

Hard Times Study Guide

Hard Times by Charles Dickens

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Plot Summary

At the opening of *Hard Times* by Charles Dickens, the reader meets Thomas Gradgrind, a London merchant-turned-politician who is obsessed with the school of Fact. Gradgrind believes that there is no place in one's life for curiosity, imagination, or "Fancy." So, he insists that his children be educated on Fact alone, filling them up with information as one would fill a vase with water. Gradgrind believes that all children should be taught this way, and he has taken a particular interest in Sissy Jupe, the fanciful daughter of circus performers. Based on Gradgrind's criteria, Sissy is too emotional to be considered "teachable." After learning that Sissy's circus performing father has abandoned her, Gradgrind takes Sissy in and raises her in his home, the aptly named Stone Lodge. There, he hopes to strip Sissy of her imaginative spirit. He also hopes his own daughter, Louisa, will realize the dangers of indulging in one's emotions over Fact alone.

Meanwhile, Gradgrind's friend, Josiah Bounderby, a London bank and factory owner, runs his business with the same emotionless, mechanized system of Fact alone. He refuses to view his factory workers as human, referring to them as Hands, or little more than cogs in a machine. When Louisa becomes of age, Bounderby asks for her hand in marriage, even though he is much older and her education has left her too emotionally void to truly love him.

Tom, Gradgrind's son, also becomes involved in Bounderby's life when he comes to work at Bounderby's bank. As he ages, Tom grows angrier and angrier about the education his father forced on him. He has matured into a selfish, conniving, and cruel young man. When his sister refuses to help him with his gambling debts, Tom concocts a plan to rob the bank and blame the crime on one of Bounderby's Hands, a pure-hearted yet sad man named Stephen Blackpool. Tom chooses to exploit Blackpool after learning that the rest of the Hands have turned against him in his refusal to join their union against the horrific conditions Bounderby forces them to work in.

At the same time that Tom decides to rob the bank, a handsome young stranger named James Harthouse comes to town. Harthouse initially arrives in London to study Gradgrind's political philosophy, but when he learns that Louisa is stuck in a loveless marriage, chases the thrill of awakening emotion in her cold heart. Harthouse never loves Louisa, although he leads her to believe he does, simply to manipulate her. When Louisa begins to fall in love with Harthouse, she suffers an emotional breakdown and confronts her father about the mistakes he made when raising her. Faced with Louisa's breakdown and the suspicion that Tom has robbed the bank, Gradgrind is forced to see the error of his ways. He is filled with self-loathing and vows to make a change in his children's lives, even though he feels incapable of teaching them to love.

The novel ends with each of the characters receiving their just rewards. Sissy takes over Louisa's education and teaches her, for the first time, what it means to love. Louisa spends the rest of her life with Sissy, even after Sissy marries and has children. Tom is able to escape prosecution for the bank robbery when he runs away with the circus and



eventually sails to South America. Bounderby dies miserable and alone, while Gradgrind ambitiously works to clear Blackpool's name of the accusations Tom made against him.

Book One: Chapters 1 – 4

Summary

At the opening of the novel, Thomas Gradgrind, a middle-class man of some influence in London, has just hired a new teacher, Mr. M'Choakumchild to implement his strict lessons of fact in the school. Gradgrind views all of his students as “little pitchers” to be filled with fact alone. He quizzes two pupils, Bitzer – believed to be Gradgrind’s best student – and Sissy Jupe – believed to be Gradgrind’s worst student – on horse anatomy. Despite being raised in the circus, and therefore around horses, Sissy is unable to answer the questions in a satisfactory way. Gradgrind believes this is because Sissy has been spent too long with the “savages” of the circus, and has learned to value fantasy over fact. Bitzer, on the other hand, is able to recite complex anatomy word-for-word, which greatly pleases Gradgrind.

On his way home from school, Gradgrind spots his two children, sixteen-year-old Louisa and thirteen-year-old Tom, spying on the circus through a hole in the fence. Gradgrind is frustrated to see his children’s curiosity and scolds them from straying from their lectures by saying, “What would my Bounderby say?” Bounderby is Gradgrind’s friend, and an important factory owner in town. Through the scolding, Louisa does what she can to protect her younger brother from their father’s anger.

Inside the house, Stone Lodge, known as the “lecturing castle,” Mr. Bounderby pontificates on how he is a “self-made man” to Mrs. Gradgrind, a simpering, pathetic woman who understands little of the world. Bounderby claims that he was born in a ditch and abandoned to his alcoholic and abusive grandmother who sold his shoes for liquor and drank fourteen pints before breakfast. When Gradgrind makes good on his threat to tell Bounderby about his children’s indiscretion, Bounderby is forgiving toward the Gradgrind children but insists that Sissy Jupe, a terrible influence on “good” students, should be removed from the school. As he leaves, Bounderby insists on kissing Louisa. She obliges, but afterward, tells Tom that she wouldn’t feel the pain if he were to take a knife and slice off the cheek Bounderby kissed.

Analysis

Hard Times is generally considered to be Dickens most political and obtuse novel, as he employs a direct writing style to ensure the general reading population is clear on his messages about society, poverty, and the plight of the working class. The reader sees this clearly in the opening section, as Dickens creates clear contrast between Gradgrind’s strict, stark belief in fact and Sissy’s beautiful flights of fancy. This contrast will be at the heart of the novel’s conflict, so Dickens ensures readers are aware of it from the start. Dickens also gives his characters exaggerated features, characteristics, and motivations. This has led some critics to complain that the characters read as stereotypes rather than well-rounded, believable individuals.



One of the most interesting aspects of Gradgrind's philosophy is the idea that all individuals should act solely for their own interest. Serving oneself is a "matter of fact." By introducing Sissy's character, a young girl who is compassionate and sensitive – by very definition "unselfish," – the conflict between these two ideals is introduced. There should be no doubt in the reader's mind that Gradgrind will be forced to reevaluate his educational ideals, most likely in relationship to those closest to him: his children. Critics have also argued against Dickens' oversimplification of societal conflict. Concern with academic fact does not always equal selfishness, nor does indulging in fantasy or imagination always lead to compassion and sensitivity. For the purposes of this novel, however, Dickens employs many simplified generalizations to ensure the audience understands his messages.

Vocabulary



Chapters 5 – 8

Summary

Gradgrind and Bounderby stalk through the smoky streets of Coketown in search of Sissy Jupe. They find her when she comes bounding toward them, chased by Gradgrind's model student, the bully Bitzer. Sissy, who has been out buying medicinal oils to alleviate her father's performance pains, leads the men back to the circus performers' dwelling. As she tells the men about her life, Bounderby continually laughs at her stories, as if the very idea of her life is ridiculous. On the way, Sissy stops in at the Pegasus Arms, a pub where she can collect her father's earnings. There, the circus master, Mr. Sleary, tells Gradgrind that Sissy's father is no longer able to perform. Disgraced, he plans to abandon Sissy to the care of the performers. He and Gradgrind engage in a heated debate about the differences between Fact and Fancy. Gradgrind claims that the circus people have no value of time, and that he has worked hard to raise himself above them, while Mr. Sleary argues that Gradgrind should lower himself, and allow himself to enjoy all the best of life (the fanciful aspects).

On the spot, Gradgrind sees this as a great opportunity to instill his educational beliefs on an otherwise hopeless student. He proposes his idea, for Sissy to live in the Gradgrind home, to the girl, and she agrees. Sissy believes that her stay at the Gradgrind home will be short-lived, as she is certain her father will come back for her, an idea Gradgrind and Bounderby mock as ridiculous. Before she goes, the rest of the performers gather around to wish her well in her new home. Sissy embraces the affection, but it clearly makes Bounderby and Gradgrind uncomfortable. Before she goes, Mr. Sleary encourages Sissy to remember the value of entertainment, and that she may find opportunities within the cold house to bring love and joy. Upon arriving at Stone Lodge, Gradgrind informs Sissy that she may continue attending his school, and in return for her housing, she is to care for the ailing Mrs. Gradgrind in her spare time. She is also told that in this house, she must forget the fanciful stories of fairies and magic that her father once told her.

