

Hard Times

Summary

Thomas Gradgrind, a wealthy, retired merchant in the industrial city of Coketown, England, devotes his life to a philosophy of rationalism, self-interest, and fact. He raises his oldest children, Louisa and Tom, according to this philosophy and never allows them to engage in fanciful or imaginative pursuits. He founds a school and charitably takes in one of the students, the kindly and imaginative Sissy Jupe, after the disappearance of her father, a circus entertainer.

As the Gradgrind children grow older, Tom becomes a dissipated, self-interested hedonist, and Louisa struggles with deep inner confusion, feeling as though she is missing something important in her life. Eventually Louisa marries Gradgrind's friend Josiah Bounderby, a wealthy factory owner and banker more than twice her age. Bounderby continually trumpets his role as a self-made man who was abandoned in the gutter by his mother as an infant. Tom is apprenticed at the Bounderby bank, and Sissy remains at the Gradgrind home to care for the younger children.

In the meantime, an impoverished "Hand"—Dickens's term for the lowest laborers in Coketown's factories—named Stephen Blackpool struggles with his love for Rachael, another poor factory worker. He is unable to marry her because he is already married to a horrible, drunken woman who disappears for months and even years at a time. Stephen visits Bounderby to ask about a divorce but learns that only the wealthy can obtain them. Outside Bounderby's home, he meets Mrs. Pegler, a strange old woman with an inexplicable devotion to Bounderby.

James Harthouse, a wealthy young sophisticate from London, arrives in Coketown to begin a political career as a disciple of Gradgrind, who is now a Member of Parliament. He immediately takes an interest in Louisa and decides to try to seduce her. With the unspoken aid of Mrs. Sparsit, a former aristocrat who has

fallen on hard times and now works for Bounderby, he sets about trying to corrupt Louisa.

The Hands, exhorted by a crooked union spokesman named Slackbridge, try to form a union. Only Stephen refuses to join because he feels that a union strike would only increase tensions between employers and employees. He is cast out by the other Hands and fired by Bounderby when he refuses to spy on them. Louisa, impressed with Stephen's integrity, visits him before he leaves Coketown and helps him with some money. Tom accompanies her and tells Stephen that if he waits outside the bank for several consecutive nights, help will come to him. Stephen does so, but no help arrives. Eventually he packs up and leaves Coketown, hoping to find agricultural work in the country. Not long after that, the bank is robbed, and the lone suspect is Stephen, the vanished Hand who was seen loitering outside the bank for several nights just before disappearing from the city.

Mrs. Sparsit witnesses Harthouse declaring his love for Louisa, and Louisa agrees to meet him in Coketown later that night. However, Louisa instead flees to her father's house, where she miserably confides to Gradgrind that her upbringing has left her married to a man she does not love, disconnected from her feelings, deeply unhappy, and possibly in love with Harthouse. She collapses to the floor, and Gradgrind, struck dumb with self-reproach, begins to realize the imperfections in his philosophy of rational self-interest.

Sissy, who loves Louisa deeply, visits Harthouse and convinces him to leave Coketown forever. Bounderby, furious that his wife has left him, redoubles his efforts to capture Stephen. When Stephen tries to return to clear his good name, he falls into a mining pit called Old Hell Shaft. Rachael and Louisa discover him, but he dies soon after an emotional farewell to Rachael. Gradgrind and Louisa realize that Tom is really responsible for robbing the bank, and they arrange to sneak him out of England with the help of the circus performers with whom Sissy spent her early childhood. They are nearly successful, but are stopped by Bitzer, a young man who went to Gradgrind's school and who embodies all the qualities of the detached rationalism that Gradgrind once espoused, but who now sees its limits. Sleary, the lipping circus proprietor, arranges for Tom to slip out of Bitzer's grasp, and the young robber escapes from England after all.

Mrs. Sparsit, anxious to help Bounderby find the robbers, drags Mrs. Pegler—a known associate of Stephen Blackpool—in to see Bounderby, thinking Mrs. Pegler is a potential witness. Bounderby recoils, and it is revealed that Mrs. Pegler is really his loving mother, whom he has forbidden to visit him: Bounderby is not a self-made man after all. Angrily, Bounderby fires Mrs. Sparsit and sends her away to her hostile relatives. Five years later, he will die alone in the streets of Coketown. Gradgrind gives up his philosophy of fact and devotes his political power to helping the poor. Tom realizes the error of his ways but dies without ever seeing his family again. While Sissy marries and has a large and loving family, Louisa never again marries and never has children. Nevertheless, Louisa is loved by Sissy's family and learns at last how to feel sympathy for her fellow human beings.

