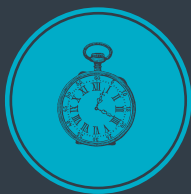


THE  
CONNELL GUIDE  
TO CHARLES DICKENS'S



*Hard Times*

“There’s now not a journey I make without taking with me one of the Connell Guides.”

JOANNA LUMLEY

ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE  
NOVEL IN ONE CONCISE VOLUME

*by Uttara Natarajan*

The  
Connell Guide  
to  
Charles Dickens's

---

# Hard Times

---

by  
Uttara Natarajan

# Contents

Introduction	4
A summary of the plot	6
What is <i>Hard Times</i> about?	10
Is <i>Hard Times</i> socialist?	21
How do we cope with Dickens's sentimentality?	29
Why is the novel so unsubtle?	40
Is <i>Hard Times</i> a realist novel?	56
Where's the sex?	71
Is Louisa in love with James Harthouse?	75
Is cleverness unwomanly?	80
What's the point of the circus?	90
What can we learn from the novel today?	95

## NOTES

<i>Jeremy Bentham on poetry and Push-Pin</i>	12
<i>The Great Reform Act and the Chartist movement</i>	22
<i>Victorian Manchester</i>	32
<i>J. Hillis Miller on Dickens's use of language</i>	46
<i>Ten facts about Hard Times</i>	52
<i>Political Gradgrindery</i>	56
<i>Astley's circus</i>	84
<i>Hard Times and ethical criticism</i>	100
<i>The critics on Hard Times</i>	102
<i>Bibliography</i>	106

# Introduction

*Hard Times* is Dickens's shortest novel, but despite this – or because of it – it's not his most readable. Published in weekly instalments from April to August 1854, it was his first return to weekly serialisation since *Barnaby Rudge* in 1841. (The four novels in the interim had all been published in monthly parts.) Later, as a single volume, it lagged far behind his previous fiction in sales figures. Dickens himself complained that he had found the weekly format “crushing”. As one contemporary reviewer, Richard Simpson, put it, “the story is stale, flat, and unprofitable; a mere dull melodrama, in which character is caricature, sentiment tinsel, and moral (if any) unsound”.

Although contrary views were expressed by such influential commentators as John Ruskin and George Bernard Shaw, the consensus on the book up to around the middle of the 20th century remained more or less in line with Simpson's view. The novel was generally taken to be Dickens's worst: overly didactic, overly schematic, and overly dogmatic, all faults unrelieved by the genius for characterisation and the capacity for humour that mark his greatest achievements in fiction.

The turning point in the critical assessments was F.R. Leavis's praise. In *The Great Tradition* (1948), Leavis adopts the other extreme position, that *Hard Times* is Dickens's sole contribution to

the great tradition of the English novel, displaying a moral seriousness lacking elsewhere in his more entertaining work: “It has a kind of perfection as a work of art that we don't associate with Dickens – a perfection that is one with the sustained and complete seriousness for which among his productions it is unique.” The stature gained by the novel from Leavis's estimate, whether disputed or confirmed by subsequent commentators, at least ensured that it was no longer overlooked. Nowadays, if it is still not Dickens's most readable book, it is certainly one of his most read. The name of its principal character, long absorbed into the English vocabulary, continues regularly to be invoked as shorthand for a rigid adherence to fact.

Moral seriousness is not a recommendation to all readers. But whether *Hard Times* works for its reader or not, it's hard to deny its impact. This is Dickens in full battle mode, and the force of his outrage demands our attention. *Hard Times*, he told his friend and mentor, Thomas Carlyle, “contains what I do devoutly hope will shake some people in a terrible mistake of these days, when so presented”. That the words “Gradgrind” and “Gradgrindian” have stayed in use as pejoratives, well into the 21st century, says something about his success in that purpose.

# A summary of the plot

## Book I

Thomas Gradgrind, recently retired from the hardware trade, is the owner of a model school, offering a modern, strictly factual, and Utilitarian education, in Coketown, an industrial town in the north of England. Among the school's pupils, Bitzer shows the greatest aptitude, and Sissy Jupe, the daughter of a circus clown, the least.

Gradgrind has five children, Louisa, Thomas (Tom), Jane, Adam Smith, and Malthus. Mrs Gradgrind is feeble and silly, parroting her husband's opinions without understanding them, and barely participating in the upbringing of their children. Gradgrind's best friend is Josiah Bounderby, a banker and manufacturer. Mrs Sparsit, a widow who has fallen from former affluence, presides over Bounderby's household.

Discovering that her father has run away from Sleary's Circus, where he had become increasingly unsuccessful as a performer, Sissy opts to leave the circus and enter the Gradgrind household, so as to complete her education, according to her father's wishes. In due course, Gradgrind becomes Member of Parliament for Coketown. Sissy's poor performance in school leads him eventually to discontinue her education, but she remains in his household. His eldest child, Louisa, marries Bounderby, older than her by many years.

Bounderby gives Tom a job at his bank.

Among the workers employed at a factory owned by Bounderby is Stephen Blackpool. Stephen is married to a degenerate and alcoholic wife, from whom, lacking financial means, he is unable to obtain a divorce. He is in love with Rachael, a working woman, who returns his love and whom he regards as his moral and spiritual guide. Following a visit to Bounderby, Stephen makes the acquaintance of an old woman, later named as Mrs Pegler, who expresses a great interest in and admiration for Bounderby.

