Study Material on *Hard Times* by Charles Dickens

Course: English Hons., Sem – IV, CC-X

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Overview

Author

Charles Dickens

Year Published

1854

Type

Novel

Genre

Drama, Satire

Perspective and Narrator

Hard Times is told in the third person by an omniscient narrator who occasionally inserts a comment, sarcastic remark, or opinion on the characters or the action, giving readers a sense of the narrator's familiarity with the characters and events. This narrative point of view also contrasts with the characters who, for the most part, are detached from their feelings, thoughts, and emotions and unable to communicate effectively.

Tense

Hard Times is written in the past tense.

About the Title

The title *Hard Times* or the full title *Hard Times for These Times* refers to the difficulties of life caused by industrialization in England in the 19th century and by the constraints of rigid, fact-based education that arose along with it in the attempt to increase profits and control life and thought.

Charles Dickens | Biography

Impoverished Youth

Charles Dickens was born in Portsmouth, Hampshire, England, on February 7, 1812, to Mary and John Dickens, a navy payroll clerk. The family moved to London in 1822. Although John Dickens had a well-paying job, he was a big spender, and the family was often in financial difficulty. To contribute to the family's income, Charles was taken out of school at age 12 and sent to work in Warren's boot-blacking factory, where he pasted labels on jars of blacking (shoe polish). Conditions in the factory appalled the boy. It was full of rats; its wooden floors and stairs were rotting; and the air smelled of the dirty waters of the nearby Thames. Factory work paid too little to help with the family's financial woes, and John Dickens was soon imprisoned for debt in Marshalsea Prison in Southwark. His family lost their home and, as was common at the time, went to live with him at the prison. Charles, however, was sent to room with a family friend. Returning to school briefly, Dickens left again at age 15 to take a job as a clerk in a law office. After learning shorthand he found work as a law clerk and then as a court and parliamentary reporter, later using his knowledge of law and government in his fiction.

Dickens's experiences as a young boy trying to make his way alone in London, his encounters with the harsh conditions of factories and prisons, and his resentment of a system that kept the poor in poverty came to inform many of his novels. Loss of childhood innocence and exploitation of the vulnerable are two themes inspired by Dickens's personal tribulations and explored in his works, taking central roles in *The Pickwick Papers* (1836), *Oliver Twist* (1837–39), *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838), *David Copperfield* (1849–50), *Hard Times* (1854), and *Great Expectations* (1860–61). Dickens's novels appeared first in serial form in various London periodicals, usually with a weekly or biweekly installment over the course of a year or two. Completed novels were later published in single book form. For example, *Hard Times* appeared in weekly installments in magazines throughout 1854.

Literary Life

Dickens sold his first short story in 1833 to the *Monthly Magazine*. The following year he began working for the *Morning Chronicle*, writing stories under the name Boz. These stories were published in the collection *Sketches by Boz* in 1836. In the same year, Dickens began editing for *Bentley's Miscellany*. In this publication his first two novels, *The Pickwick Papers* and *Oliver Twist*, appeared in serial form. He continued working at an intense pace for several years. As his catalog of novels grew, so did his popularity and his fortunes. By 1843, when he published *A Christmas Carol*, the first and most successful of his four "Christmas books," Dickens was already a household name in London. Later in his career Dickens founded and edited two successful weekly magazines, *Household Words* (1850–59) and *All the Year Round* (1859–88). These provided a platform for serializing several later novels, including *Bleak House* (1852), *Hard Times* (1854), and *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859).

In addition to writing, Dickens performed with an amateur theatrical group and gave speeches in support of causes and charities. With the financial help of Angela Burdett-Coutts, a wealthy friend, Dickens set up a school for delinquent girls, which he directed for more than 10 years. In 1858 Dickens began to give public readings of his novels, making use of his acting experience. The readings were popular, and he embarked on very popular speaking tours throughout England and the United States (1867–68).

Marriage

In 1836 Dickens married Catherine Hogarth, with whom he had 10 children. In the early years of his marriage and career, Dickens enjoyed fatherhood and domestic pursuits. His writing earned him sufficient money to support his family and help settle his parents' debts, but the marriage was ultimately unhappy. The couple separated in 1858, a year after Dickens fell in love with actress Ellen Ternan. Dickens seems to have had a happy relationship with Ternan, but he treated Catherine Dickens poorly. He even accused her of being mentally ill and claimed she and their children were happier apart from one another. One of his daughters later said Dickens ceased to care about his children after the breakup with their mother.

In this way, Dickens's treatment of divorce in *Hard Times* presents it as a natural solution to deeply unhappy marriages. Stephen Blackpool seeks a divorce from his alcoholic and abusive wife so he can marry a more agreeable woman. Louisa Gradgrind leaves Mr. Bounderby after an emotional breakdown. It is possible these scenes reflect Dickens's own frustration at being trapped in his marriage, as an English divorce before 1857 required Parliamentary approval and cost a small fortune.

Lasting Legacy

Charles Dickens's novels remained highly popular throughout his lifetime, but his popularity began to decline after his death. Early 20th-century critics praised "serious" novels by modernist authors such as James Joyce and Virginia Woolf and, by comparison, found Dickens's novels shallow and carelessly constructed. The 1940s, however, saw a revival of critical interest and appreciation for Dickens's ability to combine compelling stories with significant social criticism. The English writer and satirist George Orwell commented on Dickens's work in 1940: "In *Oliver Twist*, *Hard Times*, *Bleak House*, *Little Dorrit*, Dickens attacked English institutions with a ferocity that has never since been approached. Yet he managed to do it without making himself hated, and, more than this, the very people he attacked have swallowed him so completely that he has become a national institution himself."

Charles Dickens died from a stroke on June 9, 1870. By 1970, the centenary of his death, Dickens's reputation in English literature was largely on a par with William Shakespeare's.

