

Hard Times

By Charles Dickens

The full title of the novel is ***Hard Times: For These Times.***

- The novel was written in **1854**.
- The novel is divided into three books which are **Sowing, Reaping and Garnering**.

The Setting

- **Place:** The place is in an imaginary and industrial city called Coketown
- **Time:** The time of the Industrial Revolution, the early nineteenth century

Synopsis

The novel takes place somewhere in England during the mid-19th century and involves many different and sometimes profoundly distinct characters - especially concerning their conduct towards others, and in particular, those of a different class or disposition. To begin with the readers are introduced to the Gradgrind family and the two oldest children Louisa and Thomas (Tom). Their father, Mr Gradgrind, also happens to be the founder of the school they attend; an arena in which he greatly enjoys sharing his philosophy about rationality and facts. He believes strongly in practical and logical notions and does not approve of imaginative and illogical thinking and reasoning - neither by his own children nor by Cecilia Jupe. Jupe is the daughter of a circus entertainer who disappeared and left her to be taken in by Mr Gradgrind. Mr Gradgrind, despite his friend Mr Bounderby's objection for doing so, believes he may have a chance of putting her straight. Jupe is specifically very different from the Gradgrind children, that is to say, their complete opposite, and that is something Mr. Gradgrind wishes to amend.

Time passes and the Gradgrind children become older, they mature into adulthood according to their father's efforts and wishes and all the while their experience of their own lives seem to them as if there is something missing, something vital. Tom shows an increasingly self-interested side: he inconsiderately gambles too much and starts to owe people a lot of money - his everyday goal is mainly to enjoy himself as much as possible. Louisa on the other hand is married to the factory owner Mr. Bounderby who is much older than her. She finds herself trapped in this marriage at the same time as her brother becomes an apprentice at her husband's bank. During all of this Cecilia Jupe stays at the Gradgrind home and takes care of the younger children, Mrs. Gradgrind and the household. One day, Mr. Bounderby's bank is robbed and no witnesses can be found except someone claiming that a 'Hand' (one of the middle class workers) had been observing the building many nights in a row before the robbery happened. While the robbery remains a mystery, Louisa suffers from distress and feels miserable in her marriage with Mr. Bounderby, who she does not love. She meets a certain Mr Hearthouse and experiences emotions her upbringing has quenched and now take her by surprise. Uncertain and confused she leaves her husband and lives at Stone Lodge once more, her childhood home. This makes Mr. Bounderby furious. Mr. Gradgrind and Louisa ultimately understand that Tom is the bank robber and, with a little help from Sleary and his circus performers with whom Cecilia Jupe spent her early childhood, they manage to help Tom to leave the country and be spared his penalty.

The snooty character Mrs. Sparsit, who is employed as Mr. Bounderby's housekeeper, wishes to be the one her employer will marry. In her attempt to help Mr. Bounderby find the bank robber and win his favour she presents a certain Mrs Pegler who she believes has something to do with the bank robbery. Old Mrs. Pegler is then revealed to be Bounderby's mother and a woman who loves her son. She would never abandon him as he had always proclaimed she did. Bounderby's rise from rags to riches has all been a lie and he loses face. He had forbidden his mother to visit him and fires Mrs. Sparsit for putting him in this embarrassing position. The story ends with Bounderby's death alone in Coketown and Mr. Gradgrind

abandons his fact-oriented and rational philosophy to help poor people instead. Cecilia Jupe, on the other hand, marries and lives a happy life with her own family while Louisa never will have one of her own. Still, their relationship is strong and Sissy Jupe teaches Louisa the importance of feeling sympathy for her fellow men and women. Her brother Tom also at last understands his faults but unfortunately dies without ever seeing his family again.

