to speak to you...'	6:10
54	5-7	Stephen followed him out...	5:00
55	5-8	It was but a hurried parting...	5:36
56	5-9	Chapter 7: Gunpowder	7:56
57	5-10	It was among the leafy shadows...	6:07
58	5-11	'Mrs Bounderby,' said Harthouse...	8:34
59	5-12	They walked on to the house...	7:20
60	6-1	Chapter 8: Explosion	6:37
61	6-2	Bitzer knuckled his forehead again.	7:48
62	6-3	It soon appeared that if Mrs Sparsit...	6:33
63	6-4	Long after Louisa had undressed...	6:44
64	6-5	Chapter 9: Hearing The Last Of It	5:17
65	6-6	This again made the excellent woman...	7:18
66	6-7	She went with a heavy, hardened kind of sorrow...	6:23
67	6-8	Chapter 10: Mrs Sparsit's Staircase	4:49
68	6-9	The same evening, Mrs Sparsit...	4:53
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70	6-11	Next day, Saturday, Mrs Sparsit sat...	8:15
71	6-12	Mrs Sparsit saw her out of the wood...	4:25
72	7-1	Chapter 12: Down	4:24
73	7-2	He moved, to support her with his arm.	5:03
74	7-3	Book 3: Garnering Chapter 1: Another Thing...	5:10



75	7-4	'My dear, I have remained all night at my table...'	9:32
76	7-5	Chapter 2: Very Ridiculous	4:46
77	7-6	It was impossible, even before dinner...	6:07
78	7-7	'Well! If it should unhappily appear...'	4:26
79	7-8	If she had asserted any influence...	5:54
80	7-9	Chapter 3: Very Decided	4:49
81	7-10	'Well, ma'am,' said Bounderby...	4:56
82	7-11	The blustering Bounderby crimsoned...	7:50
83	7-12	Chapter 4: Lost	6:32
84	7-13	'Who is it?,' asked Louisa.	8:40
85	8-1	Since his sheet-anchor had come home...	4:56
86	8-2	Chapter 5: Found	6:55
87	8-3	The spectacle of a matron...	8:26
88	8-4	'I don't exactly know,'...	3:59
89	8-5	Chapter 6: The Starlight	5:36
90	8-6	The wide prospect, so beautiful...	8:03
91	8-7	When all was ready...	8:27
92	8-8	Chapter 7: Whelp-Hunting	7:51
93	8-9	The first thing they saw...	9:08
94	9-1	Mr Gradgrind arrived within an hour...	7:45
95	9-2	Chapter 8: Philosophical	8:10
96	9-3	The other three sat up at the inn all night...	6:38
97	9-4	Chapter 9: Final	7:24
98	9-5	Here was Mr Gradgrind on the same day...	5:13

Charles Dickens

(1812–1870)

Hard Times

The idea laid hold of me by the throat in a very violent manner – Dickens

Dickens had no intention of writing another novel in 1854. Exhausted after completing *Bleak House* in August 1853, he had intended to have a holiday from the pressures of writing, but an appeal from his publishers, Bradbury and Evans, changed his plans. In collaboration with them, Dickens had produced a weekly magazine called *Household Words*, for which he had briefly edited and contributed articles; however, in 1854 it was having financial difficulties. The publishers asked Dickens if he would reverse the falling sales by contributing a new novel in weekly parts. Despite his exhaustion Dickens agreed and the result was *Hard Times*.

By the mid 19th century, England was in the grip of the Industrial Revolution and was the world's leading manufacturer. Factories sprang up all over the Midlands and the northern counties, and the mass production of goods meant long hours of intense labour and low wages for the work-force. Industry was beginning to dominate working people's lives, and the consequent reduction in the quality of life for these workers led to illness, disease and desperation. Sensitive as always to the mood of his times, Dickens chose industry and its effects as the theme for his novel.

The Industrial Revolution introduced a new system of values, in which individual worth and self-esteem were measured purely in monetary terms. Dickens viewed this development with alarm and wanted to sound a warning. He had touched on the subject before in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, when Little Nell finds herself in the nightmare world of furnaces, smoke and fire in Birmingham. But in *Hard Times* Dickens creates an environment whose inhabitants, both

masters and men, are not able to pass through, as Little Nell did in Birmingham, but are prisoners of their industry, and moreover are serving life sentences.

Dickens's description of the fictitious northern town, Coketown, where the novel is set, has all the atmosphere of a grainy black-and-white photograph from the era. Indeed smoky black is the dismal colour in the description:

It was a town of red brick... if smoke and ashes had allowed it... it was a town of unnatural red-black... it was a town of machinery and tall chimneys out of which interminable serpents of smoke trailed themselves... it had a black canal in it...

The workers in *Hard Times* blend into this industrial landscape and even the central working-class character, Stephen Blackpool, is not marked out by any individual characteristics. He serves Dickens's theme, and is portrayed as a victim of a ruthless system. Some critics think that Dickens overdid the tragic aspects of Blackpool's life, in his emphasising of the downward spiral, the utter 'muddle' as Blackpool sees it, of ordinary people's lives crushed by a lack of human feeling.

But considering Dickens set out to show the world the appalling conditions the factory system bred, his lack of descriptive detail is strange. There is, for instance, no detailed description of work in the factories or of a hard working day; his examination of industrial conditions falls victim to his bigger theme of utilitarianism.