Hard Times | Context

Industrial Revolution

The first wave of the Industrial Revolution in Britain took place between 1760 and 1830 as technologies emerged to increase production of goods and expanded trade increased demand. These changes in the early decades of the 19th century created a shift toward economies based on manufacturing and urban living that redefined society first in England, as well as the United States and the rest of Europe, throughout the 19th century and into the 20th. The cotton textile industry was one of the first to shift toward automation with the invention of machines such as the spinning jenny and the power loom in the late 1700s. Powered by steam, these devices could produce far more fabric in far less time than a single spinner or weaver could with a traditional wheel and loom. Therefore, cloth production moved from homes or small workshops to factories, prompting workers to migrate from rural areas to cities where factories were located, which greatly changed English life at the time.

While scholars define the Industrial Revolution as taking place between 1760 and 1830, the decades that followed witnessed an ongoing proliferation of factories in urban centers. Outside London, especially in the north of England, small towns grew as large numbers of people moved there to find work. Housing was hastily, and often poorly, constructed to accommodate the new residents. Additional factories were also built to produce the machinery of manufacturing. Mines were expanded to provide coal to power steam engines, which produced tremendous amounts of smoke and coal dust. For example, London became famous for its thick "fog" in the 19th century, the result of industrial smoke mixing with natural moisture in the air. At the time, no environmental attention was paid to the conditions.

Hard Times addresses the social and political changes associated with industrialization through the portrayal of Coketown. (Its named in reference to *coke*, the residue left from burning coal.) The conditions of this fictional industrial city in England mirror those found in growing factory towns such as Manchester, Sheffield, and Liverpool. The substandard housing and the proliferation of smokestacks are presented in detailed descriptions *Hard Times*.

Factory Conditions

Charles Dickens knew firsthand the working conditions in the factories of industrial England from his time as a 12-year-old in Warren's boot-blacking factory in London. His account of this time describes the filthy floors, rotting staircases, constant dampness, and swarms of rats. Child labor in factories was common, as impoverished families needed all sources of income in the changed society, and some children worked because they had no families at all. Dickens's experience at Warren's was unpleasant but

less hazardous than the experiences of young laborers who operated machines. Such conditions eventually prompted Parliament to enact regulations in 1833 to limit working hours and improve conditions for children in factories. Nevertheless, for both children and adults, hours remained long, pay low, food scarce, and, despite some regulation, conditions dirty and often unsafe. In *Hard Times*, Dickens combines his personal experiences with political understanding to criticize the conditions found in 19th-century factories throughout England and Europe.

Living Conditions

Life outside the factories was scarcely better than the conditions within the factories. Accounts abound of overcrowded and cramped living spaces, the result of low wages and population shift from rural to urban areas. With lack of sanitation a serious problem, outbreaks of disease were not unusual, especially in manufacturing centers in northern England—location of the fictional Coketown of *Hard Times*—because they were farther away from the regulatory eye of the government in London.

Philosopher Friedrich Engels, before writing *The Communist Manifesto* in 1848 with fellow philosopher Karl Marx, published an account of his observations of English factories in 1843. His description of the city of Manchester includes the "irregular cramming together of dwellings in ways which defy all rational plan." One such cluster of dwellings is described surrounding "a privy without a door, so dirty that the inhabitants can pass into and out of the court only by passing through foul pools of stagnant urine and excrement." The rest of his description of Manchester contains similarly disturbing details of filth and stench combined with unsafe and inadequate accommodations. These conditions not only fed Engels's radical political ideas, but they also led eventually, in the middle of the century, to the formation of more moderate labor unions that aimed to improve wages and conditions for the working classes.

In *Hard Times*, Dickens provides less explicit descriptions of the subpar living conditions factory workers inhabit, but he does present characters such as poor factory worker Stephen Blackpool who offer insight about the human consequences of living in close proximity to such squalor and who make impassioned pleas for improved conditions for himself and his peers.

Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism at this time became a popular philosophical school of thought among the educated classes. Developed by political economist John Stuart Mill and social reformer Jeremy Bentham, utilitarianism rested on the idea that self-interest drives all human behavior, and one must evaluate actions by their potential to create pleasure rather than pain to the individual. Understanding the facts, rather than the emotional implications or imagined outcomes, of a given situation is essential to such evaluation. On a

larger moral scale, goodness also can be evaluated according to the consequences of actions and how much good or evil those consequences might bring to how many people. In this way one can analyze and quantify human behavior in ways that were very new compared with philosophies of the past.

In *Hard Times*, the utilitarian model led Dickens to satirize and exaggerate both Mr. Bounderby's and Mr. Gradgrind's strict reliance on fact and reason to assess situations and make decisions. Mr. Gradgrind, especially, must face the consequences of such extreme pedagogy when he sees emotional barrenness as its result—in Louisa's passivity and inability to deal with emotion, in Tom's detached sense of entitlement and rebellion against the lack of amusement, and in Bitzer's uncompromising rigidity and soullessness in acting only as he was trained to.

Divorce in 19th-Century England

Before 1857 divorce was possible in England only by an act of Parliament. As Mr. Bounderby tells Stephen Blackpool in *Hard Times*, divorce involved petitioning lower courts as part of the process of bringing the case before Parliament. Costs were prohibitively high, so divorce was reserved for only the wealthy. For the most part only men could seek a divorce and only on the grounds of adultery. Wives could seek a divorce only if they could prove adultery in addition to extreme cruelty, and if a woman left her husband, she could be legally compelled to return to him.

In 1857 Parliament passed the Matrimonial Causes Act, which moved divorce hearings from Parliament to a special court. This act may have marginally reduced the cost of divorce, but little else changed. Adultery remained the only grounds for divorce, but wives no longer had to prove life-threatening cruelty as additional grounds. This meant many people living in permanent conditions of unhappiness and estrangement had no recourse.