Major Characters

Thomas Gradgrind

Thomas Gradgrind is the first character we meet in *Hard Times*, and one of the central figures through whom Dickens weaves a web of intricately connected plotlines and characters. Dickens introduces us to this character with a description of his most central feature: his mechanized, monotone attitude and appearance. The opening scene in the novel describes Mr. Gradgrind's speech to a group of young students, and it is appropriate that Gradgrind physically embodies the dry, hard facts that he crams into his students' heads. The narrator calls attention to Gradgrind's "square coat, square legs, square shoulders," all of which suggest Gradgrind's unrelenting rigidity.

In the first few chapters of the novel, Mr. Gradgrind expounds his philosophy of calculating, rational self-interest. He believes that human nature can be governed by completely rational rules, and he is "ready to weigh and measure any parcel of human nature, and tell you what it comes to." This philosophy has brought Mr.

Gradgrind much financial and social success. He has made his fortune as a hardware merchant, a trade that, appropriately, deals in hard, material reality. Later, he becomes a Member of Parliament, a position that allows him to indulge his interest in tabulating data about the people of England. Although he is not a factory owner, Mr. Gradgrind evinces the spirit of the Industrial Revolution insofar as he treats people like machines that can be reduced to a number of scientific principles.

While the narrator's tone toward him is initially mocking and ironic, Gradgrind undergoes a significant change in the course of the novel, thereby earning the narrator's sympathy. When Louisa confesses that she feels something important is missing in her life and that she is desperately unhappy with her marriage, Gradgrind begins to realize that his system of education may not be perfect. This intuition is confirmed when he learns that Tom has robbed Bounderby's bank. Faced with these failures of his system, Gradgrind admits, "The ground on which I stand has ceased to be solid under my feet." His children's problems teach him to feel love and sorrow, and Gradgrind becomes a wiser and humbler man, ultimately "making his facts and figures subservient to Faith, Hope and Charity."

Louisa Gradgrind

Although Louisa is the novel's principal female character, she is distinctive from the novel's other women, particularly her foils, Sissy and Rachael. While these other two embody the Victorian ideal of femininity—sensitivity, compassion, and gentleness—Louisa's education has prevented her from developing such traits. Instead, Louisa is silent, cold, and seemingly unfeeling. However, Dickens may not be implying that Louisa is really unfeeling, but rather that she simply does not know how to recognize and express her emotions. For instance, when her father tries to convince her that it would be rational for her to marry Bounderby, Louisa looks out of the window at the factory chimneys and observes: "There seems to be nothing there but languid and monotonous smoke. Yet when the night comes,

Fire bursts out.” Unable to convey the tumultuous feelings that lie beneath her own languid and monotonous exterior, Louisa can only state a fact about her surroundings. Yet this fact, by analogy, also describes the emotions repressed within her.

Even though she does not conform to the Victorian ideals of femininity, Louisa does her best to be a model daughter, wife, and sister. Her decision to return to her father’s house rather than elope with Harthouse demonstrates that while she may be unfeeling, she does not lack virtue. Indeed, Louisa, though unemotional, still has the ability to recognize goodness and distinguish between right and wrong, even when it does not fall within the strict rubric of her father’s teachings. While at first Louisa lacks the ability to understand and function within the gray matter of emotions, she can at least recognize that they exist and are more powerful than her father or Bounderby believe, even without any factual basis. Moreover, under Sissy’s guidance, Louisa shows great promise in learning to express her feelings. Similarly, through her acquaintance with Rachael and Stephen, Louisa learns to respond charitably to suffering and to not view suffering simply as a temporary state that is easily overcome by effort, as her father and Bounderby do.

Josiah Bounderby

Although he is Mr. Gradgrind’s best friend, Josiah Bounderby is more interested in money and power than in facts. Indeed, he is himself a fiction, or a fraud. Bounderby’s inflated sense of pride is illustrated by his oft-repeated declaration, “I am Josiah Bounderby of Coketown.” This statement generally prefaces the story of Bounderby’s childhood poverty and suffering, a story designed to impress its listeners with a sense of the young Josiah Bounderby’s determination and self-discipline. However, Dickens explodes the myth of the self-made man when Bounderby’s mother, Mrs. Pegler, reveals that her son had a decent, loving childhood and a good education, and that he was not abandoned, after all.

Bounderby’s attitude represents the social changes created by industrialization and capitalism. Whereas birth or bloodline formerly determined the social hierarchy, in an industrialized, capitalist society, wealth determines who holds the

most power. Thus, Bounderby takes great delight in the fact that Mrs. Sparsit, an aristocrat who has fallen on hard times, has become his servant, while his own ambition has enabled him to rise from humble beginnings to become the wealthy owner of a factory and a bank. However, in depicting Bounderby, the capitalist, as a coarse, vain, self-interested hypocrite, Dickens implies that Bounderby uses his wealth and power irresponsibly, contributing to the muddled relations between rich and poor, especially in his treatment of Stephen after the Hands cast Stephen out to form a union.