## Book II

After Bounderby's marriage, Mrs Sparsit has moved to apartments at the bank, where Bitzer is now working as light porter. James Harthouse, a gentleman from an upper-class family, arrives in Coketown with a view to finding professional occupation there. He meets Louisa Bounderby, to whom he is immediately attracted, and quickly discovers that her only attachment is to her brother, Tom.

Because of a promise to Rachael, Stephen refuses to join the workers' union and is ostracised by his fellow-workers. He is subsequently sacked by Bounderby for criticising the way in which the workers are treated by their employers. Sorry for his ill-treatment, Louisa, along with Tom, visits Stephen to offer him financial assistance, and finds

that he is about to leave Coketown to seek work elsewhere. Tom asks Stephen to wait for a message from him in the vicinity of the bank in the evening before he leaves. Stephen does so, but, receiving no message, leaves Coketown.

James Harthouse gains an intimacy with Louisa, in the first place by showing an interest in Tom, who has a gambling habit and is heavily in debt. A robbery is discovered at the bank on the morning after Stephen leaves Coketown and suspicion falls upon him. Mrs Gradgrind dies. James Harthouse, watched by Mrs Sparsit, tries to persuade Louisa to elope with him. Instead, Louisa flees to her father and, after confronting Gradgrind with the failure of her marriage and her life, collapses.

### Book III

Recovering, Louisa notes the evidence of Sissy's beneficial influence everywhere in her father's household. Initially hostile to Sissy, she is soon reconciled to her. She remains with her father, permanently estranged from Bounderby. Sissy confronts James Harthouse and persuades him to leave Coketown for good.

Mrs Pegler is forcefully dragged into Bounderby's presence, in front of a large crowd of onlookers, by Mrs Sparsit, who has mistakenly associated her with the robbery. She turns out to be Bounderby's devoted and self-sacrificing

mother, giving the lie to the stories of childhood abuse and neglect that Bounderby has strenuously propagated.

Rachael writes to Stephen, asking him to return to clear his name, but he does not appear. Taking a walk in the fields outside Coketown, she and Sissy find signs that Stephen has fallen down the Old Hell Shaft, a disused mine pit. A rescue party is formed, and Stephen is lifted out, to die shortly afterwards. Before he dies, Stephen asks Gradgrind to clear his name, and indicates that Tom has the knowledge to do so. Louisa and Gradgrind are convinced of Tom's guilt in the robbery. Sissy, by this time guessing the truth, dispatches Tom to hide at Sleary's Circus, then performing in a town near Liverpool. Louisa, Gradgrind and Sissy follow him there. Just as Tom is about to get away to Liverpool, he is apprehended by Bitzer. Sleary engineers Tom's escape.

Mrs Sparsit is dismissed from Bounderby's employment. Brief details are given of the future lives of the characters: Mrs Sparsit, at the mercy of a tyrannical female relation; Bitzer, taking Tom's place at the Bank; Bounderby, dropping dead some years later on a Coketown street; Gradgrind, chastened; Tom, dying just as he is about to be reunited with his sister; Rachael, tending compassionately to Stephen's wife; Louisa, remaining unwed and childless; Sissy, a happy wife and mother.

## What is *Hard Times* about?

“What means this bitter discontent of the Working Classes? Whence comes it, whither goes it? Above all, at what price, on what terms, will it probably consent to depart from us and die into rest?” So asked Thomas Carlyle, to whom Dickens later dedicated *Hard Times*, in his influential pamphlet ‘Chartism’ (1839). To Carlyle, the spectre of revolution, raised by Chartism, the great workers’ movement in Britain in the first half of the 19th century, loomed large. The blame, as he and Dickens and many other contemporaries saw it, lay squarely with the two systems of thought that had come to dominate social relations: Political Economy and its near equivalent, Utilitarianism.

The first phrase, broadly associated with the economic theories of Adam Smith (1723-90) and David Ricardo (1772-1823), was shorthand for the argument that national prosperity is best furthered by allowing industrialists to maximise profits, unhampered, paradoxically, by any regard for social good. Equally, the principle of utility or “the greatest happiness of the greatest number”, proposed by Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) – calculating value on a statistical basis – makes self-interest the automatic tendency of the individual and the sole motive force of human endeavour.

Both systems treat humanity en masse, rather

than as a collection of individuals; both, in their antagonists’ perception at least, dismiss those aspects of human experience that are not quantifiable: imagination, creativity, our feelings for each other. Dickens’s caricature Benthamite is

*“Thomas Gradgrind, Sir. A man of realities. A man of facts and calculations... With a rule and a pair of scales, and the multiplication table always in his pocket, Sir, ready to weigh and measure any parcel of human nature, and tell you exactly what it comes to.” (I, ii)\**

His practising Political Economist is “Josiah Bounderby of Coketown”.

The accuracy, or lack of it, of Dickens’s view of the systems he attacks has exercised a number of commentators from his own time to ours. From the novel’s perspective, at least, this is beside the point. Only a few years prior to the publication of *Hard Times*, a revised model of political economy, based on a more sympathetic view of the working class, was proposed by John Stuart Mill in his *Principles of Political Economy* (1848), of which Dickens was certainly aware; later, similarly, Mill’s *Utilitarianism* (1861/1863) set out a substantially qualified version of Bentham’s, to include exactly those aspects of human experience – poetry, the arts, imagination – shut out in Dickens’s

*\*Throughout this book, the numbers in brackets refer to the chapters from which the quotations are taken.*