The next day Bounderby discusses Louisa Gradgrind with his maid, Mrs. Sparsit, worried that the fanciful Sissy will be a bad influence on his beloved Louisa, whom he views as his future wife. Meanwhile, back at Stone Lodge, Louisa and Tom discuss their father's educational system. It's clear that Tom is unhappy with his education, and Louisa is drawn to imagination and curiosity, even though she knows it is forbidden. Tom's anger grows as he vows to take revenge on his father's educational system, and wishes that he could build a bomb to blow-up the doctrine of Facts. The pair also discusses Tom's upcoming apprenticeship at Bounderby's bank, and Tom encourages Louisa to make life easier for both of them by playing into Bounderby's affection for her. Their conversation is interrupted when their mother, Mrs. Gradgrind, reminds them to never question the world, as it goes against their father's doctrine of Fact. As she walks away, she laments being cursed with such difficult children, saying, "I really do wish that I had never had a family and then you would have known what it was to do without me."



Analysis

In this section, Coketown is described in detail, with its dark, dirty streets of identical red brick buildings. Coketown itself is like a little machine, in which the uniformity and pollution make it impossible to differentiate between the hospital and the laundress. This nameless, faceless atmosphere mimics Bounderby's (and perhaps society's) failure to acknowledge the Hands as individuals – they are simply an organism of workers, practically indistinguishable from one other. Perhaps what is most striking about Coketown is the black smoke (often described as “serpentine”) that billows from the factory smokestacks, filling the entire town with “serpent-like” smoke. The smoke is highly symbolic in Coketown as it highlights the way the factory owners exploit their workers' health and the environment for their personal gain, and it also gives the illusion of clouded judgment (the narrator frequently reminds the reader that it is difficult to see through the thick fog).

When Gradgrind meets Mr. Sleary at the Pegasus Arms, the two men engage in the first of the novel's many discussions of Fact and Fancy, the theme at the heart of this novel. At the pub, the two men lay out the opposing views of life – Gradgrind believes that Fancy leads to idleness, and that emotion leads to clouded judgment. In his mind, everyone should be focused on their personal wealth and enjoyment above others. Mr. Sleary, on the other hand, believes that a life filled with curiosity leads to happiness, which is the true meaning of life, and that emotion helps one to enjoy the little things in life. Keen readers should be encouraged to watch these opposing views weave throughout the novel, particularly in the lives of the main characters. There are already hints of unhappiness in Louisa and Tom's life, highlighting the divide between Fact and Fancy. The children have little to enjoy in their lives, which leads Louisa to lavish all her emotion and love on Tom, the only person who truly understands her. Because Tom has not been trained in compassion or affection, he already exploits his sister's emotion, a character trait that will unfortunately mature as Tom ages.

This section also introduced two nasty female characters, Mrs. Gradgrind and Mrs. Sparsit. Both women are interesting because they have no redeeming qualities: Mrs. Gradgrind is a pitiful, spiteful woman who mindlessly follows her husband's ideals and smites her children for making her life difficult. Mrs. Gradgrind clearly symbolizes the danger of living a Fact-centered life. She has lost all emotion, including compassion, which makes her a wretched mother and human being. Mrs. Sparsit is similarly nasty, but her negativity is bred from her entitlement. Even though Mrs. Sparsit works as a domestic laborer (due to her husband's poor financial choices), she comes from an aristocratic family and takes every opportunity to remind Bounderby (and the reader) of her aristocratic blood. Mrs. Sparsit fails to realize who she truly is – a worker – and perpetuates the idea that she is better than those around her, particularly those in the middle and working class. In a way, Mrs. Sparsit and Bounderby are a good match, as neither can admit their true identity to themselves. This parallel will become more pronounced as the novel progresses.

Vocabulary



Chapters 9 – 12

Summary

Sissy returns to the school where she continues to flounder, unable to grasp the strict doctrine of Fact Gradgrind forces upon her. Despite Gradgrind's demands, Sissy has failed to relinquish her fanciful notions, including the "ridiculous" thought that her father will one day come back for her. Despite her inability to be properly educated, Gradgrind still allows her to work as a part-time educator to his daughters Louisa and Jane. Back at Stone Lodge, Sissy's emotionality is beginning to affect Louisa, who, having been trained her entire life to ignore emotion, feels deeply moved by Sissy's emotional passion, particularly in regards to her relationship with her father. Every day, Sissy asks Gradgrind if a letter from her father arrives, and although the letter never comes, Sissy never gives up hope that perhaps it will arrive the next day. When Tom overhears their discussion, he quietly reminds Louisa that Bounderby will look down on her, and possibly even punish her, if he hears her questioning Sissy's background. Despite the warnings, Louisa begins to feel real emotion for Sissy, particularly compassion over Sissy's lost relationship with her father – foreshadowing for Louisa's eventual search for a meaningful relationship in her own life.

In Coketown, the readers are introduced to a new character: Stephen Blackpool, one of the Hands who slaves away as a power-loom weaver in Bounderby's factory. In this chapter, Blackpool walks home from work with Rachael, a fellow worker that he is clearly in love with. When Blackpool returns home, he is shocked to discover that his abusive, alcoholic wife has returned home after a long absence. Blackpool had assumed that his wayward wife would never return and that he was essentially "single" again. Her return wrenches his plans to court Rachael. Overcome with emotion, Blackpool vows to divorce his wife, even though he pities the life she has chosen. The next day, Blackpool sets out to Bounderby's office to ask for legal advice about divorce. As pompous as ever, Bounderby preaches about his own impoverished childhood and the man hurdles he had to overcome to become the "self-made man" that he is today. He encourages Blackpool to simply accept his fate and work through the misery of his marriage to make himself a better person. He also states that divorces can only be obtained by the wealthy anyway. Bounderby concludes his speech by saying, "I see traces of turtle soup, and venison, and gold spoon in this."

Dejected, Blackpool leaves Bounderby's office with a terrible sense of disappointment. Bounderby has made clear that he has no options: if he abandons his wife, harms her, or lives with Rachael outside of the sanctity of marriage, he will be punished. Divorce may be possible, but Blackpool is far too poor to ever afford this slim possibility. Outside, he bumps into an old woman who claims to have traveled into Coketown from the city with the express purpose of catching a glimpse of Bounderby. She says that she saves her money each year to make the trip, yet she never speaks to Bounderby, she simply watches him. This year, unfortunately, she was unable to glimpse Bounderby and so asks Blackpool to describe him. She listens with reverence to his words, and is



clearly proud of all Bounderby has accomplished, no matter how his accomplishments have affected the lives of his workers. As he leaves, Blackpool resignedly walks back home, imagining the beautiful life he could be returning to if he were allowed to marry Rachael.

When Stephen returns home, he is shocked to find Rachael in his home. His wife is gravely ill, and a neighbor found Rachael and requested that she help care for the woman, lest she die while Stephen was away. Stephen falls asleep in the chair, and wakes to see his wife reaching for a medicine bottle. Stephen knows that if his wife drinks the bottle, she will overdo and die, but he cannot bring himself to stop her. He watches in horror as his wife drinks, and is only shocked back into reality when Rachael rouses and snatches the bottle from his wife's hands, saving her life.

Analysis

With the introduction of the Hands, Dickens is able to showcase his feelings about the Industrial Revolution. Dickens sought to showcase the harsh divide between the middle and working classes in London and he hoped this novel would humanize the downtrodden factory workers and bring about social change. The Industrial Revolution was only possible due to manpower, which was often exploitative and abusive, similar to the way sweatshops exploit and abuse their workers for corporate profit. In this section, the reader is introduced to Stephen Blackpool, one of Bounderby's workers, who will be Dickens' show horse for political change. Dickens has, however, been heavily criticized for failing to create well-rounded characters in the Hands. The reader sees this even in Dickens' descriptions of the town: "So many hundred Hands in the Mill; so many hundred horses Steam Power." Here, Dickens refers to the workers only as nameless, faceless body parts (Hands) and again as animals (horse power). The only exception is Blackpool, who is too perfect, too sympathetic a worker to be truly realistic.

However, through the introduction of Stephen Blackpool, an immediate contrast is made to Bounderby. Blackpool is hardworking, honest, and selfless, yet he lives a miserable life. Bounderby, on the other hand, is exploitative, dishonest, and selfish, yet by many standards he lives a fortunate life. It is interesting to note that Bounderby assumes if the Hands were not so lazy, they too could rise up as self-made men, just as he has done. During his conversation with Stephen, he also accuses him of wanting to eat turtle soup, implying that Blackpool, and the rest of the Hands, is dishonestly manipulating his situation as way of getting ahead in society. In reality, this description better fits Bounderby himself. What is most interesting about their conversation, however, is Bounderby's assertion that the laws have been created for the rich – a direct echo of Dickens' plaintive case for social change – and his pompous statement that "There's a sanctity in the relation [of marriage] that must be kept up." There is clear foreshadowing in this scene suggesting that Bounderby will be let down by the system of law that has been "made for him," and that he will be forced to eat his words about "sanctity" when his own marriage becomes troubled.