Main Characters in *Hard Times*

Mr. Gradgrind: He is one of Coketown's leading citizens and the principal of a school in Coketown. Thomas Gradgrind is a man of facts. The writer describes him as a man with a square face and forehead and covering his head with a square hat. Also, he has square shoulders and he is covering his body with a square coat. So, Dickens's ironic description of Gradgrind helps the readers to figure out that Gradgrind is just like a box. He is a narrow minded person who does not think outside of his box. Gradgrind's philosophy contains no room for useless nonsense, and he is determined to educate all of Coketown's children by this philosophy. His own five children appear to be models of this system-until things begin to fall apart. Even though, Mr. Gradgrind is a man who is devoid of sentiments but he is not devoid of fatherly affection or moral conviction. When he sees the ultimately damaging outcomes brought by his methods, he changes his mind and confesses that he has followed the wrong philosophy and this proves that he is a man capable of change and growth.

Mr. Bounderby: The most inflated, egotistical character is Mr. Josiah Bounderby. He is just like a balloon because of his lies and pride. He likes to call himself as "Josiah Bounderby of Coketown". He is a good friend of Mr. Gradgrind and depends on the philosophy of facts aslo, Bounderby represents one of the philosophy's worst characteristics: self-interest. He is a self-made man who owns several businesses and has no qualms about the fact that his success was built on the sweating backs of his overworked employees. He designed a story for his sordid and poor beginning, something he liked to vaunt about endlessly. He claims that he was abandoned by his wretched mother as an infant to be raised by his more wretched, alcoholic grandmother, who kept him in an egg box. From there, he landed in the gutter until he finally scratched his way up to the remarkable self-made man that he was. All of these tales turned out to be lies that eventually blew up in Bounderby's face when his mother comes to reveal the truth. Also, his marriage to Louisa, which never flourished, fell apart and his relationship with his housekeeper blew up. His bank was robbed by his own apprentice (Tom), and as a result of all of these events, he finished his relationship with Mr. Gradgrind. In the end, he died an early death and was replaced by future versions of himself.

Louisa: She is Mr. Gradgrind's eldest child and daughter. She is also his pride, joy and successful model for she is the proof that his system brings positive results. But these results were at her expense, she becomes a victim of her father's philosophy of fact. Although Louisa is the novel's principal female character, she is not a good representative of Victorian ideal of femininity, sensitivity, and compassion because her education prevented her from developing such traits. Instead, Louisa is silent, cold, and seemingly unfeeling. She is just like a robot without any feelings. She never experiences how to love. However, Louisa simply lacks the way how to recognize and express her emotions. She marries Mr. Bounderby depending on her father's philosophy. 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. At the end, under Sissy's guidance, Louisa shows great promise in learning to express her feelings.

Stephen Blackpool: He is one of the "Hands," or one of the working-class folk in Bounderby's factory and he is surrounded by endless noise and motion. Occasionally, he is visited by his wretched, hopeless

and drunken wife who has lost her mind, and that places a strain on him. He could not divorce her because he does not have enough money to pay for the parliament to get his divorce in the court. As if divorce in the Victorian age is a luxury that is designed for rich people only. But Stephen has an angel in his life, Rachael, and she is his saving grace. Stephen is the only Hand who refuses to join the 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. Thus, he is unjustly accused of treachery and selfishness by his co-workers and Mr. Bounderby who wanted him to spy on his co-workers. So, Bounderby fired him and he was forced to leave Coketown to live and seek work elsewhere. Louisa secretly visits his apartment to help by offering him some money. He only accepts a little, with the intention of paying it back. Louisa brought Tom along, and Tom took Stephen aside in private telling him to wait outside the bank for the next few evenings, without saying why. Innocently, Stephen agreed, not knowing that Tom intended to exploit and use him as a decoy. Tom intended to exploit and use him as a decoy. Once the robbery was accomplished by Tom, Stephen was accused of the crime. Stephen becomes a martyr, or Christ figure. Stephen is just like Jesus Christ because both of them are pure and helpful. In addition, both of them died for the salvation of others. Jesus Christ died for the salvation of human beings and Stephen died 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 peace that do not exist 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.

Sissy Jupe: The daughter of a circus performer, Sissy is an imaginative and sensitive girl due to her father's care and upbringing when she was little. Her father abandoned her when she was still a young girl, leaving her to be adopted by the Gradgrind. She is the best representative of the Victorian woman for she could establish her own family depending on creating a balance between her mind and heart.

