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Hard Times

CHARLES DICKENS



COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

HARD TIMES

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Charles Dickens

Introduction and Notes by
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HARD TIMES

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Wordsworth Classics are inexpensive editions designed to appeal to the general reader and students. We commissioned teachers and specialists to write broad-ranging, jargon-free Introductions and to provide Notes that would assist the understanding of our readers, rather than interpret the stories for them. In the same spirit, because the pleasures of reading are inseparable from the surprises, secrets and revelations that all narratives contain, we strongly advise you to enjoy this book before turning to the Introduction.

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INTRODUCTION

'I am three parts mad, and the fourth delirious, with perpetual rushing at *Hard Times*,' wrote Dickens in a letter to his friend and later biographer John Forster on 14 July 1854.¹ His shortest novel, often labelled his industrial novel, *Hard Times* was serialised, weekly, in his magazine *Household Words* between 1 April and 12 August 1854. It was then published in one volume in August, after the final serialisation, in total some 110,000 words written in just over five months, alongside all his other work and hectic activities. Dickens's usual publication method was in nineteen independent monthly numbers (the last a

1 *The Pilgrim Edition of the Letters of Charles Dickens* edited by M. House, G. Storey, and K. Tillotson, Vol. VII, Oxford University Press, 1993, p. 369, hereafter referred to in parentheses as *PL*, with volume and page number. All works cited in the footnotes will also be listed in the Bibliography.

double number and so effectively twenty), each four times as long as his weekly *Hard Times* instalment. No wonder then that he complained vociferously about the 'CRUSHING' difficulty of space and lack of 'elbow-room' (*PL*, VII, 282).

Although *Hard Times* is Dickens's shortest novel, it is impressively wide-ranging. In addition to economic and philosophical theories, industrialism and education, Dickens looks at Coketown – his fictional industrial town – and its characteristics, the family, marriage, divorce laws, class, Parliament and the new industrial seats, and he urges the need for imagination and entertainment, embodied here in the circus. Above all, linking these various strands, he offers a powerful picture of two opposed ways of seeing and thinking about the world. The dominant picture is of materialist (mainly factory-owner Bounderby), 'statistical', theory-blinded (mainly Utilitarian Gradgrind) thinking; Sissy Jupe, daughter of the circus, whom Dickens designated 'Power of Affection' in his working notes for the novel, is the main representative of the alternative attitude. *Hard Times* was written in a great burst of energy and it left Dickens exhausted. His single-minded drive, the book's brevity and the short writing period account for a pared-down concentration and economy in the writing, very different from *Bleak House* which preceded it and *Little Dorrit* which followed, and which readers have either admired or regretted since its first publication.

There was a dual impetus behind the book: immediate and practical on the one hand, long-meditated and political-philosophical on the other. There was a drop in the profits and circulation of *Household Words*, the weekly magazine Dickens had started in 1850 to entertain and instruct, and to further the cause of social reform, and 'there is such a fixed idea on the part of my printers and copartners in *Household Words* that a story by me, continued from week to week, would make some unheard-of effect with it, that I am going to write one' (*PL*, VII, 256). (They were right; sales rose dramatically.) As far back as 1838, when he had first seen factory conditions in Manchester, Dickens had sworn 'to strike the heaviest blow in my power' (*PL*, I, 484) for those toiling there. He stated his aim strongly and explicitly during the writing of *Hard Times*, for example in a letter to Carlyle asking permission to dedicate the single-volume edition to him: 'It contains what I do devoutly hope will shake some people in a terrible mistake of these days' (*PL*, VII, 367) and in a letter to his friend Charles Knight, representative of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge and a moderate Utilitarian: 'My satire is against those who see figures and averages, and nothing else – the representatives of the wickedest and most enormous vice of this time – the men who, through long years to come, will do

more to damage the real useful truths of political economy, than I could do (if I tried) in my whole life . . . ' (*PL*, vii, 492).