Throughout the novel, Dickens attempts to create versatility in his female characters, but as the novel progresses, it becomes clear that his female characters fall, almost comically, into the classic literary complex: Madonna / whore. Within this literary complex, female characters are depicted one of two ways, pure (Madonna) or tainted (whore). This complex stands even when not dealing with the sexuality of female characters – it is simply a way of categorizing two female stereotypes, which Dickens uses throughout the novel. The “good” female characters are clearly Sissy Jupe and Rachael. Both women are described as nearly perfect, without any visible flaws, with Stephen Blackpool even referring to Rachael as an “angel.” These women stride into the story with hearts full of love, complete morality, and the ability to lead “sinners” to “see the light.” Neither Sissy nor Rachael is a complicated character, despite the traumas and losses they’ve both sustained, which is why they are considered stereotypes or archetypes rather than well-rounded female characters. On the other side of the coin are the “flawed” women. Mrs. Sparsit and Mrs. Gradgrind are the prime examples of the literary “whores.” Both women are manipulative, condescending, and downright nasty. They are completely self-serving and have no redemptive qualities. In this section, Rachael is portrayed as an angel – the Madonna to Blackpool’s wife’s whore. Readers should be encouraged to document this literary complex throughout the novel.

Vocabulary



Chapters 14 – 16

Summary

Several years have passed since the last section. Gradgrind has taken a position in Parliament and spends most of his time in London. Tom has started his apprenticeship at Bounderby's bank, and he hears that Bounderby plans to ask Louisa to marry him. When Tom tells Louisa of the news, he encourages her to accept the proposal, as it will make life easier for both of them. When the proposal happens, it is Gradgrind who brings the question to Louisa's attention, not Bounderby himself. Louisa decides to accept the offer because she does not understand love: she has never experienced love and therefore hasn't come to expect it in a marriage. She is more eager to please her father by marrying his friend than she is to find a good partner for herself. Only Sissy has an emotional reaction to Louisa's engagement, viewing her friend with a mixture of pity and wonder.

For his part, Bounderby does his best to woo Louisa by buying her expensive jewelry and clothes, and he arranges for Mrs. Sparsit to find housing above the bank rather than in his home. Right before the wedding, Louisa seems to grasp the gravity of the decision she's making, and clings to Tom, questioning whether she's doing the right thing. It is clear to the reader that Tom is only interested in himself, so he makes light of the situation and tells Louisa to get on with it. At the end of this section, Louisa and Bounderby are married, and set off on a honeymoon to Lyons so Bounderby can observe the factories there.

Analysis

This section functions to showcase the mechanization of life when one lives on Fact alone. Gradgrind's home has become as mechanized as Bounderby's factories, with only Sissy (the only character raised to embrace her emotions) functioning as a happy, healthy adult. Gradgrind tries to boil all emotion, including love, down to logic, or fact. He advises his daughter to "consider [Bounderby's proposal] as you have been accustomed to consider every other question, simply as one of Fact." Based on the statistics he's gathered, the facts seem to show that Bounderby would be a good match for Louisa, even though she does not love him. To Bounderby, getting married is simply a chore to accomplish. It should therefore be handled with the same emotionless calculation as choosing when to harvest the fields or when to shear the sheep. Emotion would only muddy these strictly academic decisions.

Although Louisa wants to live on Fact alone some of Sissy's teachings have rubbed off on her, and at the last moment before her marriage she questions her decision. This scene highlights Louisa's ability to feel, and although she ignores her emotions this time, there should be no question in the reader's mind that in the future she will begin to listen to Fancy over Fact. This scene also highlights Tom's manipulative ways. He wants



Louisa to marry Bounderby because he knows that the union will make life much easier for him at the bank. Despite the fact that his sister is pouring her heart out to him, Tom can only think about himself (as his father has taught him to do), so he sacrifices Louisa's happiness for his personal gain. Unfortunately for Louisa, this will not be the last time.

Vocabulary



Book Two: Chapters 1 – 4

Summary

Book Two opens with Mrs. Sparsit and Bitzer sitting on the porch discussing what a “dissipated, extravagant idler” Tom Gradgrind has become during his time working at Bounderby’s bank. Their conversation is interrupted by a young, well-dressed man – soon to be revealed as Harthouse – who has come to Coketown in search of Gradgrind. Harthouse has heard that Gradgrind is an excellent politician, and he would like to study under his tutelage (although he has heard that Gradgrind’s daughter, Louisa Bounderby, is quite intimidating). Mrs. Sparsit is pleased to have a proper gentleman around, and she embarrasses herself trying to flatter him.

Soon after, Harthouse is invited to a dinner at Bounderby’s home. Harthouse is enamored with Louisa, and Tom is enamored with Harthouse. Tom is intrigued by Harthouse’s travels and worldly experiences – things he longs for in his own life. After their meal, Harthouse invites Tom back to his apartment where he plies him alcohol and tobacco before asking him about Louisa. Drunk, Tom tells Harthouse everything he would ever need to know in order to woo Louisa, including the fact that she does not love her husband. Harthouse is baffled by the Gradgrind children’s upbringing, and vows to awaken emotion inside Louisa.

Meanwhile, the Hands have decided to unionize to battle their wretched working conditions. An orator named Slackbridge riles the Hands into a frenzy, preaching about the benefits of unionization. The only worker who dares to question the benefits is Stephen Blackpool. Blackpool fears that unionization will only worsen the tense relationship with their employer. When they hear his opinion, the rest of the Hands turn against him, vowing to shun him as an act of solidarity.

Analysis

In the second chapter of this section, Harthouse is revealed to be an extravagant idler, just as Tom had been accused of in the opening conversation. Harthouse has only come to Coketown with the hopes of alleviating his perpetual boredom. It is revealed to the reader that Harthouse does not even align with Gradgrind’s political ideologies, he is simply curious to find out whether he can ingratiate himself with a prolific politician, a game he will use to pass the time. Once he meets Louisa at his first dinner party, it becomes immediately clear that the tactic of his game has changed: his mission now is to woo Louisa, to waken the emotion of love inside her, even if he is incapable of reciprocating the affection. Harthouse sees that Louisa only springs to life when she speaks to, or of, her brother Tom. He vows to exploit this.

It is also interesting to note that in Slackbridge, the reader sees that the employees can sometimes be as corrupt and manipulating as the employers. Slackbridge doesn’t really



care about the plight of his fellow workers. He is merely interested in the power associated with becoming an influential orator. He is excited by the frenzy he can whip the workers into, and exploits that for his pleasure, much like Harthouse will exploit Louisa's emotions for his own pleasure. At the same time, there is an interesting juxtaposition made between the passion of the Hands and Harthouse's (and Slackbridge's) ambivalence. Although the elite (like Bounderby) often view the Hands as idlers who could work toward a better future if they weren't so lazy, the truth of the matter is that it is the elite themselves who hold the workers back. The elite don't care about anyone's lives other than their own, which leaves the Hands to exist in misery. Impassioned by their desire for a better future, the Hands are willing to sacrifice everything for the betterment of their entire community's lives (save for Blackpool, of course). Meanwhile, Harthouse and Slackbridge, motivated only by the alleviation of their own boredom, flounder.

Vocabulary



Chapters 5 – 8

Summary

Blackpool is summoned to Bounderby's office. Bounderby has heard about the workers' plans to unionize, and he attempts to hire Blackpool as his spy. Unwilling to turn against his comrades – despite the fact that they have just turned against him – Blackpool dismisses Bounderby's request. He says that he has not rejected the union out of loyalty to Bounderby, but because he made a promise, and he also attempts to educate Bounderby about the grievances he feels should be amended in the factories. Outraged, Bounderby angrily fires Blackpool and dismisses him at once. Ironically, now that Blackpool does not have a union to protect him, he must leave Coketown in search of other work. He leaves Bounderby's office saying, "Heaven help us in this world."

