

## Lecture 3: *Hard Times* by Charles Dickens

**Charles DICKENS** born on February 7, 1812 in Portsmouth, England, and died on June 9, 1870, was a British author, social reformer and satirist. He grew up in a poor family which obliged him to go through the experience of child labor. The latter deeply influenced his writing as most of his protagonists were young orphans who struggled for survival. He began writing as a journalist where he published short stories. His works were published in a serialized form, which allowed him to understand his audience and adapt to their demands. His first successful work was *The Pickwick Papers* (1837), after which he engaged in novel writing. His novels are expressions of satire and social criticism, depicting themes related to the lives of the working class, poverty, industrialization, education, and inequality. His use of irony and humor in his social satire contributed in attracting a higher audience for his works. He crafts his characters in a creative way that they became iconic figures in the literary scene, like Oliver Twist, Fagin as the villain figure, Ebenezer Scrooge (from *A Christmas Carol*), and David Copperfield.

### Major Works

1. *Oliver Twist* (1838)
2. *David Copperfield* (1850)
3. *Great Expectations* (1860)
4. *Bleak House* (1853)
5. *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859)
6. *Hard Times* (1854)

### *Hard Times*, (plot, themes, characters)

This Realist Moralistic novel, published in 1854, is about England during the Industrial revolution. It opposes the two philosophies of rationalism (depicted as fact) and emotion (depicted as Fancy) in the two characters Mr Thomas Gradgrind (schoolmaster belonging to the upper class) and Sissy Jupe, a young girl belonging to the working class. It shows a number of characters inspired from the Victorian society and belonging to different social classes, set in the fictional city of "Coketown", described as the "triumph of fact".

The novel attacks the Enlightenment philosophy which has created social inequalities and its direct consequences, merely Utilitarianism. It shows the relationships between the rich and the poor, and highlights the different ways in which industrialization allowed exploitation and dishonesty to prevail. The toxic atmosphere is also depicted in the description of the city Coketown, which creates a dystopian environment with its coloured and ill-smelling river, black brick that was originally red, pollution, and routine.

Mr Gradgrind, the most prominent figure in the novel, believes in the philosophy of fact and utilitarianism, upon which he raises his children Louisa and Tom, and which he imposes in his school. He is described as a man of "realities, ... fact and calculation". He only believes in rational thinking and in rational terms and never doubts his principle nor accepts any other ideology. Mr Gradgrind is convinced with this principle and does not see any harm in his approach, although it makes his behavior towards other people inhumane and mechanical. He instructs the teacher in his school to teach children only fact and to replace everything else they have learnt before.

The author uses the title "Murdering the Innocents" for chapter two, because he wants to attract the reader's attention to the impact of erasing every childhood memory and replacing it with fact. Other references to violence are made within the same chapter, wherein the children are referred to as "pitchers", and "vessels" that are ready to be filled with "Gallons of fact". Mr Gradgrind is described as a "Canon loaded to the muzzle ready to blow them out of the regions of childhood at one discharge", showing thus that imposing fact on these children is an erasure of their innocence and a metaphorical murder, by which they make insensitive adults (to return to the romantic belief of William Blake and Jean Jacque Rousseau that childhood innocence leads to creative adult but child labor and industrialization lead to corrupt adult).

Mr Gradgrind considers anything emotional irrational and ridiculous. His encounter with Sissy Jupe (his opponent in ideology) leaves a traumatizing impact on her. Mr Gradgrind mocks the little girl when she says that she had hope to see her father again, because hope was inexistent to him. Consequently he decides to raise her

in his own house with his children to teach her fact yet she managed to show the contrast between her thoughts and those of his children by living with them.

Mr Gradgrind's closest friend, Mr Bounderby, marries his daughter Louiza and hires his son Tom Gradgrind to work in his bank. This latter is a representation of the utilitarian philosophy in his management policy in his bank. He also serves to show Mr Gradgrind his mistakes in raising his children as both of them come to the most difficult time of their lives when they meet Mr Bounderby. Louiza realizes that she loves someone from the working class even though she is married to Bounderby (who is older than her). Her affair, then heartbreak, with James Harthouse leads her to realize that her entire life was senseless and inhumane. She confronts her father about his philosophy and blames him for destroying her life and that of her brother.

Tom Gradgrind robs a bank and lays the blame on Stephen Blackpool, a worker whose life reflects the difficulties of the working class during the nineteenth century. Stephen is said to look old despite his young age. He is accused of greediness by Mr Bounderby when he approaches him to speak about the workers' rights (the Hands), then is put in jail instead of Tom.