Thomas Gradgrind, hardware manufacturer, founder of a model school and later MP for Coketown, together with his factory-owner friend and associate Josiah Bounderby, represent this vice in *Hard Times*, and the story centres mainly on the Gradgrind family, whose lives come to mingle with that of Dickens's representative industrial worker Stephen Blackpool. Dickens's major targets of attack are the Science of Political Economy as it was called, and the philosophy of Utilitarianism, whose main representative in Britain was Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832), and which was particularly influential from 1830-50. It was based on the concept that actions were good in so far as they helped to bring about the Greatest Happiness of the Greatest Number. 'At the same time the Utilitarians deplored interference with private rights. Hence, while supporting governmental action over problems of destitution or health, they opposed all controls of trade or commerce.'²

According to the prevailing Science of Political Economy, the pursuit of individual self-interest brings benefit to all, and in the words of Nicholas Coles, in practice, 'under the pressures of a capitalist economy, and particularly since the felicific calculus required a numerical index of pleasure, the concept of "pleasure" (or happiness or good) became attenuated to financial gain, the form of self-interest which in political-economic theory was taken to be the motor of industrial progress'.³ This is reflected in the novel in the retort of Bitzer, model product of Gradgrind's model school, in the plot denouement, when Gradgrind appeals in vain to Bitzer's compassion . . . 'I am sure you know that the whole social system is a question of self-interest. What you must always appeal to, is a person's self-interest. It's your only hold. We are so constituted. I was brought up in that catechism when I was very young, sir, as you are aware' (p. 226). Sacrosanct laws of supply and demand allow market forces to determine working hours and wages; there is a *laissez-faire* policy; and the prosperity of Britain depends upon high profits and cheap labour. The latter part of Dickens's statement to Charles Knight suggests his attack is aimed in particular at the coarsening and simplification of this 'science'; however, these 'real useful truths' of Political Economy, whatever Dickens

2 Alan Palmer, *Dictionary of Modern History* (Penguin, Harmondsworth 1962, p. 339

3 Nicholas Coles, 'The Politics of *Hard Times*: Dickens the Novelist versus Dickens the Reformer', *Dickens Studies Annual*, Vol. 15, 1986, p. 153. Hereafter surname only will be used.

may have considered them to be, are not represented in *Hard Times* which on the contrary offers a wholesale attack.

Through the figures of Gradgrind and Bounderby Dickens condemns the alliance between Utilitarian ethics and *laissez-faire* economics: the ethos of industrial capitalism. Like Carlyle, Ruskin and many others, Dickens deplored this ethos and the attitudes it appeared to create and sanction: selfishness, antagonism between masters and men, the belief that appalling conditions were justified by 'scientific' laws, and the treatment of workers (revealingly referred to as 'Hands'), seen as mere units in a calculation, and subjected to vigorous and oppressive analysis and control. Because, for example, few of them are church-goers, 'there was a native organisation in Coketown itself, whose members were to be heard of in the House of Commons every session, indignantly petitioning for acts of parliament that should make these people religious by main force' (p. 19). Then come the Teetotal Society and the chemist and the druggist with their 'tabular statements' (p. 19) about drunkenness and the taking of opium. Gradgrind and Bounderby, Dickens goes on to tell us, could furnish more such statements, 'illustrated by cases they had known and seen, from which it clearly appeared – in short, it was the only clear thing in the case – that these same people were a bad lot altogether, gentlemen' (p. 20). Dickens then uses heavy irony to stress the already mentioned vehement opposition on the part of manufacturers to all controls. The factory owners, for example 'were ruined when . . . inspectors considered it doubtful whether they were quite justified in chopping people up with their machinery; they were utterly undone, when it was hinted that perhaps they need not always make quite so much smoke' (p. 87).

As his letters tell us, 'tabular statements', or statistics, are the subject of one of Dickens's most heartfelt and powerful attacks in the novel. Though in much of his non-fiction (such as articles and speeches), Dickens applauds statistics as a means of information-gathering widely and constructively used by nineteenth-century reformers, and in fields such as sanitary reform statistics might be neutral instruments, *Hard Times* eloquently shows the way in which they can also operate as an approach that is deeply class-biased, partial and censorious. ('"Look how you . . . writes of us, and talks of us . . . and how yo are awlus right, and how we are awlus wrong"' (p. 118) as Blackpool puts it to Bounderby, when in his second interview he tells him of the workers' grievances.) When Gradgrind's daughter, statistically educated Louisa, meets Blackpool in his home for the first time, Dickens lists the Hands' characteristics as taught to Louisa, the Hands seen as a dehumanised mass:

something that was a little pinched when wheat was dear, and overate itself when wheat was cheap; something that increased at such a rate of percentage, and yielded such another percentage of crime, and such another percentage of pauperism . . . something that occasionally rose like a sea, and did some harm and waste (chiefly to itself), and fell again. [p. 124]