Back home, Stephen meets up with Rachael and the old woman he met outside Bounderby's office a few chapters earlier (Mrs. Pegler). Mrs. Pegler seems particularly interested in Louisa, Bounderby's wife, and asks Blackpool many questions about her. Surprisingly, midway through their conversation, Tom and Louisa show up at Blackpool's door. Louisa says that she was very moved by Blackpool's speech in Bounderby's office earlier and that she would like to help. She offers him money to help him find work in another town, but Blackpool only accepts two pounds from her, which he promises to pay back as soon as possible. When Tom is alone with Blackpool, he suggests that he might know of a few days' work as a light porter at the bank. Tom says that if Blackpool is interested, he should wait outside the bank each night. If there is work to be done, someone will come out and find him. Although he finds the agreement a bit strange, Blackpool waits outside the bank each night, to no avail. Many people, including Mrs. Sparsit and Bitzer, witness his loitering.

Meanwhile, Harthouse continues to pursue Louisa using her love for Tom as his greatest asset. As he and Louisa walk through the gardens one afternoon, they find Tom carving a girl's name into a tree. Tom is angry with Louisa, who has recently refused him 100 pounds, and is barely cordial to her. Harthouse sees how deeply Tom's rudeness affects Louisa and encourages Tom to apologize to her. When he does, Louisa is sure that Harthouse is having a positive impact on Tom, and she begins to feel affectionate toward him. During Harthouse's conversation with Tom, it is revealed that Tom is deeply in debt due to gambling, and that he fears no amount of money will be able to save him.

The next day, everyone is shocked to learn that the bank has been robbed and 150 pounds stolen from the safe. In the shock of the crimes, Mrs. Sparsit insists upon moving back in with the Bounderbys. The thief used a fake key, which was later found in the street, but left no other evidence behind. The reader almost certainly suspects Tom of the crime, but Bounderby feels certain that Blackpool, who has been seen loitering outside the bank, is the culprit. Others suspect an old woman (Mrs. Pegler), whose identity is still unknown, as his accomplice. Only Louisa suspects Tom, and thus makes her way to his apartment to confront him. She wants to know what Tom said to



Blackpool that night on the stoop, and whether he somehow used Blackpool as a tool in the heist. Tom lies to Louisa and says that he told Blackpool how lucky he was to have Louisa's help, and that he knows nothing about the bank robbery. When Louisa leaves, however, Tom collapses onto his bed and weeps.

Analysis

In this section, the novel reaches its climax, when all the characters must face who they truly are and how their actions affect those around them. Stephen Blackpool is cast as the novel's martyr. He is so perfect and pure that he refuses to abide by Gradgrind's strict rules of Fact (and self-preservation) by turning against anyone, even those who have turned against him. The reward for his pure heart is the loss of his job and the exile from his home. He is also falsely accused of robbing a bank, the effects of which will play out in the rest of the novel. It is interesting to note that during her brief conversation with Blackpool, Louisa sees him (a Hand) as something more than Fact. She sees him as a human being, and for the first time, considers what his working life must be like, and it has a profound emotional impact on her. Previously, Louisa had known the Hands only as "[s]omething to be worked so much and paid so much," but now she sees Blackpool as a man worthy of her compassion. This meeting is important because it showcases Louisa's ability to feel empathy (a true sign that her character is changing), whereas Tom only senses Blackpool's vulnerability, which he manipulates to his own advantage.

Tom is the clear thief in the bank robbery, although he attempts to frame Blackpool for the crime. Tom's plan, which places Blackpool at the scene of the crime, is premeditated, showing how depraved his sense of justice is. He has fully embraced his father's doctrine of self-preservation, regardless of the collateral damage. As the novel progresses, both Tom and Gradgrind will be forced to reevaluate their principals, and both men will seek redemption from their self-serving ways.

Finally, there is much foreshadowing to the true nature of Mrs. Pegler's relationship with Bounderby. When she thinks Bounderby is about to enter Stephen's rooms, she becomes extremely nervous and looks for an escape route. Also, when Stephen asks if she has any children, she says, "I have lost him." There should be no question in the reader's mind that Mrs. Pegler is Bounderby's mother, and her presence in Coketown will shatter his image of being a "self-made man." As the second section reaches its conclusion, there is much foreshadowing to the way each of the flawed characters will have to reconcile the choices they've made and the effects these choices have had on their lives.

Vocabulary



Chapters 9 – 12

Summary

Now that Mrs. Sparsit has wormed her way back into the Bounderby estate, she spends the majority of her time flattering Bounderby and searching out ways to ruin Louisa's life. For example, she continually points out to Bounderby the amount of time Louisa spends with Harthouse. She begins to obsess over Louisa and Harthouse's relationship, imagining Louisa on a giant staircase leading into a black abyss. She relishes the thought of Louisa running down the staircase and falling into the abyss.

At the same time, Louisa receives a letter from home stating that her mother is near death. Louisa rushes back to Stone Lodge to be by her mother's side. As she approaches her childhood home, Louisa is filled with heavy sorrow rather than sentimental happiness. There, she is reunited with her younger sister Jane, who has been raised primarily by Sissy. Louisa immediately notices that Jane's childhood is much happier than her own had been, no doubt because Sissy has raised her with fancy, imagination, and love – three elements missing from her own fact-centered upbringing. Compounding this confusion, in the moments before Mrs. Gradgrind dies, she calls out to Louisa claiming that her life is missing something. She cannot decipher what she has forgotten, and she asks Louisa to ask Gradgrind to figure it out for her. Then she dies. Gradgrind views his wife's death in a business-like way, returning home from Parliament just long enough to bury her body and settle her estate.

When Louisa returns home to the Bounderby estate, Bounderby has dismissed Mrs. Sparsit but requested that she return as his weekend companion. With her new position, Mrs. Sparsit continues to spy on Louisa and offer a sympathetic shoulder for Bounderby's worries, particularly about the bank robbery. In one pontificating speech, Bounderby compares himself to Romulus and Remus – the Greek gods heralded for building Rome – for as Romulus and Remus were raised by a wolf, so does Bounderby claim to have a she-wolf for a grandmother. During one of her meddling investigations of Louisa's relationship with Harthouse, Mrs. Sparsit invites Tom over for dinner. She gets him drunk and manipulates the information that Harthouse is returning early from a hunting trip the next afternoon. Mrs. Sparsit immediately suspects that he is returning early to be with Louisa. The next afternoon, Mrs. Sparsit follows Louisa into the woods, where she meets Harthouse. Mrs. Sparsit hides behind a tree and overhears Harthouse declare his love for Louisa. He tries to convince Louisa to run away with him, but a storm breaks out and Mrs. Sparsit cannot hear Louisa's answer. Drenched, Mrs. Sparsit races through Coketown trying to following Louisa to the train station, overwhelmed with glee that she might witness Louisa's downfall. Coughing and sneezing, Mrs. Sparsit does her best to keep up with Louisa, but eventually loses her.

When the final chapter "Down" opens, Gradgrind sits at his desk in the office at Stone Lodge. Louisa bursts through the doors and immediately begins shouting at her father. It's clear that Louisa has returned to her childhood home to be surrounded with Fact as



her emotions have become too overwhelming for her. She laments her upbringing, blaming her father for the emotional predicament she is in now, and his failure to prepare her for the complexities of love. She explains first the reasons why she married Bounderby (which she now sees as a grave mistake), and that Harthouse has declared himself to her. She curses the day she was born, and laments that she is completely unable of coping with these new emotions. Crying out, she begs Bounderby to help her and collapses at her father's feet. When Gradgrind is faced with the destruction he has caused in his daughter's life, he finally sees the error of his ways. He embraces Louisa affectionately, yet realizes he is incapable of comforting her, a realization that fills him with self-loathing.

Analysis

In this section, the reader first sees the symbolism of Mrs. Sparsit's staircase. Mrs. Sparsit imagines Louisa descending the staircase toward a black abyss. The staircase and abyss are likely symbols of the strict moral codes for women at the time. Women were expected to stay chaste until marriage, and dedicate their lives (and purity) to their husbands. The idea of losing one's virginity before marriage or having a relationship with another man (even a friendship) was scandalous, particularly in the upper-class society Mrs. Sparsit would have been accustomed to. For some time now, Mrs. Sparsit has fantasized about taking over Louisa's role in Bounderby's house. Mrs. Sparsit clearly believes that because of her "aristocratic" blood, she would make a more fitting lady of the house – which is why she insists on calling Louisa Miss Gradgrind rather than Mrs. Bounderby. Louisa's relationship with Harthouse is exactly the type of scandal Mrs. Sparsit had been hoping for. If Louisa "falls into the abyss" of social shame, Bounderby will be free to recognize her as the true lady of the house. The staircase also highlights the irony of Mrs. Sparsit's character: she tries to perpetuate the idea that she is a lady, but she takes pleasure in the pain and suffering of others.

