

## Key Facts<sup>1</sup>

### Main Ideas Key Facts

**Full Title** *Hard Times for These Times*

**Author** Charles Dickens

**Type Of Work** Novel

**Genre** Victorian novel; realist novel; satire; dystopia

**Language** English

**Time And Place Written** 1854, London

**Date Of First Publication** Published in serial installments in Dickens's magazine *Household Words* between April 1 and August 12, 1854

**Publisher** Charles Dickens

**Narrator** The anonymous narrator serves as a moral authority. By making moral judgments about the characters, the narrator shapes our interpretations of the novel.

**Point Of View** The narrator speaks in the third person and has a limited omniscience. He knows what is going on in all places and at all times, but he sometimes speculates about what the characters might be feeling and thinking, suggesting, at those times, that he does not actually know.

**Tone** The narrator's tone varies drastically, but it is frequently ironic, mocking, and even satirical, especially when he describes Bounderby, Harthouse, and Mrs. Sparsit. When describing Stephen and Rachael, his tone is pathetic, evoking sympathy.

**Tense** The narrative is presented in the past tense; however, at the end, the narrator reveals what the future will bring to each of the main characters.

**Setting (Time)** The middle of the nineteenth century

**Setting (Place)** Coketown, a manufacturing town in the south of England

**Protagonist** Louisa Gradgrind

**Major Conflict** Louisa Gradgrind struggles to reconcile the fact-driven self-interest of her upbringing with the warmth of feeling that she witnesses both in Sissy Jupe and developing within herself. As this attitude changes, Louisa is caught between allegiances to her family and loveless marriage and her desire to transcend the emotional and personal detachment of her past.

**Rising Action** Sissy joins the Gradgrind household, and Louisa marries Mr. Bounderby unwillingly, only to satisfy her father's sense of what would be most rational for her.

**Climax** Mr. Harthouse joins Gradgrind's political disciples and attempts to seduce Louisa. Louisa, confused, leaves Bounderby and returns to her father's house, where she collapses.

**Falling Action** Sissy informs Harthouse that Louisa will never see him again, and Louisa attempts to amend her life by appealing to her father and offering assistance to the alleged perpetrator in Bounderby's bank robbery.

**Themes** The mechanization of human beings; the opposition between fact and fancy; the importance of femininity

**Motifs** Bounderby's childhood; clocks and time; mismatched marriages

**Symbols** Staircase; pegasus; fire; smoke serpents

**Foreshadowing** Stephen's claim that factory Hands have only death to look forward to foreshadows his own death in the mine shaft. Bitzer's run-in with Mr. Gradgrind at the circus at the beginning of the novel, when he has been taunting Sissy, foreshadows his run-in with Mr. Gradgrind at the circus at the end of the novel, when Tom is fleeing the country.

## Character List

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.sparknotes.com/lit/hardtimes/facts/>

## Characters Character List

- **Thomas Gradgrind**

A wealthy, retired merchant in Coketown, England; he later becomes a Member of Parliament. Mr. Gradgrind espouses a philosophy of rationalism, self-interest, and cold, hard fact. He describes himself as an “eminently practical” man, and he tries to raise his children—Louisa, Tom, Jane, Adam Smith, and Malthus—to be equally practical by forbidding the development of their imaginations and emotions.

Read an [in-depth analysis of Thomas Gradgrind](#).

- **Louisa**

Gradgrind’s daughter, later Bounderby’s wife. Confused by her coldhearted upbringing, Louisa feels disconnected from her emotions and alienated from other people. While she vaguely recognizes that her father’s system of education has deprived her childhood of all joy, Louisa cannot actively invoke her emotions or connect with others. Thus she marries Bounderby to please her father, even though she does not love her husband. Indeed, the only person she loves completely is her brother Tom.

- **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.

- **Josiah Bounderby**

Gradgrind’s friend and later Louisa’s husband. Bounderby claims to be a self-made man and boastfully describes being abandoned by his mother as a young boy. From his childhood poverty he has risen to become a banker and factory owner in Coketown, known by everyone for his wealth and power. His true upbringing, by caring and devoted parents, indicates that his social mobility is a hoax and calls into question the whole notion of social mobility in nineteenth-century England.

Read an [in-depth analysis of Josiah Bounderby](#).

- **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.