Satire

In an 1855 letter to his friend Charles Knight, publisher of London's *Penny Magazine*, Dickens focused on the satiric aspect of the recently published *Hard Times*, "My satire is against those who see figures and averages, and nothing else—the representatives of the wickedest and most enormous vice of this time." As satire *Hard Times* uses exaggeration and irony to illustrate and criticize serious social, political, and economic problems during the years after industrialization had taken a firm hold in society. Objects of Dickens's ridicule include Coketown and the myths that govern life there. He also pokes fun at Mr. Gradgrind's educational principles and their implementation as well as the exaggerated characterization of Josiah Bounderby—a man whose malice is cloaked by his ridiculous persona. The juxtapositions of downtrodden factory workers with joyful circus performers and oblivious upper classes also become

targets of Dickens's ridicule. Scholars and critics also have recognized *Hard Times* as one of Dickens's most scathing social commentaries, in which he confronts the issues of working conditions associated with industrialization, income inequality, frustrations of the working classes, purposes and results of education, and environmental damage.

Hard Times | Characters

Character	Description
Louisa Gradgrind	Lousia Gradgrind is an obedient and generally passive young woman whose belief in, or refusal to question, her father's philosophy of pure reason leads her into a loveless marriage and an eventual mental breakdown.
Mr. Bounderby	Josiah Bounderby, a wealthy factory owner and bank owner in Coketown, claims to have raised himself from nothing to his current position of power and influence.
Mr. Gradgrind	Mr. Thomas Gradgrind is a schoolmaster of some wealth who believes the understanding of all facts and the application of pure reason will result in a happy and prosperous life.
Tom Gradgrind	The oldest Gradgrind child, Tom Gradgrind, resents his limited education and job at the bank. He spends most of his adult life expecting Louisa to bail him out of the trouble he causes himself.
Sissy Jupe	Abandoned for a good reason by her father, a circus performer, Sissy Jupe is taken into the Gradgrind family to care for Mrs. Gradgrind and attend school. The Gradgrinds believe they have saved Sissy, but she saves them as well.
Stephen Blackpool	A poor factory worker trapped in a miserable marriage, Stephen Blackpool runs afoul of Mr. Bounderby, is forced to leave town, and is falsely accused of robbery.

Mrs. Sparsit	Described as having a classical face and heavy, dark eyebrows, Mrs. Sparsit is Mr. Bounderby's highly born housekeeper and companion until he marries Louisa Gradgrind, whom Mrs. Sparsit resents for displacing her.
Bitzer	An unpleasant schoolmate of Sissy Jupe, Louisa, and Tom, Bitzer learns facts well and grows up to have ambitions at the bank, exposing Tom in the hope of obtaining his position.
Mrs. Blackpool	Mrs. Blackpool is Stephen Blackpool's alcoholic and abusive wife, who leaves home for long periods of time and returns only when she is too ill to stay away.
Mr. E.W.B. Childers	An accomplished master of horseback riding, Mr. E.W.B. Childers is a principal member of Mr. Sleary's circus.
Emma Gordon	Emma Gordon is the pregnant circus performer who comforts Sissy Jupe when Sissy learns her father has left her.
Mrs. Gradgrind	A timid supporter of her husband's educational principles, Mrs. Gradgrind is Thomas Gradgrind's sickly wife and mother of Louisa, Tom, and their siblings.
Adam Smith Gradgrind	Adam Smith Gradgrind is a younger brother of Louisa and Tom, named for the economist who endorsed free-enterprise capitalism, in which markets are left essentially to manage themselves.
Jane Gradgrind	Jane Gradgrind is the youngest Gradgrind child who, under Sissy's influence, grows up softer and more emotionally mature than Louisa.
Malthus	Malthus is the fourth Gradgrind child, named for Thomas Malthus, the philosopher

Gradgrind	who cautioned against overpopulation and believed poverty to be inescapable.
Hands	Treated as a single unit by Mr. Bounderby and others, the Hands are the faceless masses of workers who labor in the factories of Coketown.
James Harthouse	James Harthouse is a wealthy young man who comes to Coketown to teach in Mr. Gradgrind's school and attempts to seduce Louisa to relieve his boredom with life.
Mr. Jupe	Mr. Jupe, a horse-riding circus clown, abandons his daughter, Sissy, so she might receive an education and live a better life, as his health and ability to perform begin to fail.
Master Kidderminster	Master Kidderminster performs as Cupid, among other roles, in the circus acts and has a crush on young Sissy Jupe.
Mr. M'Choakumchild	Mr. M'Choakumchild is the teacher who runs Mr. Gradgrind's school with strict adherence to factual information and reasoned thinking.
Merrylegs	Merrylegs is Mr. Jupe's dog who, in his own old age, returns to the circus looking for Sissy after his master dies.
Mrs. Pegler	A mysterious woman who comes to Coketown once a year and watches Mr. Bounderby's home from afar, Mrs. Pegler is actually Mr. Bounderby's hard-working, middle-class mother, whom he has treated poorly.
Rachael	A longtime friend of Stephen Blackpool and his wife, Rachael is the kind, devoted, generous woman Stephen loves but cannot marry.

Lady Scadgers	Lady Scadgers, who overeats, has remained bedridden for 14 years, and who arranged the Sparsits' marriage, is Mrs. Sparsit's only relative; she and Mrs. Sparsit do not get along well.
Slackbridge	Slackbridge is a union organizer who ostracizes Stephen Blackpool from the Coketown workforce when Stephen refuses to join the union.
Mr. Sleary	Kind-hearted, asthmatic, lisping owner of the circus, Mr. Sleary offers Sissy Jupe an apprenticeship when her father leaves; he later helps her save Tom Gradgrind's life for a time.
Josephine Sleary	Mr. Sleary's fair-haired daughter and rider in the circus, Josephine Sleary has ridden horses since she was tied to one at two years of age.
Mr. Sparsit	Mr. Sparsit is Mrs. Sparsit's dead husband, most notable because the brief marriage left Mrs. Sparsit without money but with social connections; 15 years her junior, he lost his money by gambling and drinking.

Hard Times | Character Analysis

Louisa Gradgrind

As a child, Louisa Gradgrind absorbs her father's teachings about the value of factual analysis and pure reason, rejecting imagination and sentiment completely. At 20 she marries Josiah Bounderby, a man 30 years older, because she believes it matters little whom she marries and has no other prospects at the time. When she meets and develops feelings for the young teacher James Harthouse, she spins into a crisis of conscience and must re-evaluate her understanding of herself and her world.