Tom: the second oldest Gradgrind child who turns into a grumpy, sulky young man and ends up robbing a bank to help pay off his debts and nearly breaks the heart of his father and sister in the process.

Mrs. Pegler: She is Mr. Bounderby's mother who took as much care of her son as the most loving mothers of the world ever did. Mr. Bounderby, who likes to be under spot light and fakes the story that he is an entirely self-made man, tells her never to contact him in public and goes around telling everyone that his mother deserted him at a young age to his drunken grandmother (he never had a drunken grandmother, either). She spends most of the book as a mysterious old woman who hangs around Mr. Bounderby's factory from time to time, inquiring after his well-being, but her true identity is accidentally revealed by Mrs. Sparsit at the end of the book.

Mr. Harthouse: He is young, wealthy London gentleman. He tries to seduce and manipulate Louisa when he sees what a fascinating, repressed, beautiful woman she is. His plans are thwarted when Louisa goes to her father's house instead of eloping with him, and Sissy, in her calm and pure way, confronts him the next day and succeeds to make him leave Coketown forever.

Minor Characters in *Hard Times*

Mr. Sleary: He is the proprietor of the circus of which Signor Jupe and his daughter, Sissy, were a member. He is a good-hearted man and helps the Gradgrinds smuggle Tom out of England when it's discovered that he is the bank robber.

Bitzer: He is a model pupil of Mr. Gradgrind's education of facts; later, he becomes the porter of Mr. Bounderby's Bank. He is a cold-hearted and analytical person. He tries almost to prevent Tom from leaving England to escape his crime.

Mr. McChoakumchild: He is a teacher at Mr. Gradgrind's schools of fact.

Mrs. Gradgrind: She is Mr. Gradgrind's feeble and infirm wife. She spends most of her days in a chair by the fire, pettishly telling her children to follow their father's system of facts. Only before her death, she realizes that there was something missing in her and their lives.

Signore Jupe: He is Sissy's father who abandons her out of shame for not being able to support her.

Mrs. Sparsit: She is Bounderby's aristocratic housekeeper.

Mr. Childers: He is a circus performer.

Mr. Kidderminster: He is a circus performer

Main Themes in *Hard Times*

Facts and fancy: Charles Dickens also stresses the need for imagination and facts in life. Through Thomas Gradgrind's character along with his family's, Dickens highlights that everything is not a fact. Through the character of Sissy Jupe and Louisa how one loses her future while the other, who has been placed at the lower order in thinking about facts and fancy, become a successful wife in her life. Dickens shows the importance of imagination in life. Her successful life shows that imagination has as much importance in life as material things or facts. It, however, is also a fact that had Gradgrind not adopted her, she might have lost her future which means that facts also have significance in life.

Industrialization: The novel sheds light on the theme of industrialization through the city of Coketown, the establishment of factories as well as the employment of human beings. Coketown shows the impacts of industrialization through its environment and the condition of the working class. Examples of environmental pollution and the situation of Stephen Blackpool are cases in point. Where the establishment of factories is concerned, Mr. Bounderby and the establishment of banks in Coketown sheds light on it and its impacts on the life of hands," the laborers who are at the receiving ends. Although they find work, they also find it hard to live in that polluted environment that has stunted their mental and physical growth.

Utilitarianism: The theme of utilitarianism is presented in the novel through the characters of Mr. Thomas Gradgrind and Mr. Bounderby. Although both of them are practical, they suppose that human happiness depends on the acquisition of money and material resources and not human relations, compassion, and love. That is why Mr. Bounderby supports the education that places stress upon facts and practicality. abandoning his mother. Mr. Gradgrind, however, receives a rude shock when he sees his daughter becoming a victim of his pragmatism and his son dying away from the home town after he becomes a criminal in the bank robbery case.

Important Quotes

1. "Now what I want is facts... Plant nothing else and root out everything else... This is the principle on which I bring up my own children, and this is the principle on which I bring up these children. Stick to facts, sir!"