- **Stephen Blackpool**

A Hand in Bounderby's factory. Stephen loves Rachael but is unable to marry her because he is already married, albeit to a horrible, drunken woman. A man of great honesty, compassion, and integrity, Stephen maintains his moral ideals even when he is shunned by his fellow workers and fired by Bounderby. Stephen's values are similar to those endorsed by the narrator.

Read an [in-depth analysis of Stephen Blackpool](#).

- **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.

- **Slackbridge**

The crooked orator who convinces the Hands to unionize and turns them against Stephen Blackpool when he refuses to join the union.

- **Jane Gradgrind**

Gradgrind's younger daughter; Louisa and Tom's sister. Because Sissy largely raises her, Jane is a happier little girl than her sister, Louisa.

## **Plot Overview**

### **Summary Plot Overview**

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 lispng 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.

#### Thematic Study: Hard Times

1. The theme of Dehumanization > Video by CEC, UGC (Blogged)
2. Education: the head and the heart (Macmillan eBook)
3. Industrialism: Masters and Workers (Macmillan eBook)
4. Marriage and Divorce (Macmillan eBook)
5. Fact vs Fancy:
6. Industrialism and its Evil
7. Femininity

## 8. Surveillance and Knowledge

### Fact vs Fancy<sup>2</sup>

Dickens depicts a terrifying system of education where facts, facts, and nothing but facts are pounded into the schoolchildren all day, and where memorization of information is valued over art, imagination, or anything creative. This results in some very warped human beings. **Mr. Thomas Gradgrind** believes completely in this system, and as a superintendent of schools and a father, he makes sure that all the children at the schools he is responsible for and especially his own children are brought up knowing nothing but data and "-ologies".

As a result, things go very badly for his children, **Tom Gradgrind** and **Louisa Gradgrind**. Since they, as children, were always treated as if they had minds and not hearts, their adulthoods are warped, as they have no way to access their feelings or connect with others. Tom is a sulky good-for-nothing and gets involved in a crime in an effort to pay off gambling debts. Louisa is unhappy when she follows her mind, not her heart, and marries **Mr. Bounderby**, her father's friend. As a result of her unhappy marriage, she is later swept off her feet by a young gentleman, Mr. James "Jem" Harthouse, who comes to stay with them and who seems to understand and love her. Louisa nearly comes to ruin by running off with Harthouse.

Cecilia (Sissy) Jupe was encouraged when she was little to dream and imagine and loved her father dearly, and therefore she is in touch with her heart and feelings, and has empathy and emotional strength the other children lack. Sissy, adopted by the Gradgrinds when her father abandons her, ultimately is the savior of the family in the end.

### Industrialism and its Evil

Hand in hand with the glorification of data and numbers and facts in the schoolhouse is the treatment of the workers in the factories of Coketown as nothing more than machines, which produce so much per day and are not thought of as having feelings or families or dreams. Dickens depicts this situation as a result of the industrialization of England; now that towns like Coketown are focused on producing more and more, more dirty factories are built, more smoke pollutes the air and water, and the factory owners only see their workers as part of the machines that bring them profit. In fact, the workers are only called "Hands", an indication of how objectified they are by the owners. Similarly, **Mr. Gradgrind's** children were brought up to be "minds". None of them are people or "hearts".

As the book progresses, it portrays how industrialism creates conditions in which owners treat workers as machines and workers respond by unionizing to resist and fight back against the owners. In the meantime, those in Parliament (like Mr. Gradgrind, who winds up elected to office) work for the benefit of the country but not its people. In short, industrialization creates an environment in which people cease to treat either others or themselves as people. Even the unions, the groups of factory workers who fight against the injustices of the factory owners, are not shown in a good light. **Stephen Blackpool**, a poor worker at Bounderby's factory, is rejected by his fellow workers for his refusal to join the union because of a promise made to the sweet, good woman he loves, **Rachael**. His factory union then treats him as an outcast.

The remedy to industrialism and its evils in the novel is found in **Sissy Jupe**, the little girl who was brought up among circus performers and fairy tales. Letting loose the imagination of children lets loose their hearts as well, and, as Sissy does, they can combat and undo what a Gradgrind education produces.