This section is the emotional climax of the novel as all the characters are forced to reconcile the decisions they've made in their lives. The reformation can begin. When Mrs. Gradgrind dies, she realizes that something is missing from her life, although she cannot guess what. True to her character, she asks for her husband to write a letter finding out what it is, rather than struggling to discover the loss herself. Even in death, Mrs. Gradgrind fails to understand life, which has a strong subconscious effect on Louisa. Even though the two women don't discuss their roles (particularly in the Gradgrind house) with each other, Louisa must see her future in her mother's dying eyes if she fails to make changes in her life. Although she returns to her home at the Bounderby estate, it doesn't take long for Louisa to realize that what was missing from her mother's life is love – the same emotion that torments her in her failed marriage to Bounderby and her inappropriate relationship with Harthouse. Louisa is faced with the reality that her life is a failure, and she determines herself to make the changes necessary to survive. At the same time, Gradgrind is faced with the destruction a life of Fact can lead to when his philosophy, and his daughter, ends up in a heap at his feet. At the closing of this section, nearly all the characters are broken, and they will rebuild their relationships, for better or worse, in the novel's closing section.

Vocabulary



Book Three: Chapters 1 – 3

Summary

Louisa recuperates from her trauma at Stone Lodge with her now dutiful father vowing to do whatever he can to help her heal, although he continues to feel insecure about his lack of emotional knowledge. Sissy also vows to step in and help Gradgrind, for she is the only character at Stone Lodge capable of teaching Louisa how to love. The first thing Sissy does is visit Harthouse to lambaste him for toying with Louisa's emotions. She determinedly demands that Harthouse leave town forever and never return, giving Louisa enough space to heal from his thoughtless games. Harthouse is stupefied by Sissy's good looks and straight-talking ways, and he agrees to leave Coketown immediately.

Meanwhile, the ailing Mrs. Sparsit – who has caught a nasty cold chasing Louisa through the storm – finally brings all her gossip to Bounderby, flatly accusing Louisa of having an affair with Harthouse. Enraged, Bounderby storms off to Stone Lodge where he confronts Louisa directly. He demands that Louisa return to the estate at once. Despite her health concerns, Gradgrind steps in to defend Louisa, saying that he made a terrible mistake in her upbringing and that he would like some time now to rectify it. Bounderby is unmoved by Gradgrind's plea and threatens to abandon Louisa if she does not return home with him at once. Both Louisa and Gradgrind refuse to acknowledge Bounderby's threats, and he returns to the estate to resume life as a bachelor.

Analysis

Hard Times has been divided into three distinct sections: Sowing, Reaping, and Garnering. In the first section, the main characters sowed the seeds of their beliefs. Gradgrind sowed the seed of Fact alone into his children, while Bounderby sowed the seed of his lies. In the second section, those beliefs grew and took on lives of their own, thus building plot and creating conflict. In the final section, garnering, the men are forced to harvest the fruits of the seeds they sowed. Gradgrind must reconcile the devastating effects of his stringent educational system. There are many parallels drawn between the Gradgrind children and farming (including illusions to seeds planted in rocky soil rather than fertile), which make the section titles particularly poignant. It's interesting to note that Dickens would title the sections with obvious reference to agriculture when the novel focuses so heavily on the negative effects of industrialization.

When faced with Louisa's emotional meltdown, Sissy, who continues to represent a perfect literary Madonna, visits Harthouse and kicks him out of town. Interestingly, the narrator states that Sissy's words affect Harthouse, "in the cavity where his heart should have been." This statement suggests that Harthouse is amoral rather than immoral,



meaning that his actions toward Louisa came not from bad intentions, but rather from lack of good intentions. For Dickens there is a clear distinction between the two. Dickens is drawing a clear distinction between characters like Harthouse and characters like Slackbridge, whose main objective in life is to stir up trouble.

The most important facet of this section, however, is the turnaround in Bounderby's beliefs about marriage. When Gradgrind argues that Louisa should stay at Stone Lodge, he employs the exact same rhetoric about marriage that Bounderby had previously used on Blackpool. The foreshadowing of Blackpool's plea for a divorce in Section One comes full circle when Bounderby is faced with the decision of honoring the "sanctity" of his marriage or abandoning Louisa. It should come as no surprise to the reader that Bounderby chooses the easiest road and returns to his estate to resume his life as a bachelor. This shows the reader how superficial and pompous Bounderby's character truly is.

Vocabulary



Chapters 4 – 6

Summary

Frustrated that Louisa has not returned home with him, Blackpool diverts his rage by continuing his blind search for Blackpool, whom he still believes is responsible for robbing the bank. He offers a £20 reward for whomever can rustle Blackpool out of the shadows, leading Slackbridge to give a rousing speech at the factory, rallying the Hands into searching for him. Meanwhile, a weeping Rachael shows up at Stone Lodge with Bounderby and Tom. Although she doesn't accuse Louisa on the spot, it's clear that she suspects Louisa's previous offer to help Blackpool somehow implicated him in the crime. Bounderby is outraged that Louisa went behind his back, not only to meet with Blackpool but also to offer him money. Tom is likewise outraged that Louisa would admit the truth to Bounderby: for Tom, it would have been much easier to lie, saying he had never met with Blackpool at all. Rachael admits that Blackpool has moved to another town and assumed an alias to find work. She agrees to write him a letter asking him to return to Coketown to clear his name. A few days later, he agrees but fails to show. When four days pass without Blackpool's arrival, Bounderby sends men to the town where Blackpool is said to be living under his alias, but no one can find him. All this confirms the town's belief that Blackpool truly is the thief.

One afternoon, as Mrs. Sparsit is walking through town, she sees Mrs. Pegler, whom she still believes is an accomplice to the bank robbery. She drags the old woman to Bounderby's office, gleefully anticipating Bounderby's pride in her detective work. Rather than being proud, Bounderby is flabbergasted to see Mrs. Pegler standing in front of him. It is finally revealed that Mrs. Pegler is Bounderby's mother, as the reader might have assumed for some time, and that rather than abandon him to an abusive, alcoholic grandmother, Mrs. Pegler raised, loved, and nurtured Bounderby until he grew too rich and abandoned her. Bounderby is embarrassed to have his "self-made man" story exposed, but he refuses to offer anyone an explanation for his lies.

Sissy visits with Rachael every day as she futilely waits for Blackpool to return. While they are out walking one afternoon, they happen upon Blackpool's hat. Rachael immediately fears that he has been murdered, but the women soon discover that he has fallen into Old Hell Shaft, an old mining pit. A crowd gathers as the doctor comes to attend to him. Blackpool is gravely injured and nearly starved, but he manages to bid a loving farewell to Rachael, and instruct her to seek out Tom Gradgrind to clear his name, before he dies.

Analysis

As the novel draws to a close, many of the characters begin receiving the justice due to them. Bounderby's lies about being a "self-made man" are finally exposed. It is interesting to note, however, that there is little backlash for his lies, and the truth doesn't



affect his standing in society. This may lead the reader to question why Bounderby chose to lie in the first place, if not for societal gain. The only answer is that the concocted story many Bounderby feel better about himself, which again highlights his vanity and selfishness. The lie about being abandoned also ensures that Bounderby's mother will have no claim over his fortune. Despite Mrs. Sparsit's best intentions, her incessant nosiness and meddling has now ruined her chances to win over Bounderby's heart, and she is sent packing from the estate. She is forced to move in with a disagreeable relative, Lady Scadgers, leaving the reader to assume that her life will be as unhappy as she hoped others' (including Louisa Bounderby) would be.

Also in this section, Blackpool dies. Before he passes away, he states that all men should learn to live together with understanding. He dies holding Rachael's hand, and gazing at the star in the distance that had been his only comfort in prison. While Blackpool's death may come as a shock to readers – especially because he did not deserve to die – it's clear that Dickens is attempting to cast the glow of a martyr around the novel's true angel, Blackpool. During the time of the novel's first publishing, readers' hearts would have broken for the inequity in Blackpool's death. Dickens hoped that by creating a sympathetic life and death for a working man, it might sway readers to view the working class as human and therefore prompt social change. Had Blackpool lived and received his just reward, readers would have received the message that the Hands, through their morality and tenacity, can fend for themselves. It is only through death that Dickens' cry for social revolution could reach fever pitch.