These lines are the opening lines of the novel. Mr. Gradgrind opens *Hard Times* with this famous address to the class at his school. His words outline his philosophy of educating children: facts are more important than all else, as they are the key to understand the world and to achieve success in it. This philosophy, rejected by Dickens, dismisses emotional understanding, analysis, and creative thinking, as it presents factual analysis as the answer to everything.

2. "Facts are the elements of the highest happiness. In this world, the only happiness is to be found in the facts."

This quote reiterates the central tenet of Gradgrind's philosophy that happiness comes only from facts and reason. This is the core of the utilitarian mindset that dominates the novel, reflecting a world where material success and rationality are seen as the ultimate goals. Dickens critiques this view by showing its negative impact on the characters' emotional lives. The novel suggests that such a narrow focus leads to spiritual and emotional emptiness, illustrating that true happiness comes from emotional connection, imagination, and a more holistic approach to life.

3. “He belongs to horse-riding, if you please, sir... You mustn’t tell us about that, here. Your father breaks horses, does not he? ...Girl number twenty, said the gentleman, smiling in the calm strength of knowledge... So you would you carpet your room- or your husband’s room, if you were a grown woman, and had a husband- with representations of flowers, would you, said the gentleman...Why would you?”

These lines actually are part of a very long investigation or inquiry that Mr. Gradgrind has made with Sissy Jupe. This conversation draws a simple contrast between Mr. Gradgrind’s philosophy of fact and Sissy Jupe’s emotional philosophy. The writer wants to compare between the two different worlds of these both characters and this comparison emerges with Sissy’s answers about her father’s work and the way she would carpet her room with the representation of flowers. While Gradgrind’s philosophy includes the idea that people should only act according to their own best interests which they can calculate through rational principles, loving Sissy are inspired by her feelings, usually of compassion toward others.

4. “Ay, ay, ay! But you mustn’t fancy. Cried the gentleman... That’s it! You are never to fancy. You are not, Cecilia Jupe...to do anything of that kind.”

This quote is said by Mr. Gradgrind to Sissy Jupe she has answered him that she would carpet her room with a representation of flowers. This draws a simple contrast between Mr. Gradgrind’s philosophy of fact and Sissy Jupe’s frequent indulgence in romantic and imaginative fancy. It shows also the writer’s hidden way to criticize Mr. Gradgrind and his utilitarian way of thinking because there is no gentleman who does not accept other’s viewpoint and way of thinking and there is no gentleman cries. So, the writer attempts to make fun of Mr. Gradgrind as a bumble bee for he becomes a delirious person because of his fact-based philosophy.

5. “No little Gradgrind had ever seen a face in the moon... it had never heard of those celebrities, and had only been introduced to a cow as graminivorous ruminating quadruped with several stomachs.”

It is said by the narrator to describe the absence of fun from Gradgrind children’s childhood. The quotation sheds light on the importance of the imaginative way that the children have to learn about. Gradgrind’s children were deprived of any fanciful or imaginative way in approaching things just like the moon and the cow. They were even deprived from listening to any song that might have any connection to the world of childhood. The writer tries to indict this horrifying way of bringing up children. For Dickens facts demonstrates the misery that results when children are completely cut off from imagination and fancy and subjected to a utilitarian and facts-only education. So, it seems that Dickens wants to highlight the idea that the lack of imagination, fancy and emotion leads to standardization and loss of identity.

6. “ I brought him, father, said Louisa, quickly. I asked him to come.”

It is said by Louisa when she admits that her curiosity drew her to the circus. She tries to defend her brother by claiming that she dragged him there. Louisa’s act of defending her brother proves how she thinks like adults and how she is able to take the responsibility of her brother like adults and this is because of the fact-based philosophy on which she was raised up.

7. “What would Mr. Bounderby say!”

It is said by Mr. Gradgrind after knowing that Louisa has dragged Tom to the forbidden area; to the circus. This quotation reflects how Mr. Gradgrind is nothing more than a superficial person who takes into consideration appearances only and who cares only for what others say about him. This line also shows how he has a selfish character because he cares only for his prestige or his social image without taking into consideration what his children really need and feel.

