

Charles Dickens' Biography

Charles John Huffam Dickens was born February 7, 1812, in Portsmouth but left it in infancy. From 1822 he lived in London, until, in 1860, he moved permanently to a country house near Chatham.

His origins were middle class but in 1824 the family reached bottom. Charles had been withdrawn from school and was now set to manual work in a factory and his father went to prison for debt. These shocks deeply affected Charles.

Three years later he became a clerk in a solicitor's office, then a short-handed reporter in the lawcourts, and finally, like other members of his family, a parliamentary and newspaper reporter.

In 1833 he began contributing stories and descriptive essays to magazines and newspapers; these attracted attention and were reprinted as *Sketches by Boz* (1836), seven weeks later the first instalment of *Pickwick Papers* appears.

In April 1836 he had married Catherine, eldest daughter of a respected Scottish journalist and a man of letters, George Hogarth.

In the following years he published *Oliver Twist*, *Nicholas Nicklaby*, *The Old Curiosity Shop* and *Barnaby Rudge*. He then took a five-month vacation in America, receiving honours as a literary celebrity but he found more vulgarity and sharp practice to detest than social arrangements to admire. Some of these feelings appear in *American Notes* and *Martin Chuzzlewit*. Later appear *Dombey and Son* and *David Copperfield*.

In 1850 Dickens published his own magazine *Household Words* and he contributed some serials *Hard Times*, *A Tale of Two Cities* and *Great Expectations*.

His health remained precarious after the punishment American tour and was further impaired by his addiction to giving the strenuous *Sikes and Nancy* reading. His farewell readings tour was abandoned when, in April 1869, he collapsed. He began writing another novel, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, which is already unfinished and gave a short farewell season of readings in London.

He died suddenly, on June 9, 1870, and was buried in Westminster Abbey.

Other Major Works:

– Novels: *Bleak House* (1853); *Little Dorrit* (1857); *Our Mutual Friend* (1865).

– Stories: A volume entitled *Christmas Stories* (1850–1868).

– Christmas Books: *A Christmas Carol* (1843); *The Chimes* (1845); *The Cricket on the Heart* (1846); *The Battle of Life* (1846); *The Haunted Man* (1848).

– Others Works: *Sketches of Young Gentlemen* (1838); *Sketches of Young Couples* (1840); *A Child's History of England* (1852–54); etc.

Summary: Hard Times.

Thomas Gradgrind is an important citizen of Coketown, an imaginary industrial town in the north of England. He has two children, Tom and Louisa, and brings them up according to his belief in practical necessity, denying them all imaginative or emotional outlets. Gradgrind adopts Sissy Jupe, after her father (a performer in Sleary's circus) deserts her.

Some years later Gradgrind marries his daughter to Josiah Bounderby, a local bank-owner and manufacturer. Louisa never loves Bounderby, but does love her brother, Tom, and this is part of the reason why she marries, for Tom is employed in Bounderby's bank, and she thinks that by marrying Bounderby she will increase Tom's chances of promotion. But Tom is an idle waster, and eventually robs the bank, trying to place the blame on an innocent factory-hand, Stephen Blackpool.

In the meantime, a young, unscrupulous politician visits Coketown and tries to seduce Louisa. This experience suddenly awakes Louisa to the fact that she abhors Bounderby, and she runs to her father for protection. This likewise brings Gradgrind to his senses, and he is forced to recognise the foolishness of his beliefs about practical necessity being more important than emotions.

In the meantime, suspicion for the bank robbery shifts from Blackpool to Tom, and he is speedily bundled out of the country with the assistance of Sleary's circus performers. Blackpool, having been sacked from Bounderby's factory, and now working in another town some sixty miles off, hears that he is suspected of the bank robbery and attempts to walk to Coketown to prove his innocence. But he falls into a disused mineshaft on the way, and, although discovered some days later by Sissy Jupe, he dies from his injuries.

Bounderby continues to live in his bank with his housekeeper, the detestable Mrs Sparsit, and dies of a fit in Coketown High Street five years later, while the sisterly bond between Louisa and Sissy grows ever stronger over the years, with Louisa doting on Sissy's children. Louisa herself, though, is never to remarry.

Main Characters

In Dickens' novels there is always a conflict between money and love. We can see this conflict in the main characters in the novel. There is a vast difference between the people with money (such as Gradgrind and Bounderby) and the people without money (such as Sissy Jupe and Stephen Blackpool). Thomas Gradgrind comes from a good family and he is a schoolmaster. He is the biological father of Tom and Louisa, and adoptive father of Sissy Jupe. He is a serious, cold and calculating man with capitalist ideas. The learning at his school is strict, partial and mechanical; is a dehumanising education.