Mr. Bounderby

Josiah Bounderby proudly, loudly, and frequently proclaims to have been born in a ditch, abandoned there by his mother, and rescued by an abusive grandmother who raised him. He also claims to have ascended

to his position of wealth and respect in Coketown by means of his own cunning and enterprise, overcoming abuse and hardship every step of the way. He resents his workers, believing they feel entitled to what he calls luxuries but in fact are basic necessities of life. After his marriage collapses, the truth about his family—he was raised by a loving, middle-class widowed mother—emerges, and his status diminishes.

Mr. Gradgrind

Thomas Gradgrind's intentions are good as he raises his students and his children to embrace factual analysis and logic to ensure their long-term success and prosperity. However, he grows increasingly fond of his kindhearted and imaginative ward, Sissy Jupe, despite her inadequacies as a student of fact and reason. When his favorite child, Louisa, reveals the miseries of her own life and begs for his help, he feels powerless to understand emotion and soon after abandons pure reason for a more balanced approach to life.

Tom Gradgrind

Tom Gradgrind grows up feeling resentful of his father's philosophies and hating his own work. Referred to as a whelp, Tom is often irresponsible, entitled, selfish, disreputable, and dishonest. As he rebels against the constraints of his upbringing, Tom drinks heavily and incurs massive gambling debts. When Louisa is no longer able to help him, he steals from the bank and attempts to frame Stephen Blackpool for the crime. Tom's family helps him escape from England when the truth is known, but he comes to appreciate them only as he is dying alone abroad.

Sissy Jupe

Sissy Jupe is the daughter of a horse-riding circus clown who hopes his daughter will get an education and have a more stable life than he and the circus can provide. Sissy is a poor student of Mr. Gradgrind's facts and reason-based curriculum, but she possesses more nuanced wisdom in seeing at an early age that facts are not the only basis for knowledge. Sissy sees issues from a larger perspective and has the ability to understand them from different angles. This kind of understanding, combined with her kind heart, helps the Gradgrinds in difficult times when facts do not.

Stephen Blackpool

Stephen Blackpool works in one of Mr. Bounderby's factories. He is married to an alcoholic who leaves home for long stretches of time, returning when she is too sick to function on her own. Stephen would like to divorce her so he can marry Rachael, the woman he loves, but divorce is not possible for people

with no money and influence. Instead he does his duty and his work until his honesty and desire to avoid trouble anger both the union organizer and his employer. He leaves town but is forced to return to defend himself against false allegations of bank robbery. On his return trip he falls into a disused coal pit and dies of his injuries shortly after he is rescued.

Mrs. Sparsit

Mrs. Sparsit was born and married within a higher class than her occupation as Mr. Bounderby's housekeeper implies. She takes this job after her husband dies but resents having to leave the position when Mr. Bounderby marries, even though he gives her a comfortable position at the bank. She plots against Louisa and later accidentally exposes Mr. Bounderby's fraudulent life story when she attempts to investigate the bank robbery.

Summary

Book 1: Sowing

Thomas Gradgrind, one of the wealthy leaders of Coketown, a fictional industrial city in northern England, runs a school where curriculum is based entirely on factual knowledge. His oldest children, Tom and Louisa, attend the school alongside children of modest means, among whom are Sissy Jupe, a circus-performer's daughter, who is not good with facts, and a boy known as Bitzer, who is. The students spend their days being drilled about facts and scolded if they express any evidence of imagination.

One day Mr. Gradgrind catches Tom and Louisa peeping into the circus tent, owned by Mr. Sleary, on their way home from school. Their parents and their father's friend Mr. Josiah Bounderby, a banker and factory owner, reprimand them for wasting time on useless "fancy." Mr. Gradgrind and Mr. Bounderby later find Sissy Jupe running through the streets, trying to escape from Bitzer's taunts. When they escort her back to the circus, they discover Sissy's father has abandoned her in hope she will get an education and live a better life without him and away from the circus. Mr. Sleary offers to let Sissy stay with the circus, but Mr. Gradgrind agrees to take charge of Sissy's schooling and allow her to live in his home and assist his wife. Sissy goes with Mr. Gradgrind because she thinks her father wants her to go to school.

Sissy tries hard to learn at school but finds the emphasis on facts difficult. Her answers to questions about facts and figures are usually based on her own questions about the people who are affected by those facts and figures. She shares her insecurities with Louisa, who sympathizes and asks Sissy about her father and the circus. The two develop a friendly relationship, although Mr. Gradgrind does not fully approve of it.

A factory worker, Stephen Blackpool, visits Mr. Bounderby to obtain advice on how to divorce his wife, an alcoholic who is usually absent but who wreaks havoc on the rare occasions when she returns home. Mr. Bounderby and his housekeeper, Mrs. Sparsit, are appalled by the suggestion of divorce and tell Stephen he took his wife for better or worse, adding he cannot afford a divorce anyway. Stephen is frustrated by this news because he is in love with another worker, Rachael, and now knows he will never be able to marry her. When he leaves Mr. Bounderby's house, he meets a mysterious woman who asks questions about Mr. Bounderby. When Stephen returns home, he finds Rachael taking care of his incapacitated wife, making his love for Rachael stronger and their impossible situation more frustrating.

Years pass, and when Mr. Gradgrind advises Sissy to leave school because she is a poor student, she agrees and apologizes. However, Mr. Gradgrind praises her for her goodness and wants her to remain in service to his family. Tom Gradgrind takes an apprenticeship with Mr. Bounderby at the bank and embraces his freedom. When Mr. Bounderby asks Louisa to marry him, Tom pressures her to accept the proposal to help smooth his indiscretions. Mr. Gradgrind advises Louisa to approach the proposal rationally. Louisa accepts, but her engagement and marriage cool her relationship with Sissy.