### Femininity

The best, most good characters of *Hard Times* are women. **Stephen Blackpool** is a good man, but his love, **Rachael**, is an "Angel". **Sissy Jupe** can overcome even the worst

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/hard-times/themes/fact-vs-fancy>



intentions of **Jem Harthouse** with her firm and powerfully pure gaze. **Louisa**, as disadvantaged as she is by her terrible upbringing, manages to get out of her crisis at the last minute by fleeing home to her father for shelter, in contrast to her brother, **Tom**, who chooses to commit a life-changing crime in his moment of crisis. Through these examples, the novel suggests that the kindness and compassion of the female heart can improve what an education of "facts" and the industrialization has done to children and to the working middle class.

Still, not all the women in the novel are paragons of goodness. Far from it. **Mrs. Sparsit** is a comic example of femininity gone wrong. She cannot stand being replaced by Louisa when Bounderby marries, and watches the progression of the affair between Louisa and Jem Harthouse with glee. As she attempts to catch them in the act of eloping (and ultimately fails), she is portrayed as a cruel, ridiculous figure. Stephen Blackpool's wife, meanwhile, is bleakly portrayed as a hideous drunken prostitute.

So while the novel holds women up as potentially able to overcome the dehumanizing effects of industrialization and fact-based education, those women in the novel who do not fill this role, who have slipped from the purity embodied by Sissy and Rachael beyond even the empty-heartedness of Louisa, are presented as both pathetically comic and almost demonic. Women in the novel seem like a potential cure to the perils of industrialization, but also the most at peril from its corruption.

### **Surveillance and Knowledge<sup>3</sup>**

One of Dickens's major themes centers on the idea of surveillance and knowledge. As is the case in other novels by the author, there are characters who spend time keeping secrets and hiding their history and there is another set of characters who devote themselves to researching, analyzing and listening in on the lives of others. Mrs. Sparsit and Mr. Gradgrind are both masters of surveillance but Sparsit is more gossipy while Gradgrind is more scientific. Another operator to consider is James Harthouse who devotes himself to the task of understanding and "knowing" Louisa. From all three of these characters we get the idea that knowledge of another person is a form of mastery and power over them. Besides Louisa, Josiah Bounderby is another victim of surveillance. Without knowing what she has done, Mrs. Sparsit manages to uncover the secret of Bounderby's upbringing and his foul lies about being a self-made man.

Why *Hard Times* is a bad novel

<http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/dickens/priestley1.html>

**Hard Times** . . . has had its special admirers, particularly among those who see Dickens as a propagandist for their own political-economic ideology. We are told that one Cambridge pundit [F. R. Leavis?], a few years ago, declared that the only Dickens novel worth reading was **Hard Times** — surely one of the most foolish statements of this age. It would be far more sensible to reverse this judgment, to say that of all the novels of Dickens's maturity **Hard Times** is the least worth reading. It is muddled in its direct political-social criticism. As a novel it falls far below the standard set by Dickens himself from **Dombey and Son** onwards. Here for once it is almost as if we are seeing Dickens through the eyes of his hostile critics, for in **Hard Times** there really **are** reckless and theatrical over-statements, there really are characters that are nothing but caricatures, there really **is** melodramatic muddled emotion- alism. On the other hand, only in a few odd places is there any evidence of Dickens's unique grotesque-poetic genius, so obvious in [Bleak House](#). We may join him in condemning an industrialized commercial society, its values, its economics, its education, its

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.gradesaver.com/hard-times/study-guide/themes>

withering relationships, but this does not mean we have to pretend an unsatisfactory novel is a masterpiece, just because it favours our side. . . .

The truth is, Dickens did not know enough about industrial England. He had given a public reading in Birmingham, which provided him with some horrifying glimpses of the grim Midlands. Because there was a big strike in Preston, he paid it a visit, but he found no drama there. He came away deeply sympathizing with the men but feeling doubtful about trade union organizers. He was not on any ground familiar to him. So his Coketown is merely a horrible appearance, and in order to offer us a sharp contrast to Gradgrind and Bounderby, their outlook and style of life, he sketches a travelling circus to represent arts, skills, warm personal relationships. But he could have found all these, together with many odd attractive characters, in Coketown, if he had really known it and not simply looked at it from a railway train. As it is, Coketown belongs to propaganda and not to creative imagination. [167-68]

## **References**

Priestley, J. B. **Victoria's Heyday**. New York: Harper & Rowe, 1972.