Stephen Blackpool

Stephen Blackpool is introduced after we have met the Gradgrind family and Bounderby, and Blackpool provides a stark contrast to these earlier characters. One of the Hands in Bounderby's factory, Stephen lives a life of drudgery and poverty. In spite of the hardships of his daily toil, Stephen strives to maintain his honesty, integrity, faith, and compassion.

Stephen is an important character not only because his poverty and virtue contrast with Bounderby's wealth and self-interest, but also because he finds himself in the midst of a labor dispute that illustrates the strained relations between rich and poor. Stephen is the only Hand who refuses to join a workers' union: he believes that striking is not the best way to improve relations between factory owners and employees, and he also wants to earn an honest living. As a result, he is cast out of the workers' group. However, he also refuses to spy on his fellow workers for Bounderby, who consequently sends him away. Both groups, rich and poor, respond in the same self-interested, backstabbing way. As Rachael explains, Stephen ends up with the "masters against him on one hand, the men against him on the other, he only wantin' to work hard in peace, and do what he felt right." Through Stephen, Dickens suggests that industrialization threatens to compromise both the employee's and employer's moral integrity, thereby creating a social muddle to which there is no easy solution.

Through his efforts to resist the moral corruption on all sides, Stephen becomes a martyr, or Christ figure, ultimately dying for Tom's crime. When he falls into a mine shaft on his way back to Coketown to clear his name of the charge of robbing Bounderby's bank, Stephen comforts himself by gazing at a particularly

bright star that seems to shine on him in his “pain and trouble.” This star not only represents the ideals of virtue for which Stephen strives, but also the happiness and tranquility that is lacking in his troubled life. Moreover, his ability to find comfort in the star illustrates the importance of imagination, which enables him to escape the cold, hard facts of his miserable existence.

Minor Characters

Thomas Gradgrind, Jr - .

Gradgrind’s eldest son and an apprentice at Bounderby’s bank, who is generally called Tom. Tom reacts to his strict upbringing by becoming a dissipated, hedonistic, hypocritical young man. Although he appreciates his sister’s affection, Tom cannot return it entirely—he loves money and gambling even more than he loves Louisa. These vices lead him to rob Bounderby’s bank and implicate Stephen as the robbery’s prime suspect.

Cecelia Jupe -

The daughter of a clown in Sleary’s circus. Sissy is taken in by Gradgrind when her father disappears. Sissy serves as a foil, or contrast, to Louisa: while Sissy is imaginative and compassionate, Louisa is rational and, for the most part, unfeeling. Sissy embodies the Victorian femininity that counterbalances mechanization and industry. Through Sissy’s interaction with her, Louisa is able to explore her more sensitive, feminine sides.

Mrs. Sparsit -

Bounderby's housekeeper, who goes to live at the bank apartments when Bounderby marries Louisa. Once a member of the aristocratic elite, Mrs. Sparsit fell on hard times after the collapse of her marriage. A selfish, manipulative, dishonest woman, Mrs. Sparsit cherishes secret hopes of ruining Bounderby's marriage so that she can marry him herself. Mrs. Sparsit's aristocratic background is emphasized by the narrator's frequent allusions to her "Roman" and "Coriolanian" appearance.

Rachael –

A simple, honest Hand who loves Stephen Blackpool. To Stephen, she represents domestic happiness and moral purity.

James Harthouse –

A sophisticated and manipulative young London gentleman who comes to Coketown to enter politics as a disciple of Gradgrind, simply because he thinks it might alleviate his boredom. In his constant search for a new form of amusement, Harthouse quickly becomes attracted to Louisa and resolves to seduce her.

Mr. Sleary

The lisping proprietor of the circus where Sissy's father was an entertainer. Later, Mr. Sleary hides Tom Gradgrind and helps him flee the country. Mr. Sleary and his troop of entertainers value laughter and fantasy whereas Mr. Gradgrind values rationality and fact.

Bitzer –

Bitzer is one of the successes produced by Gradgrind's rationalistic system of education. Initially a bully at Gradgrind's school, Bitzer later becomes an employee and a spy at Bounderby's bank. An uncharacteristically pale character and unrelenting disciple of fact, Bitzer almost stops Tom from fleeing after it is discovered that Tom is the true bank robber.

Mr. McChoakumchild -

The unpleasant teacher at Gradgrind's school. As his name suggests, McChoakumchild is not overly fond of children, and stifles or chokes their imaginations and feelings.

Mrs. Pegler -

Bounderby's mother, unbeknownst as such to all except herself and Bounderby. Mrs. Pegler makes an annual visit to Coketown in order to admire her son's prosperity from a safe distance. Mrs. Pegler's appearance uncovers the hoax that her son Bounderby has been attesting throughout the story, which is that he is a self-made man who was abandoned as a child.

Mrs. Gradgrind -

Gradgrind's whiny, anemic wife, who constantly tells her children to study their "ologies" and complains that she'll "never hear the end" of any complaint. Although Mrs. Gradgrind does not share her husband's interest in facts, she lacks the energy and the imagination to oppose his system of education.