At the end Mr Gradgrind realizes that his philosophy was wrong and starts working to recover for his mistakes. Sissy spreads happiness around the people who surround her; she marries and takes care of Louisa. Tom escapes the country and Mr Bounderby dies alone.

### Text Analysis

**Charles Dickens, *Hard Times* (1854)**

**BOOK THE FIRST “SOWING”**

**Chapter 1 “The One Thing Needful”**

*‘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. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts: nothing else will ever be of any service to them. This is the principle on which I bring up my own children, and this is the principle on which I bring up these children. Stick to Facts, sir!’*

*The scene was a plain, bare, monotonous vault of a school-room, and the speaker’s square forefinger emphasized his observations by underscoring every sentence with a line on the schoolmaster’s sleeve...The speaker, and the schoolmaster,*

*and the third grown person present, all backed a little, and swept with their eyes the inclined plane of little vessels then and there arranged in order, ready to have imperial gallons of facts poured into them until they were full to the brim.*

## **Chapter 2 “Murdering The Innocents”**

*THOMAS GRADGRIND, sir. A man of realities. A man of facts and calculations. A man who proceeds up on the principle that two and two are four, and nothing over, and who is not to be talked into allowing for anything over. Thomas Gradgrind, sir - peremptorily Thomas - Thomas Gradgrind. 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. It is a mere question of figures, a case of simple arithmetic. You might hope to get some other nonsensical belief into the head of George Gradgrind, or Augustus Gradgrind, or John Gradgrind, or Joseph Gradgrind (all supposititious, non-existent persons), but into the head of Thomas Gradgrind - no, sir! In such terms Mr. Gradgrind always mentally introduced himself, whether to his private circle of acquaintance, or to the public in general. In such terms, no doubt, substituting the words ‘boys and girls,’ for ‘sir,’ Thomas Gradgrind now presented Thomas Gradgrind to the little pitchers before him, who were to be filled so full of facts.*

*Indeed, as he eagerly sparkled at them from the cellarage before mentioned, he seemed a kind of cannon loaded to the muzzle with facts, and prepared to blow them clean out of the regions of childhood at one discharge. He seemed a galvanizing apparatus, too, charged with a grim mechanical substitute for the tender young imaginations that were to be stormed away.*

*‘Girl number twenty,’ said Mr. Gradgrind, squarely pointing with his square forefinger, ‘I don’t know that girl. Who is that girl?’*

*‘Sissy Jupe, sir,’ explained number twenty, blushing, standing up, and curtsying. ‘Sissy is not a name,’ said Mr. Gradgrind. ‘Don’t call yourself Sissy. Call yourself Cecilia.’*

*Give me your definition of a horse.’*

*(Sissy Jupe thrown into the greatest alarm by this demand.)*

*‘Girl number twenty unable to define a horse!’ said Mr. Gradgrind, for the general behoof of all the little pitchers. ‘Girl number twenty possessed of no facts, in reference to one of the commonest of animals! Some boy’s definition of a horse. Bitzer, yours.’*

*... ‘Quadruped. Graminivorous. Forty teeth, namely twenty-four grinders, four eye-teeth, and twelve incisive. Sheds coat in the spring; in marshy countries, sheds hoofs, too. Hoofs hard, but requiring to be shod with iron. Age known by marks in mouth.’ Thus (and much more) Bitzer.*

*‘Now girl number twenty,’ said Mr. Gradgrind. ‘You know what a horse is.’*

**Chapter 5 “The Keynote”**

*COKETOWN, to which Messrs. Bounderby and Gradgrind now walked, was a triumph of fact; it had no greater taint of fancy in it than Mrs. Gradgrind herself. Let us strike the key-note, Coketown, before pursuing our tune.*

*It was a town of red brick, or of brick that would have been red if the smoke and ashes had allowed it; but as matters stood, it was a town of unnatural red and black like the painted face of a savage. It was a town of machinery and tall chimneys, out of which interminable serpents of smoke trailed themselves for ever and ever, and never got uncoiled. It had a black canal in it, and a river that ran purple with ill-smelling dye, and vast piles of building full of windows where there was a rattling and a trembling all day long, and where the piston of the steam-engine worked monotonously up and down, like the head of an elephant in a state of melancholy madness. It contained several large streets all very like one another, and many small streets still more like one another, inhabited by people equally like one another, who all went in and out at the same hours, with the same sound upon the same pavements, to do the same work, and to whom every day was the same as yesterday and to-morrow, and every year the counterpart of the last and the next.*