Book 2: Reaping

After Mr. Bounderby marries Louisa Gradgrind, he moves his housekeeper, Mrs. Sparsit, to a position at the bank where she lives, continues to receive a salary, and appears content. A new teacher at the Gradgrind school—the spoiled, privileged, and usually bored James Harthouse—develops a friendship with Mr. Bounderby, Tom, and Louisa, to whom he is attracted. He becomes close to Louisa by expressing interest in Tom's situation after Tom informs him she never loved Mr. Bounderby and married him out a sense of duty to her father and himself. He spends time at the Bounderbys' home in Coketown and at their newly purchased country estate.

In the meantime, the men at Mr. Bounderby's factory begin organizing a union, which Stephen Blackpool refuses to join because he has promised Rachael to stay out of trouble. Although the union men allow Stephen to continue working, they ostracize him. Looking for information about the union, Mr. Bounderby summons Stephen, but Stephen tells him little about the meeting. He does, however, tell Mr. Bounderby he doesn't think the union can solve the deep-rooted problems of poverty and the harsh conditions in the factories, nor does he think factory owners care about their workers. Mr. Bounderby is furious and fires Stephen on the spot.

Stephen encounters Rachael and the mysterious old woman, Mrs. Pegler, after his meeting with Mr. Bounderby and invites them to his home for tea. Louisa and Tom visit Stephen at home to express their

sympathies. Louisa offers him some money, but he accepts only two pounds as a loan for travel expenses. With the pretense of being helpful, Tom, who has excessive and pressing gambling debts, tells Stephen to wait outside the bank for a few nights during the week to see if Tom has any leads on work for him. When the week ends with no leads, Stephen Blackpool leaves Coketown to find work elsewhere.

Shortly after Stephen leaves, the bank is robbed. Mr. Bounderby immediately suspects Stephen because of their quarrels and because Stephen was spotted loitering around the bank. Louisa vaguely suspects Tom might be behind the robbery, but Tom and James Harthouse convince her Stephen is probably guilty. She and James Harthouse become closer as both are concerned for Tom, and James Harthouse insinuates himself more into Louisa's life. To calm her nerves, Mrs. Sparsit comes to stay at the Bounderbys' country house after the robbery and observes Louisa and James Harthouse together. She begins to hope for Louisa's downfall and in private expresses contempt for Louisa and for Mr. Bounderby.

Mrs. Sparsit gets her wish when Mr. Bounderby is called away one weekend on business. She hurries to the country house to spy on Louisa who should be there alone. She spots Louisa and James Harthouse talking in the garden. Seeing Louisa leave the house shortly after Harthouse departs, Mrs. Sparsit follows Louisa on a train back to Coketown. Losing sight of Louisa after they leave the train station, she remains unaware Louisa is not meeting Harthouse but is going to her father's house to confess the near-affair and beg her father to help her because her education never taught her how to experience emotions properly. In the midst of a breakdown, Louisa falls to Mr. Gradgrind's feet. Her father is at a loss as to what to do.

Book 3: Garnering

Louisa recovers from her breakdown in her childhood bedroom. She and Sissy resume their friendly, even sisterly, relationship. Mr. Gradgrind apologizes for his role in Louisa's education and begins to question his philosophy that values facts over all else. Sissy goes to James Harthouse and quietly but firmly convinces him he must leave town to mitigate the damage he has caused. He is embarrassed about taking orders from Sissy but complies nonetheless. Mrs. Sparsit goes to London to inform Mr. Bounderby about his wife's activities. Mr. Bounderby rushes back to Coketown and confronts Mr. Gradgrind. He learns Louisa did not actually have an affair, but he still demands she get over her emotional problems and come home right away. Louisa does not return, and the marriage effectively ends.

Stephen's presumed guilt in the bank robbery becomes a common assumption throughout the city. Rachael writes to urge him to return to Coketown and defend himself, but he neither replies nor returns. Messengers sent to his new address fail to find him, and Rachael and Sissy worry something has

happened to him. They do not rule out foul play and agree to search for him if he does not respond within one more day.

Meanwhile Mrs. Sparsit arrives triumphantly at Mr. Bounderby's house having nabbed Stephen's suspected accomplice, Mrs. Pegler. However, rather than showing gratitude or appreciation, Mr. Bounderby is furious. Mrs. Pegler's presence exposes his lifelong stories about being abandoned by his mother as an infant and making himself successful after years of abuse and neglect as a fraud. Mrs. Pegler is in fact Mr. Bounderby's mother, and she tells Mr. Gradgrind and others in Mr. Bounderby's house about how hard she worked to ensure her son got all the advantages possible. She is offended they would accuse her of being a bad mother when her son is right there to refute the claim—a claim he himself initiated with years of boasting about being entirely self-made. The episode ruins Mr. Bounderby and Mrs. Sparsit's relationship. They quarrel, and he fires her from her post. Five years later he dies while walking down a street in Coketown.

Sissy and Rachael search for Stephen and find he has fallen into a coal pit while walking back to Coketown to defend himself. A large rescue effort mounts, and Stephen is pulled from the pit. Badly hurt, he is able to tell the world he is innocent and bid Rachael a sad goodbye before he succumbs to his injuries and dies. Tom realizes his role in the robbery is about to be exposed, so he escapes to Mr. Sleary's circus on Sissy's advice.

The Gradgrinds and Sissy catch up with Tom and the circus. Sissy and the performers enjoy a reunion, and Mr. Sleary agrees to help the family get Tom to a ship that will take him abroad. Bitzer has followed the family, though, and plans to take Tom back to Mr. Bounderby in exchange for a promotion. Mr. Sleary and the performers subdue Bitzer and help Tom escape. Then Mr. Sleary tells Mr. Gradgrind he believes Sissy's father has died because his old dog returned to the circus looking for Sissy before the dog also died. Mr. Sleary and Mr. Gradgrind agree to spare Sissy this news.

Mr. Gradgrind's change of philosophy, from facts to emotion, costs him his seat in Parliament, but he does not seem to mind. Tom forgives Louisa and tries to return to see her but gets sick and dies during the journey. Louisa does not remarry, but she is beloved by Sissy's children and devotes her life to promoting happiness and imagination among the people of Coketown.