Vocabulary



Chapters 7 – 9

Summary

After Blackpool clearly accuses Tom Gradgrind of the crime, Gradgrind races home where he learns that Sissy has sent Tom to the circus to hide out. With the news that Tom might safely escape England on a ship bound for South America, Gradgrind, Louisa, and Sissy all make their way to the circus where they find Tom working as a blackface comic. During their reunification with Tom, he is annoyed and harsh with his family, completely blaming them for his problems. He is particularly harsh with Louisa for her refusal to fund his gambling addiction. Despite Tom's terrible attitude, Louisa is overwhelmed with love for her brother, and she cries out that she forgives him for all his sins. Just then, Bitzer arrives prepared to return Tom to Coketown for arrest. Desperate, Gradgrind begs Bitzer to leave Tom alone, asking whether Bitzer has a heart. "The circulation, sir, could not be carried on without one," Bitzer responds, making it clear to the reader, once again, that Gradgrind's school of Fact has created emotionally void adults. As Bitzer attempts to drag Tom to the train station, the circus master, Mr. Sleary, employs his trained horses and dogs to create a raucous loud enough to distract Bitzer so Tom can be hurried off to safety. Tom is safely transported from the circus to the shipyard, where he boards a ship to South America.

The novel closes with a summary of the characters' lives in the years after the circus scene: Bounderby has a seizure in the Coketown streets and dies. Mrs. Sparsit is fired from the Bounderby estate and sent to live with her unpleasant relative, Lady Scadgers. Gradgrind abandons his school of Fact and dedicates his life to charity in addition to publishing articles exonerating Blackpool from the bank robbery allegations. Tom will eventually repent his bad behavior, but die before he can see Louisa – his one true love – again. Louisa will never remarry, but spends her life devoted to Sissy's large family of loving children.

Analysis

In his office, it's clear that Gradgrind is wrestling not only with how he should handle the news of Tom's crime, but also the truth that he has irrevocably ruined both his children's lives with his school of Fact. Gradgrind's character comes full circle from the novel's opening as he, much like his children, struggles to come to grips with his own emotions. Despite the trauma that Gradgrind has inflicted on his children's lives, there is redemption in his character. He embraces emotion and dedicates the rest of his life to perpetuating love and forgiveness, two emotions he previously despised. On the same token, it's significant to note that the novel opens with children in the classroom and closes with children at the circus, bringing the novel's themes full circle. While Gradgrind once despised the circus as a tool of corruption, he now runs to the circus as a savior, proving that there is a purpose to Fancy (it helps save Tom from jail).



It is also interesting to note that Dickens seems to abandon the working class altogether in the novel's final section: Stephen is dead (not a fitting ending to his "perfect" character) and Rachael's life has carried on unchanged (again, not very fitting). Dickens offers no resolution to the situation with the Hands and their unionization, leaving readers to question why he drew so much attention to the cause in the first place. If this novel is meant to be Dickens' love song to the workingman, or to highlight the great injustice of the industrial age, he has failed to unleash the true impact of his message. Many critics, although disturbed by Dickens' abandonment of message, seem to believe that he was incapable of writing a truly political novel and reverted back to his true passion, writing character.

Vocabulary



Characters

Mr. Gradgrind

Thomas Gradgrind is a wealthy, retired hardware merchant in Coketown. He later becomes a member of Parliament. Gradgrind has devoted his entire life to the school of Fact, and has raised his children – both biological and those who attend his school – to rely on Fact alone, never imagination or fancy. As a result of his strict school of belief, Gradgrind has strained relationships with nearly everyone in his life, most notably his children, who grow up to resent their education and complete lack of emotional maturity. Everything about Gradgrind, from his physical appearance to manner of speech, is monotone, yet as the novel progresses, his character begins to evolve. When faced with Louisa's emotional breakdown, Gradgrind realizes, for the first time, the flaws in his system. While he had tried to prepare Louisa for a self-serving life by preaching the values of Fact alone, he suddenly realizes that by stunting Louisa's emotional growth, he has stunted her ability to lead a productive, happy life. Mortified, Gradgrind is filled with self-loathing and vows to change his outlook. Similarly, when his son, Tom, is found to have robbed a bank, Gradgrind first devotes his energy to helping Tom escape justice, and then to clearing the name of the man falsely accused of the crime. In the first half of the novel, Gradgrind is a pathetic, controlling man, yet in the second half of the novel, his eyes have been opened to the value of Fancy, and he redeems himself as a father to the reader.

Tom Gradgrind

Tom Gradgrind is Gradgrind's son. Thomas' father seeks to raise him on Fact alone. Much like his sister, Tom grows up to resent his education, and Tom matures into a selfish, conniving young man. When he runs into gambling problems, Tom robs Bounderby's bank and sets Stephen Blackpool up to take the fall. Although he is never held accountable for his crime, Tom must spend the rest of his life living abroad, and by the time that he sees the errors of his ways, it is too late to see his family again.

Louisa Gradgrind

Louisa Gradgrind Bounderby is Tomas Gradgrind's daughter, raised to believe in Fact alone. Gradgrind essentially mechanizes his daughter to churn out facts, much like a computer, completely void of emotion. Growing up, Louisa struggles with her curiosity and questioning: she wants her father to be proud of her, yet she cannot sate her inquisitive nature. In a last-ditch effort to make her father proud, Louisa marries his friend, Josiah Bounderby, a man she does not love. Shortly after her ill-matched marriage, Louisa meets James Harthouse, a manipulative man who nonetheless awakens her emotions. Unable to cope with feelings of love, shame, and guilt, Louisa has an emotional breakdown, returns to Stone Lodge, and confronts her father for



ruining her life. The only person Louisa has truly loved is her brother, Tom. At first, Louisa's love for Tom fulfills her, and she will stop at nothing to protect him. When she meets Harthouse, however, this love is exploited and manipulated for Harthouse's personal gain. At the closing of the novel, Louisa must learn how to embrace her emotions to better her own life. Although she never remarries after Bounderby abandons her, she is able to express her love in her relationship with Sissy Jupe and her children.

Sissy Jupe

Cecelia (Sissy) Jupe is the model female character in the novel. Although she was raised by circus folk and is therefore "un-teachable" to Gradgrind, he takes her under his wing in the hopes of reforming her fanciful mind. Sissy never learns to rely on Fact alone, which Gradgrind views as a failure. Sissy does manage to teach the Gradgrind girls about life and love, however, helping to shape them into curious and compassionate young women.

Mr. Bounderby

Josiah Bounderby is a banker and factory owner in Coketown best known for his pontificating speeches on becoming a "self made man." Bounderby claims to have overcome a traumatic childhood in which his mother gave birth to him in a ditch, and then abandoned him to the care of his alcoholic grandmother. Bounderby uses the story of his ill-fated childhood to condescendingly motivate others to better their own existences. Bounderby is perhaps the most self-serving of all of the novel's characters, and he will stop at nothing – including perpetuating lies and exploiting his workers – for his wealth. He marries Louisa Bounderby but abandons her as soon as their marriage becomes strained, and is later revealed as a personal fraud. His story about being a "self made man" is dispelled when his mother, Mrs. Pegler, returns to Coketown and reveals that Bounderby, in fact, abandoned her when he started to collect his wealth. Through Bounderby's character, Dickens' message about self-serving capitalists that use their money and power irresponsibly is made clear.

Mrs. Sparsit

Mrs. Sparsit is Bounderby's housemaid. Originally from an aristocratic family, Mrs. Sparsit is forced into service when her spendthrift husband burns his way through their life savings. Despite her somewhat desperate position, Mrs. Sparsit continues to view herself as a lady as the rest of society as beneath her. Mrs. Sparsit takes particular pleasure in imagining Louisa Bounderby's demise.

Mr. Sleary

Mr. Sleary is the ringmaster for the circus Sissy's family works for.



Stephen Blackpool

Stephen Blackpool is one of the Hands that works in Bounderby's factory. He's a good, hardworking man who simply wants to improve his own existence. He is married to a terrible alcoholic and is in love with one of his co-workers, Rachael. Despite Blackpool's attempts to live an honest, upstanding life, he is forced to stay in his loveless marriage, falsely accused of robbing a bank, and eventually dies after falling into an old mining shaft.

