CLASSICS LIBRARY · STORY MAP

Hard Times

Charles Dickens · *1854* · *original English text*

In Coketown, Mr. Gradgrind will have nothing but Facts in the school and in the home. His children are raised on a system that starves wonder, and the factory town around them runs on the same hard accounting. Dickens sets the wisdom of the Head against the wisdom of the Heart, and asks what a life costs when it has been measured only in a straight line.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

What becomes of a child, a marriage, and a town when nothing is planted but Facts—and can a later wisdom of the Heart still mend what the Head has spoiled?

"NOW, what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life."
Thomas Gradgrind · Book the First, Chapter I

The system produces Bitzer, Louisa's wrecked marriage, Tom's theft, and a father who must say he has supposed the head to be all-sufficient. Sissy Jupe, who cannot define a horse as a unit, keeps the wisdom Gradgrind rooted out. The book does not throw facts away; it refuses to let them be the one thing needful.

KEY CHARACTERS

Thomas Gradgrind
A man of Facts who lives to unlearn the one thing he thought needful

Louisa Gradgrind
His daughter, starved of wonder, nearly lost to a loveless marriage and a tempter

Tom Gradgrind
The whelp, spoiled by the system and by his sister's sacrifice, who robs the bank

Sissy Jupe
The circus child who cannot define a horse, and who keeps a heart the school cannot measure

Josiah Bounderby
The banker-millowner, a bully who boasts of having made himself from nothing, and lies about it

Stephen Blackpool
A mill-hand of stubborn honesty, crushed between law, labor, and another man's crime

Rachael
Stephen's faithful friend, a light in Coketown's smoke

James Harthouse
A gentleman without convictions, who would treat Louisa's emptiness as an opportunity

Bitzer
The model pupil, all fact, who knows his self-interest perfectly

HEAD AND HEART

> *"NOW, what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life."*
> **Thomas Gradgrind** · Book the First, Chapter I

> *"Some persons hold ... that there is a wisdom of the Head, and that there is a wisdom of the Heart."*
> **Thomas Gradgrind** · Book the Third, Chapter I

01 The One Thing Needful

BOOK THE FIRST, CHAPTERS I—V

A school, a model town, and a girl who cannot answer in facts.

- Gradgrind opens the book by demanding Facts, and the rooting out of everything else
- In the school, "Girl number twenty"—Sissy Jupe—cannot give the official definition of a horse; Bitzer can
- Coketown is described as a town of machinery and tall chimneys, all fact, all work
- Sissy's father, a circus man, has gone; Gradgrind and Bounderby take her in on terms

> *"NOW, what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life."*
> **Thomas Gradgrind** · Book the First, Chapter I

02 Louisa and the Banker

BOOK THE FIRST, CHAPTERS VI—XVI

A daughter who has been taught not to wonder is given in a barren marriage.

- Louisa and Tom, starved of fancy, look into the circus and are caught; their father is shaken, not yet changed
- Bounderby, the self-made bully of Coketown, wants Louisa; she has no language for love
- She asks her father if she is to marry, and he treats it as a question of fact and advantage
- She accepts Bounderby for Tom's sake, and her mother's death is soon followed by a marriage without joy

03 Stephen's Oath

BOOK THE FIRST, CHAPTER X THROUGH BOOK THE SECOND

A mill-hand who will not join a Combination, and cannot be heard by the law.

- Stephen Blackpool, a weaver, is tied to a destructive marriage the law will not loose, and loves Rachael
- He will not swear himself to Slackbridge's union, and is then shunned by both sides
- Bounderby dismisses him; Tom uses him as cover for a robbery of the bank
- Stephen leaves town under a cloud, promising to come back and clear his name

04 A Temptation at the Bank

BOOK THE SECOND

James Harthouse finds the empty place in Louisa's life, and Mrs. Sparsit watches.

- Harthouse, a bored gentleman, comes to Coketown as a political ornament and stays to seduce Louisa's misery
- Mrs. Sparsit, Bounderby's discarded housekeeper, imagines a staircase down which Louisa is descending
- Louisa comes to the edge, then flees to her father instead of to Harthouse
- Gradgrind, seeing his daughter broken, begins to doubt the system he has lived by

05 The Wisdom of the Heart

BOOK THE THIRD

A confession, a pit, and a late schooling.

- Gradgrind admits that some persons hold there is a wisdom of the Head and a wisdom of the Heart, and that he has not supposed so
- Sissy quietly sends Harthouse away; Bounderby will not be taught and casts Louisa off
- Stephen, returning, falls into an unused pit; he is found, clears himself, and dies
- Tom is got away, Bitzer nearly recaptures him in the name of Facts, and Gradgrind must live with what his teaching has made

> *"Some persons hold ... that there is a wisdom of the Head, and that there is a wisdom of the Heart."*
> **Thomas Gradgrind** · Book the Third, Chapter I

Grades 9–12
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Wisdom of the Heart | Truth and System | Wonder | Justice | Industry and Mercy | Home

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 9–12

1. The first chapter is a program, not only a joke. "Plant nothing else, and root out everything else" is the book's crime, stated in Gradgrind's own voice.
2. Sissy's failure to define a horse is a moral test. Bitzer's correct answer is the book's warning of what a successful education can be.
3. Bounderby's self-made story is a lie; the facts, when they come, undo him. A system of Facts is not the same as truth-telling.
4. Stephen's refusal of the oath, and his fall in the pit, are the book's picture of an honest man with no earthly advocate.
5. Gradgrind's late sentence about the wisdom of the Head and of the Heart is a repentance, not a neat slogan. He cannot undo all he has made.
6. This edition uses typographic single quotes around dialogue, and "NOW" in capitals at the opening. The words inside are the quote.

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