Introduction

1 Mr. Gradgrind outlines his pedagogy: nothing but facts.

Rising Action

2 The Gradgrinds take in Sissy Jupe after her father leaves.

3 Stephen Blackpool learns he can't divorce his wife.

4 Tom Gradgrind goes to work at the bank.

5 Louisa Gradgrind marries Mr. Bounderby.

6 James Harthouse arrives and decides to seduce Louisa.

7 Mr. Bounderby fires Stephen for refusing to be an informant.

8 Mr. Bounderby accuses Stephen of robbing the bank.

9 Mrs. Gradgrind dies.

10 Mrs. Sparsit plots and spies on Louisa.

Climax

11 Louisa has a crisis when Harthouse professes his love.

Falling Action

12 Mr. Bounderby and Louisa's marriage ends.

13 Stephen is rescued from a coal pit and dies soon after.

14 Sissy helps Tom escape after he is revealed as the robber.

Resolution

15 Louisa and Sissy settle into relatively contented lives.

Hard Times | Symbols

Loom

Stephen Blackpool makes multiple references to his loom, a steam-powered machine used widely in textile factories after industrialization. For Stephen, the loom defines his life and gives it purpose. Thus, it symbolizes the dominance of work in the lives of the workers and the narrow definition of the workers' sense of self and place in the world. Stephen views his work as a comfort, which it is in a sense, but the

loom also symbolizes the overwhelming power of work that keeps Stephen tethered to a bleak, monotonous, and unchangeable existence.

He is, in a sense, both defined and imprisoned by his loom. The position in which he must remain to operate the machine—hunched—defines his posture: stooped and hunched. Old beyond his years, he knows no way of life other than the loom, to which he returns day after day, year after year. Although he longs for better conditions, he has no desire to leave the security his loom provides him within these conditions, as a person imprisoned for many years might have little desire for freedom.

Bottle of Nine Oils

One of the last things Mr. Jupe does before leaving is send Sissy to get him a bottle of nine oils, a primitive remedy for the aches and pains he suffers from executing the acrobatics of his performances. Sissy keeps the bottle throughout her childhood, and Mr. Gradgrind tells Mr. Sleary she still has it as an adult when Mr. Sleary reveals his belief that Mr. Jupe has died. To Mr. Gradgrind, the bottle symbolizes Sissy's childlike feelings about her father: her unwillingness to accept facts and accept her father is not coming back. Such sentimentality is the primary obstacle to her formal education.

For Sissy, however, the bottle represents unfailing hope and love for her father. Her belief he might return helps her cope with the pain of his absence and reminds her of his love for her. Her sentimentality provides her with emotional stability in the face of his abandonment, and by keeping the legendary bottle into adulthood, she symbolically carries her father's love with her into adulthood. Her belief in his love allows her to grow into a productive and balanced adult.

Circus

With clowns, acrobats, and elaborate horse-riding shows based on legendary themes, the circus symbolizes the triumph of imagination and whimsy, or what Mr. Gradgrind would call "fancy." The circus features such performance pieces as the enticingly named "equestrians Tyrolean flower-act," which presumably combines flowers and horses in a creative way. Another performance features Master Kidderminster as Cupid, complete with "curls, wreaths, and wings." These performances provide factory workers an escape from the monotony and squalor of everyday life.

Even though wealthy men such as Mr. Gradgrind and Mr. Bounderby dismiss circus performers as disreputable slackers, circus performances require great skill and extensive training, showing the variety of expertise and ability that can lead to a productive and satisfying life, one most definitely not based on fact. The circus represents not merely the escape entertainment provides but also a broader understanding

of what success and prosperity can mean. The dismissal of the circus, in turn, represents a restrictive worldview that neglects the validity of fanciful human joy.

Bank

In complete contrast to the haphazard whimsy of the circus, the bank is a regimented and organized space, cleaner than the factories but dismal and restrictive in its own way. It is part of "the wholesome monotony of the town," a red brick building nearly indistinguishable from the other red brick buildings that surround it. The desks in the office space are set up in rows that echo the rows of machines in a factory, and Tom Gradgrind finds his place in the bank as oppressive as Stephen Blackpool finds the factory—perhaps more so. It is a privileged but dull existence. As a symbol of wealth, the bank shows how wealth oppresses those who don't have it. The images of heavy doors and locks emphasize how the money is kept separate from all human eyes and hands.

The building itself, as well as the institution, is a symbol. A nondescript but imposing brick structure, the bank is inaccessible to those who do not have money, and thus serves as a physical reminder of what people living in poverty can never obtain.

Hard Times | Themes

Industrialization

Industrialization created difficult economic and environmental conditions during Dickens's time. The narrator of *Hard Times* describes Coketowners' resistance to government regulations, for example, in language that implies factory owners had no problem with child labor or dangerous conditions or "chopping people up with their machinery." Stephen Blackpool loses his job when he confronts Mr. Bounderby about the long hours and lack of incentives in factory work. The narrator also makes multiple references to middle-class and upper-class attitudes about workers' tendencies toward vice, which may be exaggerated when readers consider how virtuously Stephen Blackpool and Rachael live. Still, other workers do seek escape from daily toil through drink and other entertainments. The worst result of this need to escape is visible in Stephen Blackpool's wife, a woman driven to such excessive drink that her original personality is lost; her marriage is ruined; and at one point she inflicts serious harm on herself. At the end of the novel she is living on the streets, unable to escape from the temporary escape she pursued as a factory worker.

Industrialization also created an economic class structure that determined the course of each individual's life, with little mobility existing between classes. For example, Josiah Bounderby, one of the wealthiest people in Coketown, spends most of his time loudly proclaiming himself a wholly self-made man—born in a ditch, abandoned by his mother, abused by his grandmother, and left to an aimless and dissolute youth. This story illustrates his belief that anyone can improve their circumstances, and he uses his origins as a sort of cudgel, berating his workers for laziness. However, his story is a lie. Bounderby was raised by a loving middle-class mother who worked hard to help her son get an education and build a better life. He has risen above the humbler circumstances of his birth, but he certainly has *not* built himself from nothing.

