

Hard Times

Major characters

Mr. Gradgrind: Thomas Gradgrind is the notorious school board Superintendent in Dickens's novel *Hard Times* who is dedicated to the pursuit of profitable enterprise. His name is now used generically to refer to someone who is hard and only concerned with cold facts and numbers. He is an intense follower of Utilitarian ideas. He soon sees the error of these beliefs however, when his children's lives fall into disarray.

Mr. Bounderby: Josiah Bounderby is a business associate of Mr. Gradgrind. Given to boasting about being a self-made man, he employs many of the other central characters of the novel. He has risen to a position of power and wealth from humble origins (though not as humble as he claims). He marries Mr. Gradgrind's daughter Louisa, some 30 years his junior, in what turns out to be a loveless marriage. They have no children. Bounderby is callous, self-centred and ultimately revealed to be a liar and fraud.

Louisa: Louisa (Loo) Gradgrind, later Louisa Bounderby, is the eldest child of the Gradgrind family. She has been taught to suppress her feelings and finds it hard to express herself clearly, saying as a child that she has "unmanageable thoughts." After her unhappy marriage, she is tempted to adultery by James Harthouse, but resists him and returns to her father. Her rejection of Harthouse leads to a new understanding of life and of the value of emotions and the imagination. She reproaches her father for his dry and fact-based approach to the world and convinces him of the error of his ways.

Sissy Jupe: Cecilia (Sissy) Jupe is a circus girl of Sleary's circus, as well as a student of Thomas Gradgrind's very strict classroom. Sissy has her own set of values and beliefs which make her seem unintelligent in the Gradgrind household. At the end of the novel, when the Gradgrinds' philosophy of religiously adhering solely to facts breaks down, Sissy is the character who teaches them how to live.

Sissy Jupe is first introduced to the readers as Girl Number Twenty in Gradgrind's classroom. She struggles to keep up with Gradgrind's extreme reliance on the recitation of facts, and therefore is seen as not worthy of the school. Sissy is also representative of

creativity and wonderment because of her circus background, and those were things that the Gradgrind children were not allowed to engage in. With the urging of Josiah Bounderby, Mr. Gradgrind goes to inform Sissy's father that she can no longer attend his school.

Gradgrind and Bounderby arrive at the Pegasus' Arms, the Coketown public-house where Sissy, her father, and the rest of Sleary's circus were staying. While Sissy and her father were very close once, Mr. Jupe packed up and abandoned his daughter, leaving Sissy alone. In a moment of compassion, Mr. Gradgrind takes Sissy into his home and gives her a second chance at the school. Sissy continues to fall behind in the school, so Mr. Gradgrind keeps her at home to tend to his invalid wife.

While Sissy is the device of imagination and fantasy in the novel, she also serves as the voice of reason. The reason she cannot grasp the philosophy of Gradgrind's classroom is because she actually has a more realistic view of how the world should be perceived. After Louisa and Mr. Gradgrind come to terms with the fact that their way of life is not working, Sissy is the one they come to; she takes care of Louisa and helps her live a new, happy life.

Tom: Thomas (Tom) Gradgrind, Junior is the oldest son and second child of the Gradgrinds. Initially sullen and resentful of his father's Utilitarian education, Tom has a strong relationship with his sister Louisa. He works in Bounderby's bank (which he later robs), and turns to gambling and drinking. Louisa never ceases to adore Tom, and she aids Sissy and Mr. Gradgrind in saving her brother from arrest.

Stephen Blackpool: Stephen Blackpool is a worker at one of Bounderby's mills. He has a drunken wife who no longer lives with him but who appears from time to time. He forms a close bond with Rachael, a co-worker, whom he wishes to marry. After a dispute with Bounderby, he is dismissed from his work at the Coketown mills and, shunned by his former fellow workers, is forced to look for work elsewhere. While absent from Coketown, he is wrongly accused of robbing Bounderby's bank. On his way back to vindicate himself, he falls down a mine-shaft. He is rescued but dies of his injuries.

Other characters

Bitzer: Is a very pale classmate of Sissy's who is brought up on facts and taught to operate according to self-interest. He takes up a job in Bounderby's bank, and later tries to arrest Tom.

Rachael: Is the friend of Stephen Blackpool who attests to his innocence when he is accused of robbing Bounderby's bank by Tom. She is a factory worker, childhood friend of Blackpool's drunken and often absent wife, and becomes the literary tool for bringing the two parallel story lines together at the brink of Hell's Shaft in the final book.

