

Chapter 5: THE KEY-NOTE

... Let us strike the key-note, Coketown, before pursuing our tune.

It was a town of red brick, or of brick that would have been red if the smoke and ashes had allowed it; but as matters stood, it was a town of unnatural red and black like the painted face of a savage. It was a town of machinery and tall chimneys, out of which interminable serpents of smoke trailed themselves for ever and ever, and never got uncoiled. It had a black canal in it, and a river that ran purple with ill-smelling dye, and vast piles of building full of windows where there was a rattling and a trembling all day long, and where the piston of the steam-engine worked monotonously up and down, like the head of an elephant in a state of melancholy madness. It contained several large streets all very like one another, and many small streets still more like one another, inhabited by people equally like one another, who all went in and out at the same hours, with the same sound upon the same pavements, to do the same work, and to whom every day was the same as yesterday and to-morrow, and every year the counterpart of the last and the next.

These attributes of Coketown were in the main inseparable from the work by which it was sustained; against them were to be set off, comforts of life which found their way all over the world, and elegancies of life which made, we will not ask how much of the fine lady, who could scarcely bear to hear the place mentioned. The rest of its features were voluntary, and they were these.

You saw nothing in Coketown but what was severely workful. If the members of a religious persuasion built a chapel there - as the members of eighteen religious persuasions had done - they made it a pious warehouse of red brick, with sometimes (but this is only in highly ornamental examples) a bell in a birdcage on the top of it. The solitary exception was the New Church; a stuccoed edifice with a square steeple over the door, terminating in four short pinnacles like florid wooden legs. All the public inscriptions in the town were painted alike, in severe characters of black and white. The jail might have been the infirmary, the infirmary might have been the jail, the town-hall might have been either, or both, or anything else, for anything that appeared to the contrary in the graces of their construction. Fact, fact, fact, everywhere in the material aspect of the town; fact, fact, fact, everywhere in the immaterial. The M'Choakumchild school was all fact, and the school of design was all fact, and the relations between master and man were all fact, and everything was fact between the lying-in hospital and the cemetery, and what you couldn't state in figures, or show to be purchaseable in the cheapest market and saleable in the dearest, was not, and never should be, world without end, Amen

The complete text of [Hard Times](#) is available on line.

From *Germinal*, by Emile Zola

Germinal, (1885) by Emile Zola, is the thirteenth novel in his twenty-volume series *Les Rougon-Macquart*. The realism of this story of a miners' strike in the 1860s in northern France is stunning. In this Sensational Snippet, the strike has got out of control. A small contingent of soldiers are guarding Belgian scabs [people who work even though there is a strike happening] in the pit and the strikers are attacking them with stones and bricks. Zola – whose sympathies throughout this novel are with the miners and their cause – shows that things are never as simple as they seem afterwards in the cold light of day.

The little squad was nearly lost to sight under the hail of stones. Fortunately they landed too high and merely pitted the wall above. What was to be done? For a moment the captain considered retreating into the buildings, but the very thought of showing his back to the mob made his pale face flush – and in any case it was no longer practicable, for if they made the slightest movement they would be lynched. A brick had just broken the peak of his cap and blood was trickling down his forehead. Several of his men were wounded, and he realized that they were at the end of their tether and had reached the stage of instinctive self-defense when they would no longer obey their superiors. The sergeant had let out an oath when his shoulder had nearly been put out and his skin bruised by a heavy thud that sounded like a dolly banging the washing. The recruit had been grazed in two places, his thumb was smashed and his right knee was smarting: how much longer were they going to put up with this? One brick had bounced up and hit the veteran in the groin, and he had turned green and was raising his rifle with his thin arms. Three times the captain was on the point of ordering them to fire. He was torn with perplexity, and for some seconds an apparently endless struggle within him shook all his ideas, his sense of duty and his beliefs as a man and as a soldier. The bricks rained thicker still, and just as he was opening his mouth to shout 'Fire!' the rifles went off of their own accord; first three shots, then five, then the whole volley of a platoon and then, long afterwards, a single shot in the midst of silence.

There was a moment of stupefaction. They had really fired, and the crowd stood motionless, unable to believe it. Then piercing shrieks arose, while the bugle sounded the cease fire. And then a wild panic like the stampede of cattle before machine-guns, a frantic rush through the mud.

(*Germinal*, by Emile Zola, Penguin Classics, 1954 translation by L.W. Tancock, p 410-1)