Stephen Blackpool, on the other hand, illustrates the fate of most people born into poverty. He works in a factory and has little in his life beyond his work. He is subject to personal misery because he lacks the funds to divorce his alcoholic wife, even though those with sufficient wealth are able to dissolve their marriages. He is subject as well to exploitation and scorn because he refuses to join the union, but in his courageous refusal to sell out his co-workers who do join, he is fired. He dies because the industrial system denies him the financial resources to defend himself against accusations of a crime he did not commit. Stephen has no recourse against any of these injustices because he has no money and no way of earning it to improve his lot. The contrast between Mr. Bounderby and Stephen Blackpool illustrates how industrial society is structured to limit economic opportunities. If a man is born with a little bit of wealth, he may be able to grow that wealth, but if a man has nothing, he is likely to remain with nothing.

Another hazard of industrialization was the pollution that made the environment in cities like Coketown both literally and figuratively poisonous. Even Coketown's name evokes black dust and coal rocks. The name is apt in *Hard Times*; soot coats every surface of the town, turning buildings black as smoke hangs heavy in the sky. The river that runs through the town is black with coal dust and dyes used in making textiles in the mills. The people of Coketown are oppressed by the factories just as the air and water are tainted by them—the physical pollution of the town reflecting the pollution present in the residents' minds and spirits. Workers live in filthy conditions that rob them of the possibility to pursue better lives or even entertain their own thoughts. Factory owners are emotionally stunted and deny the humanity of the workers, and of themselves, to maintain their privileged lives and keep their factories running and profits rolling in. Neither the workers nor the factory owners at the time are fully aware of these realities because the physical and psychological pollution generated by industry obscures everything.

Reason and Imagination

The teachers and masters at Mr. Gradgrind's school present factual knowledge and adherence to pure reason as the keys to a successful and satisfying life. Characters such as Mr. Gradgrind and Mr. Bounderby, along with the menacingly named Mr. M'Choakumchild, aim not only to teach their students the value of facts but to eliminate any sign of "fancy"—emotional or creative response—because in their narrow worldview these ideas have no value. In an early scene, a teacher goes so far as to explain why images of horses and flowers should not be used in wallpaper because, *in fact*, horses do not live on walls and thus do not make an appropriate wallpaper design, and because flowers do not grow on floors, they do not make an appropriate carpet design. Such narrow-minded thoughts on aesthetics illustrate the extremity of devotion to fact at a level that seems to defy reason and kill off all beauty in people's lives.

Mr. Bounderby and Mr. Gradgrind credit reason and fact as the secrets of their financial success, and for Mr. Bounderby the evidence indicates this belief is accurate. Even though Mr. Bounderby grossly exaggerates (in fact lies about) the story of his humble beginnings, the education and apprenticeship his mother provides do allow him to rise from his start as the son of a widowed shopkeeper to become the owner of a bank and factory and, as such, a respected member of Coketown's ruling class. Even Sissy Jupe reaps some financial rewards for choosing an education in reason. Arguably, she might have been at least equally happy had she remained with the circus and taken an apprenticeship there or happier with a more liberal education, but her father believes in education as the key to his daughter's long-term prosperity—so much so he abandons her so she can pursue her schooling without interruption where she had already begun. Even though Sissy is an unremarkable student by the standards of her fact-oriented teachers, she maintains her position in the Gradgrind household as a caregiver for Mrs. Gradgrind and the younger children. She does enjoy a safe and stable life as part of a wealthy family, which eventually culminates in marriage and a family of her own, really the most she might hope for then.

According to Mr. Bounderby and Mr. Gradgrind, the lower classes, in contrast, remain poor because they distract their minds with entertainment, such as the displays of the circus or books of fairy stories, instead of focusing entirely on facts or the hard work that might better their station. However, Louisa Gradgrind's emotional collapse and the dissolution of her marriage illustrate the flaws in such an unbalanced approach to living. She is unable to cope with her emotions because she has never been exposed to the art, literature, or creative thought that might have helped her develop and live with feelings. Sissy Jupe's experience illustrates the importance of imagination as well. Her education in reason does provide her with economic opportunities that give her a stable and happy life, but her early years in the circus, steeped in her father's love and the imaginative performances of his colleagues, give her an emotional grounding that prepares her for adulthood. She has gained strength and balance because her education in facts has

been tempered with roots in fancy. Pure reason cannot provide sufficient guidance in the complex world of human behavior and emotions.

Childhood

Childhood figures most prominently in Book 1, as this section focuses on the formative years of Louisa and Tom Gradgrind and Sissy Jupe. The lessons and experiences of childhood shape these characters later in life.

For Louisa the emphasis on reason and the rejection of imagination and emotion in her childhood lead her to an unbalanced adulthood. Her over-reliance on reason and alienation from her own feelings make her passive and indifferent, leading her into a loveless marriage and to the edge of scandal with an extra-marital affair, which does not come to pass. When faced with emotions, she has no idea how to handle them. Her life comes apart as a result, requiring her to reassess her understanding of herself and her place in the world, and rebuild accordingly.

For Tom the emphasis on reason in his childhood deprives him of the pleasures of childhood, defined by fun and play, and leads him to resent his family deeply. His attempts to capture the youth he feels he missed lead to irresponsibility, entitlement, excessive gambling, and other disreputable activities. He feels entitled to his sister's continued assistance and later needs his father to help him avoid the consequence of stealing from the bank. Throughout the book the narrator refers to Tom as "the whelp," a term for an unweaned puppy or dissolute young man. In short, Tom's lack of a balanced childhood prevents him from growing into a balanced, responsible adult.