Utilitarianism (or more simply 'usefulness') was a theory developed by the philosopher John Stuart Mill, which advocated that taste should be dictated by rules and acknowledged principles, rather than innate or instinctive feeling. In short, taste has no value if it is not useful. This was the starting point for the conflict in *Hard Times*: facts versus imagination (or fancy, as Dickens termed it). For Dickens, the dull cruel world would have been unbearable without imagination, which was the very source of his creative writing. He despised the moral platitudes that were being incorporated into children's stories in the 1850s, distorting the romance of traditional tales. 'Fairy tales should be respected,' he wrote. The absence of any stimulus to the imagination of the inhabitants of Coketown, who are at the mercy of utilitarian educators bent on teaching them the facts of life, with no allowance for indulging their fancies, inspired Dickens to turn away from creating a social document and to construct *Hard Times* as a fable in itself. Its simplicity of style resembles his other fables, the Christmas books. In *Hard Times*, Dickens presents a nightmare vision of a future society where men and women are treated no differently from machines.

The two guardians of utilitarianism in Coketown are Mr Bounderby and Mr Gradgrind. Bounderby is a monster of comic cruelty and savagery, a self-made man who despises anyone who has not suffered as he has. He is a prig and a bully whose self-delusion is the source of much humour. He represents the new Victorian value of power achieved by wealth and industry, rather than by blood or class. His cruel treatment of Mrs Sparsit, an upper-middle-class lady who has fallen on hard times, epitomises this change of attitude.

Bounderby views any demands from his workers as a desire to dine 'on turtle soup and venison with golden spoons', at his expense. He is callous in his response to Blackpool's troubles; he rose from nothing and made something of himself, so why couldn't Blackpool? But Bounderby, the enemy of fancy, is ironically the book's greatest exponent of it, for his whole life turns out to be a sham, presented as truth.

Gradgrind, though firmly the symbol of utility at the start of the book, travels the furthest journey in the story, finally realising that it is *his* false beliefs that have ruined his son and daughter, and that he must recreate himself as a loving, caring father. Gradgrind, like Dombey in *Dombey and Son*, is allowed to amend his wrongs. His children, Louisa and Tom, bombarded all their lives with nothing but facts, are dysfunctional and disconnected and become victims of their own ignorance. Tom thieves, whilst Louisa is brought to the edge of committing adultery.

News of a strike by workers in Preston early in 1854 offered Dickens a basis of reality for his novel, and he set out for Preston convinced that the workers were being led astray by the strike organisers. Dickens was no socialist and mistrusted the early Trade Union movement, known as 'combinations', which in his eyes,

like the utilitarian educators, stopped the workers thinking for themselves. It would have been unnatural for Dickens, whose own sense of individuality was so strong, to accept the idea of a collective organisation that professed to think with one mind. It was anathema to him.

Dickens does not offer trade unions as an answer to social problems in an industrial town. There is no hint of early socialism in Slackbridge, the union leader. He is a bully, out to intimidate the work-force and increase his power status, working for self-interest and not the general good, just like the capitalist Bounderby.

So if Dickens did not see trade unions as the answer, where did it lie? He sees the answer in the circus: a tinsel world perhaps, but one that valued imagination; and, for Dickens, imagination led to sympathy. The circus-folk instinctively share and share alike as they face the hardship of life on the road. 'Sleary's Horse Riding', a troop of itinerant show-people led by the irrepressibly optimistic Mr Sleary, becomes the repository of warm human nature, the alternative to cold, dehumanised, soulless work. Sleary is a richly comic creation, complete with an almost unintelligible lisp, who shows tender feelings, warmth, generosity and wisdom:

People muht be amuthed. They can't be alwayth a learning, nor yet they can't alwayth be a working, they ain't made for it... make the betht of uth; not the wortht.

Dickens is firmly on his soap-box in *Hard Times*, didactic at the expense, sometimes, of his usual writing-style: he suppresses his naturally extrovert mode in favour of a repressed, subdued tone. It gives the novel a powerful sense of oppression. His customary humour is grim in *Hard Times*. There is little of it and the tone is harsh. It has led some critics to consider *Hard Times* as more of a political tract than a novel. Dickens dedicated *Hard Times* to Thomas Carlyle, the leading philosopher of his age, whom he once said was the man 'who had influenced him the most'. In his pamphlet on Chartism, Carlyle had set out the rights of the working-class man, with which Dickens agreed wholeheartedly. However, Dickens's politics were for the most part dictated by his sentimentality and sense of romance rather than sound principles. *Hard Times* was not to be a realistic social document but, true to the main theme of the novel, a work of his imagination.

He ultimately shows a humane solution to the situation in *Hard Times*, rather than a political one. Nevertheless, Karl Marx said of Dickens that he had 'issued to the world more political and social truths than have been uttered by all the professional politicians, publicists and moralists put together.'

Notes by David Timson

Total running time: 10:41:30 • 9 CDs

Recorded at Hats Off Studios, Oxford

Produced by Michael Taylor

Edited and mastered by Michael Taylor

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Booklet and cover design: Hannah Whale, Fruition – Creative Concepts, using the image *Industrial smoke from the factories of Sheffield, Yorkshire (England)*, courtesy of Mary Evans Picture Library

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CD catalogue no.: NA0023

CD ISBN: 978-1-84379-443-1

Digital catalogue no.: NA0023D

Digital ISBN: 978-1-84379-444-8

AMD011117