Mrs. Sparsit: Is a widow who has fallen on hard times. She is employed by Bounderby, and is jealous when he marries Louisa, delighting in the belief that Louisa is later about to elope with James Harthouse. Her machinations are unsuccessful and she is ultimately sacked by Bounderby.

James Harthouse: Is an indolent, languid, upper-class gentleman, who attempts to woo Louisa.

Mrs. Gradgrind: The wife of Mr. Gradgrind, is an invalid who constantly complains. Tom Sr.'s apparent attraction to her is because she totally lacks 'fancy,' though she also appears to be unintelligent and without empathy for her children.

Mr. Sleary: The owner of the circus which employs Sissy's father. He speaks with a lisp. A kind man, he helps both Sissy and young Tom when they are in trouble.

Mrs. Pegler: An old woman who sometimes visits Coketown to observe the Bounderby estate. She is later revealed to be Bounderby's mother, proving his "rags-to-riches" story to be fraudulent.

Chapter One: Effects in the Bank

Book II continues about a year after the Bounderby marriage. Coketown is little different and the life of the poor is as hard as it was before. Nonetheless, Mr. Bounderby is convinced that the poor are after a "gold spoon and turtle soup" and luxury living. It is summer and the town is especially hot. Mrs. Sparsit sits upstairs in the Bank where she has been relocated and this is where she holds court with Bitzer, Bounderby's trusty assistant. Bitzer informs Mrs. Sparsit of the common laborers and their lack of values and their inability to save money and improve upon their condition. They both agree that the

morals of the poor are wanting. The relationship between Bitzer and Mrs. Sparsit is very much like a relationship between a spy and his employer.

Their gossip conversation is interrupted by the arrival of a stranger at the door. Mrs. Sparsit consents to see him mainly because she is curious as to who this is. The stranger is a very charming and elegantly dressed gentleman and he shares Mrs. Sparsit's class sympathies. After trading their casual observations on life, the two settle down to conversation and discuss the business at hand. The stranger is to see Mr. Bounderby; he has a letter of introduction that has come from Mr. Gradgrind. The stranger became acquainted with Mr. Gradgrind in London but this is his first time in Coketown and he is somewhat disgusted with the town.

He is however, very eager to eat Louisa and he is astonished to learn that Mr. Bounderby has married her; as he is a good three decades older than she is. Mrs. Sparsit assures the stranger that Louisa is not at all the hardened and unattractive academic that he has in mind. Later in the night, Mrs. Sparsit is thinking to herself and she exclaims: "O, you Fool!" but it is unclear precisely whom she means.

Analysis:

The tone is wrought with **sarcasm**. Dickens uses the word 'wonder' as irony because there is little wonder to be had in Coketown. The "evil eye" glaring over Coketown is as intense a foreshadowing of Bounderby's unraveling as any other image in the novel. The shroud is a symbol of death and dying, decay and destruction.

The **metaphor** of Babel refers to the Tower of Babel. This is an allusion to an Old Testament story that explains that the excessive pride of humans will eventually topple their enterprises. The image of hell and punishment is reinforced by the very sharp description of the city's climate as "frying in oil."

The use of the word "aspiring" is a pun that refers both to the upward motion of the smoke and the upward yearnings of the poor; if only the fortunes of the poor rose as easily as the smoke of the factory. A **metaphor** is employed when the fragility of the townspeople is understood by their being like "weak china."

In characterizing Mrs. Sparsit, Dickens takes her posture (always sitting and watching) and makes her into an equivalent of the Fates, much like Madame deFarge, a famous character from his novel *A Tale of Two Cities*. The scenes that revolve around Mrs. Sparsit are all about the trappings of social class and position and in these moments, even the tables are personified as having their "legs in an attitude."

Against the cliffhanger that centers on yet another new stranger's mysterious identity, Dickens offers some social commentary on the upper class conceptions of knowledge and education. In sharp contrast to the Gradgrinds, Mrs. Sparsit takes her lack of knowledge as a fashionable symptom of her simple virtue. Even as it makes little sense for lack of knowledge to be rewarded we also see that Sparsit is eager to gain information about the people around her. This interest in others affairs will eventually prove to be Sparsit's undoing.