On the other hand, Sissy Jupe experiences a more balanced childhood and grows up accordingly. She spends her first seven years in the warm and whimsical environment of the circus, well loved by her father and the other performers. She reads fairy tales and plays with her dog. She spends the second half of her childhood studying facts and reason in school. Although she considers herself a failure as a student, her early experiences temper the strict education she receives and give her emotional and imaginative grounding that make her a useful resource when the Gradgrind family needs her.

Love

The bonds of family love transcend the forces of fact and the fancies of imagination. Family bonds are as real as any fact presented, even as those bonds defy logic. Louisa Gradgrind considers herself emotionally numb, but she is devoted to her brother Tom beyond the bounds of reason. She gives him money to pay his gambling debts, even though pure logic would tell her such financial support is only a useless fool's

errand. Mr. Gradgrind's devotion to Louisa moves him to radically change his life's driving philosophy when she comes to him in crisis, and this change later costs him his seat in Parliament. He also risks his reputation when he ignores the law and saves Tom from prison.

Such familial devotion is not limited to the Gradgrinds. Sissy Jupe never abandons hope her father will one day return for her, although he cannot. Mrs. Pegler remains loyal to her son, Mr. Bounderby, observing him from afar and asking strangers about his wellbeing, defending and loving him even though he has forbidden her to contact him.

Nor are family bonds determined solely by blood. Mr. Gradgrind comes to care deeply for Sissy and treats her as a member of his family, as is evident when he and Mr. Sleary choose to spare her the painful knowledge her father is dead. In return Sissy looks out for Tom's and Louisa's best interests as if they were her own siblings. Such feelings may likely have come from her time with the circus in which troupe members care for one another as a family of their own making. When Sissy returns to them after years away, the troupe rushes to help her and the Gradgrinds because Sissy is eternally part of the family bond they share.

Romantic love is presented as an emotion that may create sorrow but also makes life worthwhile. Stephen Blackpool and Rachael love each other and are pained by the knowledge they cannot marry or even openly express their love. At the same time, they find comfort and respite from the bleakness of factory work and poverty by sharing each other's company. Rachael's belief in Stephen's innocence, when he is accused of theft at the bank, comes from her love and respect for him. She never wavers and ultimately helps him clear his name. Even though Stephen dies from injuries sustained after falling into a coal pit, his love for Rachael keeps him alive long enough to say goodbye and proclaim his innocence.

Louisa's experience illustrates the value of love by showing the emptiness of a life that lacks such affection. She marries Mr. Bounderby out of a practical need to help her brother and satisfy her father's wishes. The marriage is loveless from the start, and it only declines with time. Louisa is vulnerable to James Harthouse's attentions because she is starved for an emotional connection. Even though she does not love him—and to him the seduction is just a game—the encounter shows how greatly love is missing from her life.

Hard Times | Motifs

City and Country

In many novels the countryside is presented as an idyllic contrast with the dangers and corruptions of city life. In *Hard Times*, the city itself does appear as a forbidding environment. Coketown is oppressive, dirty and at best nondescript. The factory buildings are indistinguishable from one another, as are the Hands that work inside them. Everything is obscured by soot and smoke. The non-factory buildings are likewise uniform. Coketown is described as a place of extreme utility—nothing in the city is not useful, and little is beautiful.

However, the countryside serves only as a place where the physical and emotional pollution of the city spills over and spreads its corruption too. The landscape is dotted with coal pits, both working and disused. The railway slashes through the hills and trees. One of the coal pits consumes Stephen Blackpool, an innocent and well-meaning factory worker, when he falls in by accident and dies of his injuries; the country is no safer than the city. In a similar fashion, Louisa Gradgrind's life crashes on the grounds of her husband's country estate when James Harthouse comes there to lure her into an affair. The concerns of the city—and James originates from the much larger city of London—intruding on Louisa's country life show how the dangers of urbanization and industry continually encroach and destroy.

Turtle Soup, Venison, and a Gold Spoon

Mr. Bounderby repeatedly refers to a specific string of three luxury items to represent his understanding of the workers' aspirations. He says, "When a man tells me anything about imaginative qualities, I always tell that man, whoever he is, that I know what he means. He means turtle-soup and venison, with a gold spoon, and that he wants to be set up with a coach and six." Turtle soup and venison are expensive and specialized food items, the gold spoon a far better utensil than the steel or wooden spoons workers likely use, and the coach and six horses are private transportation inaccessible to all but the wealthiest members of society. Even Mr. Bounderby, Louisa, and the Gradgrinds are typically seen eating much more common fare and traveling on foot or by train.

The turtle soup, venison, and gold spoon are Mr. Bounderby's metaphor for his ironically unrealistic beliefs about the sense of entitlement he sees in others. On one level the metaphor describes a physical representation that allows supposedly realistic Mr. Bounderby to explain the sense of entitlement he ascribes to his factory hands. While the workers may wish for better food and living conditions, as seen in the union meetings and in Stephen Blackpool's description of the "muddle" in which he lives, the workers do not have aspirations to the extent Mr. Bounderby claims. They want roomier, cleaner housing. They want shorter working hours, safer conditions, and better pay. Yet Mr. Bounderby uses this exaggerated metaphor as a means of denying his workers any improvements at all because he thinks they want too

much. On a second level, then, the metaphor represents Mr. Bounderby's (and other factory owners') unrealistic assessment of workers' needs and desires.

However, Mr. Bounderby makes use of this metaphor when he perceives *anyone's* desire for more than he is willing to provide. When he confronts Mr. Gradgrind about Louisa's emotional breakdown and Mr. Gradgrind says his daughter needs more time to recover, Mr. Bounderby does not hesitate to invoke the image of turtle soup, venison, and the gold spoon in reference to her. Louisa is not one of his factory workers, but she is someone Mr. Bounderby sees as subservient to him. By applying the metaphor to his own wife, Mr. Bounderby reveals how he uses this metaphor not simply to respond to the entitlement he perceives in his workers; he uses this metaphor to respond to entitlement he perceives in the world in a general sense. His perception indicates a hypocritical lack of awareness, as he is unable to see how his expectation for others to do his bidding stems from a highly developed sense of entitlement on his own part.

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