Harthouse

James Harthouse is a self-serving young man who comes to Coketown with the hopes of alleviating his own boredom. Initially, he comes to study politics under Gradgrind, but when he learns of Louisa's loveless marriage, vows to awaken some emotion in her. Harthouse manipulates Louisa's emotions as sport, not because he loves her. As a direct result of Harthouse's game, Louisa has an emotional breakdown, leaves Bounderby, and moves back in with her father.

Bitzer

Bitzer is Gradgrind's model student. Bitzer is like a sponge soaking up Fact alone, and he grows to enjoy a self-serving life completely regulated by Gradgrind's rules. At the end of the novel, Bitzer attempts to have Tom arrested for the bank robbery, but he is foiled by the circus performers.

Mrs. Pegler

Mrs. Pegler is Bounderby's true mother. After Bounderby abandoned her when he struck it rich, Mrs. Pegler saved up her money to make a once-a-year pilgrimage to Coketown to simply see him (although she never speaks to him). When her true identity is discovered, it destroys Bounderby's story of being a "self made man."

Mrs. Gradgrind

Mrs. Gradgrind is a pitiful woman who lives a pathetic existence following her husband's many rules. Before she dies, Mrs. Gradgrind is filled with a feeling of loss – as if she's lived her whole life without something, but she can't pinpoint exactly what she's missing.

Mr. Slackbridge

Mr. Slackbridge is the meddling orator who whips the hands into a frenzy and encourages them to form the union that will certainly strain their relationship with their

employer. Through his speeches, it becomes clear that Slackbridge is only interested in creating drama, not in enacting social change.



Objects/Places

Coketown

Coketown is the city where Bounderby's factories are built. It is described as dark, dirty streets of identical red brick buildings. The uniformity and pollution make it impossible to differentiate between the hospital and the laundress. Perhaps what is most striking about Coketown is the black smoke (often described as "serpentine") that billows from the factory smokestacks.

Stone Lodge

Stone Lodge is the home where Louisa and Tom Gradgrind grew up. It is where Louisa returns after her emotional breakdown.

The Bank

The Bank is where Bounderby, Tom, and Bitzer work. When Tom runs into some gambling debts, he robs the bank of £150, which he tries to blame on Stephen Blackpool.

Old Hell Shaft

Old Hell Shaft is the old mining shaft that Stephen Blackpool falls into on his way back to Coketown to clear his name in the bank robbery scandal. As a result of his injuries in the mine, Blackpool dies.

Merrylegs

Merrylegs is Sissy Jupe's dog in the circus. When Merrylegs returns to the circus after Sissy's father has abandoned it, Mr. Sleary knows that Sissy's father has died.

The Hands

The Hands are the hundreds of impoverished employees of Bounderby's factories. Over time, the Hands have been thought of merely as a body part, or part of a machine, rather than human beings.



Mrs. Sparsit's Staircase

Mrs. Sparsit's Staircase is a symbol for societal expectations for women during the industrial revolution. When Mrs. Sparsit thinks Louisa is starting an extramarital affair with Harthouse, she takes great pride in imagining Louisa tumbling off the staircase and into the black abyss below.

The Circus

The Circus is where Sissy Jupe grew up and where Tom hides out after the bank robbery. The circus is symbolic of the fancy Gradgrind hopes to eradicate from society.

Fact

Fact is the most important aspect of Gradgrind's life. He believes so firmly in Fact alone that he refuses to allow his children to use their imaginations, emotions, or curiosity to explore the world.

The Union

The Union is what the Hands hope to create in an attempt to better their terrible working conditions. Mr. Slackbridge, a powerful orator, riles the Hands into a frenzy speaking out about the benefits of unionization.



Themes

Human Machinery

Throughout the novel, Dickens sends a clear message to his reader about the dangers in “mechanizing” the human race. This is explored through two characters, Gradgrind and Bounderby. First, Gradgrind seeks to turn his students into little “machines” by filling them with Fact alone, leaving no room for imagination or fantasy. The reader sees the effects of this school of thought most clearly in Bitzer’s character. As a child, Bitzer is the model student, able to memorize facts and regurgitate them on command, just like a computer. As an adult, however, he is unable to stray from his mechanized role, which almost leads to malfunction. He is completely unable to process emotion, and is therefore clueless when it comes to the case against Tom. He cannot comprehend why anyone would want to stray from the fact of law, and therefore cannot understand why Tom should set free. The moralistic reader will likely side with Bitzer (Tom committed the crime and should therefore be punished for it) but Dickens has set out to highlight redemption rather than punishment, and Bitzer’s automatic, emotionless response hinders Tom’s personal growth.

The reader also sees the danger of mechanizing humans through the use of the Hands at Bounderby’s factories. The Hands are the working poor who have literally been used as machines during the industrial age. The Hands are forced into lives of Fact: long work hours, terrible pay, squalid living conditions, and no recourse to public assistance. There is no imagination, fantasy, or Fancy in their lives. For many in the middle class, like Louisa Bounderby, the Hands cease to be human. When discussing Blackpool’s life with him, Louisa says she always thought Hands were “[s]omething to be worked so much and paid so much.” Although the Hands attempt to better their existences through unionization, the novel abandons their struggle and the reader never learns the outcome of their fight. In this way, Dickens seems to be saying that the plight of the working poor remains unchanged and society still views the impoverished as less than human.

Fact vs. Fancy

Along the same lines as the mechanization of humans, the conflict between Fact and Fantasy is at the heart of *Hard Times*. From the novel’s first scenes, the reader sees Gradgrind’s cruel adherence to Fact alone, banishing imagination and fantasy from his classroom and his home. On some level, Gradgrind’s motivations are commendable. He truly believes that imagination and fancy impede learning and success, so he seeks to remove it from children’s lives before it has the chance to ruin them. In his pursuit, however, he also squelches any positive emotions, like compassion, curiosity, and love in his children, which have disastrous results in their adulthood. As a result of their father’s dictatorship, both Tom and Louisa Gradgrind mature into maladjusted, troubled adults. Louisa finds herself in a loveless marriage and, upon feeling emotions of love for



the first time with another man, collapses under the weight of her own emotions. Tom, on the other hand, matures into a cruel, conniving adult who takes advantage of others in his pursuit of personal gain.

The foil to Gradgrind's Fact is Sissy Jupe, the daughter of circus providers, who believes wholeheartedly in Fancy (and also in the positive emotions listed above). Through interacting with Sissy as a child, Louisa begins to question her father's strict schooling and, after meeting Harthouse, begins to emotionally unravel. It is Sissy's nurturing and support that helps her recover from her emotional breakdown, and Sissy's "fancy" that helps Tom escape the law when he is charged with robbing a bank. Through the lives of these characters, Dickens makes very clear to his reader that Fancy is as important, if not more so, than Fact. The characters that have embraced Fancy (as well as love, curiosity, and compassion) go on to live happy, healthy lives. Those who embrace Fact alone (as well as selfishness and deceit) go on to live miserable lives.

The Role of Women

In the industrial age, and indeed in *Hard Times*, the role of women was simple: to care for the house. Sissy is brought in as a nursemaid when Mrs. Gradgrind falls ill; Louisa is expected to do little else with her life but marry well; Mrs. Sparsit is a housemaid, and Rachael, although allowed to work in a factory, fulfills the role of nurturing mother and friend to Stephen Blackpool, a grown man. Within this singular role, Dickens attempts to create versatility, but his female characters fall, almost comically, into the classic literary complex: Madonna / whore. Within this literary complex, female characters are depicted one of two ways, pure (Madonna) or tainted (whore). This complex stands even when not dealing with the sexuality of female characters – it is simply a way of categorizing two female stereotypes, which Dickens uses throughout the novel. The "good" female characters are clearly Sissy Jupe and Rachael. Both women are described as nearly perfect, without any visible flaws, with Stephen Blackpool even referring to Rachael as an "angel." These women stride into the story with hearts full of love, complete morality, and the ability to lead "sinners" to "see the light." Neither Sissy nor Rachael is a complicated character, despite the traumas and losses they've both sustained, which is why they are considered stereotypes or archetypes rather than well-rounded female characters.