Coles points out how similar this is in tone and in conclusions to Kay's findings (1832) on Manchester's working class (labelled for example as 'generally lazy, drunken, irreligious, licentious, improvident'), and he pinpoints Dickens's critique as being

against statistics as a form of social knowledge, a way of knowing which necessarily constitutes the object of its knowledge – in this case the working class and their conditions of life – in particular ways and which thereby dictates particular approaches to it. It is statistics as what Michel Foucault would call a disciplinary technology of knowledge, as a mechanism for moral and political surveillance and restraint, which I believe centrally engages Dickens here.⁴

Dickens also satirises a dubious use of averages as when Sissy relates to Louisa some of her failings in the model school: "Now this school-room is a Nation. And in this nation, there are fifty millions of money . . . Girl number twenty, isn't this a prosperous nation, and a'n't you in a thriving state?" . . . "I thought I couldn't know whether it was a prosperous nation or not . . . unless I knew who had got the money . . ." (p. 45). In vivid shorthand fashion Dickens raises here the crucial question of wealth distribution.

Control of workers is paralleled by control of working-class children through the education system. Dickens shows the interrelation of political and educational ideologies: children, like workers, are treated as units; both must accept harshly limited lives. Dickens was highly topical here because a training programme designed to produce a rapid expansion in the number of qualified teachers had been set up in 1846 and the first batch of 'certificated teachers' emerged in 1853. Dickens's critique of the arid training and subsequent teaching, with an excessive emphasis on memorising and cramming, and a lack of imagination, were widely shared. Robin Gilmour's illuminating article on 'The Gradgrind School: Political Economy in the Classroom' shows the accuracy of Dickens's portrayal as far as the Birkbeck Schools, first established in London in 1848, and similar 'rational' schools were

concerned. These schools set out to teach obedience to economic laws; children from the age of seven were to be taught such qualities as 'industry, knowledge, skill, economy, temperance, respect for property and forethought'.⁵ With revolutions in Europe in the year of the first Birkbeck school, and with Chartism at home, it was felt to be 'imperative that the people be taught respect for the inevitable community of interest that bound a commercial society together' (Gilmour, p. 214). An 1851 report on such a school gives a verbatim account of an examination there.

'Does the capitalist receive from the labourer an exact equivalent of the wages he gives him, or something more? – Something more. What do you call this something more? – Profit. Is it to the advantage of the labourer, as well as the capitalist, that the capitalist should receive a profit? – Yes . . . Is the labourer, then, who has no store, dependent on the capitalist? . . . Yes. Is this the result of a natural or an artificial law? – Of a natural law . . .' etc. [Gilmour, p. 217]

Gilmour concludes:

'The political economists in education, like their fellow utilitarians in other fields, were engaged in what was, in effect, a campaign of containment. The end of their labours was to give the working-class child an education which stressed as its dominant principle not the potentialities of life but its inevitable limitations' and 'no provision was made for their most crying need of all – simple diversion from the crushing oppressiveness of their lot.' [Gilmour, p. 223]

In *Hard Times* it is one of Dickens's most urgent aims to show just how vital this 'crying need' is for his fictional industrial workers, model schoolchildren, the Gradgrind children, and of course for all their counterparts in the real world.

Is it possible, I wonder, that there was any analogy between the case of the Coketown population and the case of the little Gradgrinds? Surely, none of us in our sober senses and acquainted with figures, are to be told at this time of day, that one of the foremost elements in the existence of the Coketown working people had been for scores of years, deliberately set at nought? That there was any Fancy in them demanding to be brought into healthy existence instead of struggling on in convulsions? [p. 20]

⁵ Robin Gilmour, 'The Gradgrind School: Political Economy in the Classroom', *Victorian Studies*, 11, 1967, p. 215. Hereafter surname and page will appear in parentheses.