8. “When I was a vagabond, myself nobody looked with any interest at me; I know that.”

This quote is said by Mr. Bounderby to the Gradgrind family. Mr. Bounderby despises the poor circus folk describing them as vagabonds. Thus, this actually shows how he has duplicity because he

has described himself as a vagabond and now he is criticizing these poor people of being vagabonds. This quotation also reflects the truth of Mr. Bounderby and how is nothing more than a liar because if he really suffered from a poor and sordid beginning then he has to sympathize with these poor people and not the opposite (not criticizing them).

10. “There is no such thing as a child who is not a little monster.”

In this statement, Gradgrind reveals his authoritarian view of children. He regards them as raw material to be molded into rational, fact-driven adults, with little regard for their individual needs, desires, or emotions. Dickens uses this hyperbolic description to emphasize how the educational system in the novel suppresses the natural qualities of children. The phrase "little monster" highlights the cold and harsh environment that Gradgrind imposes on the children, where the innocence of childhood is dismissed in favor of utilitarian values.

11. “The one great principle of English Law is to make business for itself. This is the reason why so much time is lost in English.”

Here, Dickens humorously critiques the bureaucratic and self-serving nature of the English legal system. He suggests that laws often exist not to serve justice but to maintain and expand the system itself, resulting in inefficiency and unnecessary complexity. The legal system, much like Gradgrind's educational methods, is portrayed as a mechanism that prioritizes its own perpetuation over the well-being of individuals. This reflects Dickens' broader critique of industrial capitalism and the systems that support it, where the human cost is ignored in favor of profit and efficiency.

12. “You saw nothing in Coketown but what was severely workful.”

It is said by the narrator. When the city is properly introduced, the description of Coketown culminates in a phrase that shows how the structure and function of the town mirrors the philosophy of the men who run it. Mr. Bounderby and Mr. Gradgrind, emphasize the usefulness of facts as the basis for all understanding. They scorn processes not visibly useful, just as the city rejects structures and residents not visibly useful. The city, fictitiously set somewhere in northern England, like its ruling class denies the humanity of its residents.

13. “Her father always had it in his head ... that she should be taught the deuce-and-all of education ... He has been picking up a bit of reading for her, here—and a bit of writing for her, there—and a bit of cyphering for her, somewhere else—these seven years.”

It is said by Mr. Childers who attempts to explain Mr. Jupe's possible reasons for leaving his daughter, Sissy, behind. Mr. Childers explains how Mr. Jupe has patched together an education for Sissy during the circus's stops in various towns. The explanation supports the theory that Mr. Jupe has felt he had to abandon his daughter to give her the opportunity to remain in one place and pursue an education that might allow her a better life than his own.

14. “I thought I couldn't know whether it was a prosperous nation or not, unless I knew who had got the money, and whether any of it was mine. But that had nothing to do with it. It was not in the figures at all.”

In school Sissy Jupe is asked a question about National Prosperity. Her teacher gives her a number and asks her to determine, on the basis of this single fact, whether the nation is prosperous. Sissy later recounts her answer as an example of her hopelessness as a scholar, but her response is astute and taps into the human factor behind the actual numbers. The question and answer are particularly illustrative of the situation for Coketown's workers. By the numbers England in the 19th century was a prosperous nation, but very few workers directly experienced its prosperity.

15. “Don't you talk nonsense, my good fellow ... about things you don't understand; and don't call the Institutions of your country a muddle, or you'll get yourself into a real muddle one of these fine mornings. The institutions of your country are not your piece-work, and the only thing you have got to do, is, mind your piece-work.”

The quotation is said by Bounderby. When Stephen Blackpool learns money is the barrier preventing him from divorcing his alcoholic and absent wife, he calls the legal system a muddle. Mr. Bounderby

scolds him for such thinking and reveals the attitude factory owners and other wealthy men have toward their workers. Questioning the fairness of institutions and laws represents a threat to the social order and economic stability, so questions are discouraged. Workers are meant only to work. Their happiness is immaterial to the function they serve.