On the other side of the coin are the "flawed" women. Mrs. Sparsit and Mrs. Gradgrind are the prime examples of the literary "whores." Both women are manipulative, condescending, and downright nasty. They are completely self-serving and have no redemptive qualities. Mrs. Gradgrind meets a terrible demise when she dies halfway through the novel, and Mrs. Sparsit meets her punishment when, at the end of the novel, she is forced to leave the Bounderby estate and move in with her unpleasant relative, Mrs. Scadgers.

The only exception to this classic Madonna / whore complex is Louisa Gradgrind, perhaps because Louisa's character was constructed to showcase a different complex: the relationship between Fact and Fancy. Louisa was raised on Fact alone, essentially



raised to become a machine rather than a woman. As a result, Louisa is not feminine at all, at least not when adhering to the Victorian sentimentality. Louisa's gender, therefore, is somewhat neutral. As a result, so is her ending. Rather than embracing a happy domestic life as Sissy (the Madonna) does, or whiling away her existence in misery as Mrs. Sparsit (the whore) does, Louisa remains unmarried and childless at the novel's close, continuing her failure to fully embrace her femininity.



Style

Point of View

This novel is written from the third person omniscient point of view, which allows the reader to view the themes and events through a variety of perspectives.

Setting

Hard Times is set in London during the Industrial Revolution. Because the novel deals with the societal issues of the time, particularly the plight of the working poor, the novel has two distinct settings which include the setting for the working poor (Coketown) and the middle class. Coketown is perhaps the more distinct of the two settings. It is described as dark, dirty streets of identical red brick buildings. The uniformity and pollution make it impossible to differentiate between the hospital and the laundress. Perhaps what is most striking about Coketown is the black smoke (often described as “serpentine”) that billows from the factory smokestacks. This smoke not only represents the industrialization of London, but on a symbolic level, represents the blindness of the business owners (like Bounderby) who, in their pursuit of wealth, have ignored the plight of their working class. Men like Bounderby are blinded not only to the ways they are polluting their beautiful town, but also to the ways they are harming an entire class of people.

On the flip side, the Gradgrinds and Bounderbys live in relative wealth. They have large estates surrounded by woods, fields, and plenty of fresh air. However, even though these families have the money to “buy their happiness,” their homes are described as cold and unwelcoming. Growing up in the aptly named Stone Lodge, Louisa never felt a sense of familial sentimentality. Therefore, she views her childhood house as a morgue rather than a welcoming home. Similarly, Louisa feels alone and lonely in the cavernous estate she moves into when she marries Bounderby (whom she never truly loves). Although the estates are impressive architecturally – and perfect for superficial women like Mrs. Sparsit – they fail to ever feel like home. This is in direct contrast to Stephen Blackpool, a factory worker's home that, although small and dingy, feels much more welcoming and homey than anywhere Louisa Bounderby has ever lived.

Language and Meaning

Hard Times is certainly Dickens' most politically motivated novel, and many critics argue that in his relentless pursuit of social change (particularly in regards to the treatment of the working poor), he sacrificed some of his literary merit. As a result of his political drive, Dickens creates a variety of stereotyped, archetypal characters. The reader sees this most notably in the depiction of Stephen Blackpool, Dickens' sacrificial lamb. Since he sought to showcase the social inequalities, Dickens needed to create a flawless working class character whose life would be so pitiable, real-life high society would be



prompted to make social change. Throughout the novel, Stephen is characterized as a man of great honesty, compassion, and integrity, which he maintains even when he is shunned by his fellow workers and fired by Bounderby. Stephen endures the heartache of being unable to live with Rachael, whom he loves, make a decent wage, or better his life, all because he is poor.

At the end of the novel, Blackpool dies. Before passing away, he states that all men should learn to live together with understanding. He dies holding Rachael's hand and gazing at the star in the distance that had been his only comfort in prison. While Blackpool's death may come as a shock to readers – especially because he did not deserve to die – it's clear that Dickens is attempting to cast the glow of a martyr around the novel's true angel, Blackpool. During the time of the novel's first publishing, readers' hearts would have broken for the inequity in Blackpool's death. Dickens hoped that by creating a sympathetic life and death for a working man, it might sway readers to view the working class as human and therefore prompt social change. Had Blackpool lived and received his just reward, readers would have received the message that the Hands, through their morality and tenacity, can fend for themselves. It is only through death that Dickens' cry for social revolution could reach fever pitch.

Structure

Hard Times is divided into three parts of equal length – Sowing, Reaping, and Garnering. In the first section, the main characters sow the seeds of their beliefs. Gradgrind sows the seed of Fact alone in his children, while Bounderby sowed the seed of his lies. In the second section, these beliefs grow and take on lives of their own, thus building plot and creating conflict. Louisa and Tom act out in their pursuit of emotion – Louisa in her inappropriate relationship with Harthouse, and Tom in the bank robbery. At the end of Section Two, Gradgrind begins to see the error of his ways, and the reader begins to suspect that Bounderby has invented his “self made man” story. At the same time, the reader (Dickens' society) is forced to reap the reality of their social injustice when they see Blackpool falsely accused of the bank robbery.

In the final section, Garnering (which literally means to pick up the pieces after a harvest), Bounderby and Gradgrind are forced to pick up the pieces of their own damaged lives. Gradgrind must reconcile the devastating effects of his stringent educational system, while Bounderby must face the reality that he is not the man he claimed (or perpetuated) to be. There are many parallels drawn between the Gradgrind children and farming (including illusions to seeds planted in rocky soil rather than fertile), which make the section titles particularly poignant. It's interesting to note that Dickens would title the sections with obvious reference to agriculture when the novel focuses so heavily on the negative effects of industrialization.



Quotes

Now, what I want is Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else

I hadn't a shoe to my foot. As to a stocking, I didn't know such a thing by name. I passed the day in a ditch, and the night in a pigsty. That's the way I spent my tenth birthday. Not that a ditch was new to me, for I was born in a ditch ... For years, ma'am, I was one of the most miserable little wretches ever seen. I was so sickly, that I was always moaning and groaning. I was so ragged and dirty, that you wouldn't have touched me with a pair of tongs

People must be amuthed, Thquire, thomehow ... they can't be alwayth a working, nor yet they can't be alwayth a learning.

The fairy palaces burst into illumination before pale morning showed the monstrous serpents of smoke trailing themselves over Coketown

So many hundred Hands in this Mill; so many hundred horse Steam Power. It is known, to the force of a single pound weight, what the engine will do; but, not all the calculators of the National Debt can tell me the capacity for good or evil, for love or hatred, for patriotism or discontent, for the decomposition of virtue into vice, or the reverse, at any single moment in the soul of one of these its quiet servants, with the composed faces and the regulated actions

You don't expect to be set up in a coach and six, and to be fed on turtle soup and venison, with a gold spoon, as a good many of 'em do

There's a sanctity in this relation of life .. and-and-it must be kept up.

But she knew from her reading infinitely more of the ways of toiling insects than of these toiling men and women. Something to be worked so much and paid so much, and there ended.

How could you give me life, and take from me all the inappreciable things that raise it from the state of conscious death? Where are the graces of my soul? Where are the sentiments of my heart? What have you done, oh, Father, What have you done with the garden that should have bloomed once, in this great wilderness here?

Oh, Tom, Tom, do we end so, after all my love?



Topics for Discussion

Topic 1

Describe the role of women in *Hard Times*. What societal expectations are presented in the novel? How do the novel's characters fit into the literary complex of Madonna / whore? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

Topic 2

What message is Dickens sending to his readers about societal inequality through this text? How does Dickens' message shift and change with the plot? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

Topic 3

Describe Bounderby's story of becoming a self-made man. How does Bounderby's "childhood" affect his views of the working poor? How does Bounderby's life change when the truth of his parentage is finally revealed? What message does this send to the reader? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

Topic 4

Most of the characters in the novel have names that directly reflect their personalities. Choose three characters and describe how their names exemplify their character traits. Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

Topic 5

What is the significance of the novel's structure? What does each of its three parts represent? How do the section titles relate to the novel's themes of mechanization and industrialization? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

Topic 6

Both Gradgrind and Bounderby represent the mechanization and industrialization of humanity through the pursuit of Fact. Describe how each man affects his society with Fact, and the outcome of his beliefs. Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.



Topic 7

Discuss the character of Stephen Blackpool. How does he represent the poor Hands in Hard Times? Do you think Blackpool is an accurate representation of the working poor? Why or why not? Is he meant to be? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.