For Dickens, imagination (a very different thing from the vain puffing Fancy of Bounderby), and an imaginative response, is an essential part of being human. This opposition of reason and imagination is of course a very familiar theme from earlier literature, especially of the Romantic period. Asa Briggs gives an interesting glimpse of a Romantic's reaction to the 'statistical' age: 'Wordsworth, of all people, writing in 1845, then aged seventy-five, to H. S. Tremanheere, the "classic" Victorian inspector, that "we must not only have knowledge, but the means of wielding it, and that is done infinitely more through the imaginative faculty assisting both in the collection and application of facts than is generally believed."' ⁶ Even more crucial, for Dickens as it was for Wordsworth, is the development through imagination of the emotions, and especially of altruistic sympathy. Bitzer is a boy of 'bits', brought up on facts and taught to put self-interest first. Opposed to him is Sissy the circus child who is taken into the Gradgrind family where, as a kind of surrogate daughter (like Florence Dombey in *Dombey and Son*), she becomes an agent of redemption. As so often, contrast is a structuring principle in this novel, with fact set against fancy, also formulated as dry rationality against imagination, or, a similar opposition, head against heart. It is in these latter terms that Gradgrind describes Sissy's effect to Louisa after Louisa's return home: 'I have a misgiving that some change may have been slowly working about me in this house, by mere love and gratitude: that what the Head had left undone and could not do, the Heart may have been doing silently' (p. 176).

Dickens draws parallels in the novel between the Gradgrind family and the larger 'family' of society, for example Gradgrind's failure as a father to Louisa, and Bounderby's gross failure as a responsible employer to Blackpool. This deliberate paralleling is apparent in Dickens's use of the two interviews of each pair, marriage (and divorce in Blackpool's case) the specific topic of the first interviews (in Book 1), and more generally, the failure of Louisa's 'Utilitarian' upbringing, and the breakdown and 'muddle' of industrial relations of the second (in Book 2). The Gradgrinds are a dysfunctional family at the beginning, and it is on family reform that the novel concentrates. Industrial relations however remain virtually unchanged. This central area of *Hard Times* is the one that has perhaps received most discussion of all. Part of the problem is the excessive pathos in Dickens's presentation of Blackpool as representative worker, and the fact that his plight (a drunken wife and a mysterious refusal to join the union because of a

6 Asa Briggs, 'The Human Aggregate', in *The Victorian City*, edited by H. J. Dyos and Michael Wolff, Vol 1, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London 1973, p. 85

promise to his girlfriend Rachael) is unlinked to the industrial context. Furthermore, Dickens's highly negative picture of the union delegate Slackbridge, a rhetorical manipulator who comes from outside, is unconvincing, and unrepresentative when placed against contemporary accounts of unions and their delegates, and indeed against Dickens's own account in *Household Words* of the strike meeting he attended in February 1854 in Preston, scene of a protracted strike and lockout. Dickens had gone to Preston for a few days in order to get a first-hand impression of the industrial conflict and in the *Household Words* article he shows workers and union leaders as patient, orderly and responsible; he maintains that workers have a 'perfect right to combine'⁷ (though he certainly considers their strike a mistake), and he advocates arbitration as the best way to try and solve the dispute.

Why then the discrepancy between this view and the depiction in *Hard Times*? Novels are not documentaries, but this is a necessary and unavoidable question in the case of a novel that aims to show the forces at work in the mid-nineteenth-century industrial scene. Dickens gives a powerful satire on the masters and their attitudes, but there is a hollowness when it comes to his depiction of worker response (Blackpool's 'aw's a muddle' and a 'muddle' in which his role is not to intervene but to leave it to 'them as is put ower me, and ower aw the rest of us' (p. 118)), and in particular of worker activism. Was this negative picture of the Slackbridge meeting (Book 2, Chapter IV) intended to reassure middle-class readers that unions were pernicious and counter-productive, to avoid giving the book too radical a tone, as his major twentieth-century biographer speculates?⁸ Could this also be the reason for Dickens's omission of a short passage from his manuscript (see note to p. 70) concerning Blackpool's promise not to join the union? Blackpool recalls the factory accident which ripped off the arm of Rachael's younger sister, and then has an indignant outburst concerning the way in which masters unite and lobby against having to implement safety measures. Rachael urges him to: 'Let such things be, Stephen. They only lead to hurt, let them be!' and he replies, 'I will, since thou tell'st me so. I will. I pass my promise.' (Another possible reason suggested for the deletion is that Dickens may have felt journalism, such as an article on factory accidents, which appeared in *Household Words* during the serialisation of *Hard Times*, was a better way of exposing such horrors.)