16. “You can’t make bricks without clay”

This quotation, spoken by Mr. Bounderby, encapsulates his cynical, self-congratulatory worldview. Bounderby, an industrial magnate, believes that his wealth and success are entirely the result of his own hard work, with no acknowledgment of the laborers conditions that enabled his rise. The phrase "You can't make bricks without clay" is a metaphor for how he sees the working class-as mere raw materials to be exploited for profit. Dickens uses this to expose the moral hypocrisy and dehumanization inherent in industrial society, where the contributions of the working class are undervalued and exploited.

17. “I have been a selfish being all my life, in practice, though not in principle.”

This is a moment of self-awareness for Mr. Bounderby, who, despite his outward appearance as a self-made, charitable man, realizes that his actions have been motivated by selfishness rather than genuine concern for others. Bounderby's admission is ironic because it shows that, despite his professed values of hard work and merit, his success has been built on exploiting others. Dickens uses this moment to reveal the moral decay within the industrial elite, who claim virtue but act in ways that harm others. This mirrors the broader theme of hypocrisy in the novel, where appearances and social systems often hide deeper truths.

18. “While it lasts, I would wish to do the little I can, and the little I am fit for. What does it matter!”

It is spoken by Louisa Gradgrind to contemplate Mr. Bounderby’s marriage proposal. It hints of her emotional detachment and dissatisfaction with her life. She considers pessimistically how short her life will be and how few options are open to her. In talking about doing the little she can and is fit for, she alludes to her desire to help her brother. With no emotional ties to anyone else, she determines it does not matter if she marries Mr. Bounderby or, indeed, anyone else.

19. “The result of the varieties of boredom I have undergone, is a conviction ... any set of ideas will do just as much good as any other set, and just as much harm as any other set. There's an English family with a charming Italian motto. What will be, will be. It's the only truth going.”

It is spoken by James Harthouse who is son of a wealthy family and brother of a member of Parliament. James describes his empty life as one of boredom. He has never had to work or strive for anything, and his privilege has left him detached from his own humanity, from the events unfolding around him, and from other people in the same way as a lifetime of performing as a machine in a factory might have done. He adheres to no moral code nor to any truth other than allowing events to unfold as they will and to amuse himself as well as he can.

20. “Mr. Harthouse ... the only reparation that remains with you, is to leave here immediately and finally.”

Sissy Jupe does not possess a large store of facts, but she does have wisdom about human nature and behavior. When Louisa comes home begging her family to prevent her from having an affair with James Harthouse, Sissy sees the most practical answer to the problem, not because she understands facts but because she understands the emotions driving the problem. She sees the seduction of Louisa is only a game to Harthouse. She knows if he remains in town, he might continue to tempt Louisa or Louisa might give in to temptation in her weakened state of mind. She knows he has already irreparably damaged Louisa's marriage, but he has not ruined her reputation. Therefore, the only thing he can do now is leave. Sissy shows courage speaking so frankly to a man whose economic status far outranks her own, but she is firm and convincing in the simplicity of her assertions.

21. “People mutht be amuthed. They can't be alwayth a learning, nor yet they can't be alwayth a working, they an't made for it. You mutht have uth, Thquire. Do the with thing and the kind thing too, and make the bethth of uth; not the wurthth.”

It is said by Mr. Sleary to Mr. Gradgrind. Mr. Sleary gets the last word in his final conversation with Mr. Gradgrind. He recognizes Mr. Gradgrind has dismissed the utility of the circus and other entertainments as frivolous and useless because they are not based in fact. When Mr. Sleary tells Mr. Gradgrind that people must be amused, they must have an escape from work and study, Mr. Gradgrind's own experiences with his children's failures has made him now ready to hear and appreciate what Mr. Sleary has to say. Dickens here wants to shed light on the idea that people should create a kind of balance between their heart and their mind (between their rational way of thinking and their emotional way of thinking) for there is always a wisdom of the mind and a wisdom of the heart.