Josiah Bounderby is a businessman without scruples, every thing he does is for his own advantage. He personifies the power of the nineteenth century bourgeoisie. In fact he is a self-made-man. He lives with his housekeeper, Mrs Sparsit, who is devotee of the power from the past, from the aristocracy and the privilege. With these two characters, Dickens recalls the nature of the new leading class.

Money is at the centre of the story, and it is the desire for power which money brings that provides the climax to the story. Tom attempts to steal money from Bounderby's bank, because in stealing that money he hopes he will possess the kind of power already possessed by Bounderby and by his father.

I have realised that money, and the power that it brings, is inevitably corrupting and causes the suffering of innocent people: Blackpool dies as a direct result of Tom robbing the bank, and Louisa sells herself to Bounderby in the hope that this will benefit Tom's career. Money not only physically controls people's lives (by forcing them to work in dangerous factories) but also corrupts the emotions – Louisa prostitutes herself to Bounderby's money and power, until shocked into recognising the importance of love and her emotions.

In *Hard Times* the central conflict is located in the opposition between the world of money, affectation and self-interest (represented by Gradgrind and Bounderby), and the world of love and a natural simplicity of spirit (represented by the circus and Sissy Jupe that even going to Gradgrind's school she is as spontaneous girl full of fantasy and imagination).

Between these two extremes are the children and innocents; like Blackpool: a humble worker who belongs to the low social class, and is known for his good sense; who all have the potential to partake of the virtues of the circus world, but who are all made to suffer under Gradgrind's and Bounderby's beliefs about the value of practical necessity.

Structure of the Novel

Hard Times was first published in weekly serial form between April and August 1854, and comes just about half way through Dickens's writing career. Now this novel consists of three books, each one of them divided into chapters. This type of division into three sections was a very extended practice in the Victorian age.

The titles of these three books are: the first one *Sowing*, the second one *Reaping*, and the third one *Garnering*. These names have tried to reflect the social climate of the period; sowing and reaping, prize and punishment.

In the first book Dickens introduces us the characters, the second book is the exposition of the novel and finally at the end we get to know the denouement in the third book.

Each book consists in chapters, *Sowing* has sixteen, *Reaping* has twelve and *Garnering* has nine chapters.

Narrative point of view and Literary style

Dickens is an outside narrator. He relates the story like an omnipotent storyteller. This novel *Hard Times* gains in quality through a global vision about the social problem of the time, but this quality suffers the effects of his social prejudices. A question of law is that the circus is the heart of Dickens, his good wishes, his Christmas philosophy

Dickens projects in his novel the ideological conflicts between the middle class and the low social class. Dickens tried in *Hard Times* to reach the root of all society's problems. It could be said that he is focusing on the corrupting power of money, and the way in which it can poison both the physical and the emotional parts of people's lives.

Critics have often seen *Hard Times* as not truly Dickensian: it lacks the sentimentality, jollity and grotesquely of the earlier novels, yet is not really as serious and probing as the later social novels.

Hard Times is one of the novels that is much darker than its predecessors, he has certainly found in his fiction the response of an acute, knowledgeable, and concerned observer to the social and political developments of the moving age.

In this novel he is emotionally more tragic, the satire is harsher, the humour less genial and abundant. Technically is more coherent, plot is more fully related, and theme is expressed through a more insistent use of imagery and symbols.

There is a comic figure, Mrs Sparsit, like in the first novels, although in these years figures of this type are less frequent. Characterisation also is more subordinate to the general purpose and design, Dickens presents characters of great complexity who provoke more complex responses in the reader. Even the juvenile leads, who had usually been thinly conceived conventional figures, are now more complicated in their make-up and less easily rewarded by good fortune.

Personal Opinion

The effect of *Hard Times* may be to encourage the readers to look more critically at our own society, since the novel is presenting that society as little more than an elaborate charade, founded on the most questionable moral and economic principles. The novel achieves this effect by telling a story with characters who are nothing like real people in the real world. The comic characters in Dickens's novel are not real characters even in the sense that characters in a novel can be real. They are caricatures or types who allow normally hidden, basic human desires and failings to be exaggerated to comic proportions and made fun of. But there is a serious side to all this, since we see, in this view of the world, some of the essential characteristics and failings of our own society.

The novel offers an impression of the potentially poisoning and corrupting effect of the world of money and political and economic systems upon the natural love and affection we have for our fellow humans.

An interest thing to notice about this novel is the great quantity of dialect used by some characters. This point difficult notably the reader because Dickens only writes the phonetic features of Cockney– <wi'>(with); <fro'>(from); <ashes>(asks); <monny>(many);etc. And is for this question that it was almost impossible to understand everything.

Bibliography

- *Hard Times*, Charles Dickens. Editorial Alhambra.
- *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. University of Chicago.
- *Charles Dickens: A Critical Study*. G. R. Gissing.
- *The Life of Charles Dickens*. John Foster.