⁷ Dickens, 'On Strike', in *Hard Times*, edited by G. Ford and S. Monod, Norton critical edition, New York 1966, p. 288

⁸ Edgar Johnson, *Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and his Triumph*, Vol. 2, Victor Gollancz, London 1953, p. 811

Was Dickens determined to believe that if there were no labour organisations, and no 'agitators', masters and men would get along? The implication to be drawn from Blackpool is that political activism is incompatible with decency, even though *Hard Times* clearly shows that Blackpool is powerless on his own. Interestingly it is Blackpool himself who convincingly demolishes the view that 'agitators', or 'mischievous strangers' (p. 118), are to blame, which gives an indication of Dickens's ambivalence about unions, an ambivalence shared by many of his contemporaries. Gaskell's fine portrait of a responsible, non-violent union activist, Nicholas Higgins, in *North and South* (1855) is a necessary corrective to the picture in *Hard Times*. Blackpool, by contrast, is a martyr figure (perhaps echoing the biblical Stephen), and in 1857, just three years after the novel's publication, a witty parody appeared in *Our Miscellany*, a collection of parodies and lampoons, offering an alternative happy ending, making fun of Blackpool's resignation and his piled-up woes . . . ('I do only look on my being pitched down that their shaft, and having all my bones broke, as a mercy and a providence, and God bless everybody!'), and of the novel's ending: ('And now, reader, let us love one another. If you will, I will. I can't say fairer. And so, God bless us all.') (Dickens magnanimously forgave the perpetrators and they continued writing for *Household Words*.)

The mob scenes in *Barnaby Rudge* also show Dickens's deep fear of collective action, and time and again in his writing he makes clear his own passionate hope and belief: that reform would come from above, obviating the need for unions. As just stated, the novel implies the opposite: it shows a very small element of hope symbolised by Gradgrind's reform, but at the end twenty-five Bounderby clones are flourishing in Coketown (p. 232) and Bitzer is a rising young man (p. 232), a fictional situation crying out for a strong labour organisation to withstand what Dickens, in a letter on the subject-matter of *Hard Times*, called 'the monstrous claims of domination' (*PL*, vii, 320) made by a seeming majority of masters. Dickens's ambivalence is admirably described by Coles:

It is a measure of the weight Dickens in his novel attaches to the sacredness of the individual – or, perhaps, a measure of his revulsion from all the forces of industrial capitalism – that in order to uphold individual integrity as a last vestige of humanity, he was willing to falsify what had moved him so deeply in the conduct of

9 Philip Collins (ed.), *Dickens: The Critical Heritage*, Barnes and Noble, New York 1971, pp. 309–13

the Preston strikers. His ambivalence about this falsification contributes to his desire to have it both ways: to praise the solidarity of the Hands yet condemn its operation; to invoke the traditional middle-class objections to unions and to unmask them as self-serving cant.¹⁰

Hard Times, like all the Victorian industrial novels, deplores the divide in British society, famously invoked in Disraeli's *Sybil, or The Two Nations* (1845). A recent editor, David Craig, convincingly sums up Dickens's dilemma, namely that he 'repeatedly leans to the mass of the people, then draws back, because to commit himself would have been to wake up from the dream of harmony between classes'.¹¹ This dream of contact and harmony is also implied in an obituary notice on Dickens's friend Justice Talfourd, published in *Household Words* about three weeks before the serialisation of *Hard Times* began. Echoing Talfourd's last speech (the judge had died dramatically in mid-delivery), Dickens wrote that England's curse 'is ignorance, or a miscalled education which is as bad or worse, and a want of the exchange of innumerable graces and sympathies among the various orders of society, each hardened unto each and holding itself aloof'.¹² This is very close to his words in the final chapter of *Hard Times* on Louisa's future – 'trying hard to know her humbler fellow creatures, and to beautify their lives of machinery and reality with those imaginative graces and delights' (p. 234), though here it is one-way, from upper to lower class, rather than an exchange.

Given Dickens's inability to conceive a political solution to the 'Two Nations' divide, it is not surprising that his presentation of the Condition of England is pessimistic. This dramatic satire however is for the most part written with Dickens's characteristic power and energy. Of all his novels, it is the starkest and closest to allegory, particularly in the case of characters such as Bounderby and Bitzer. Much is conveyed in a few vivid strokes, aiming not at detailed realism but at depicting the essentials, often in exaggerated and sometimes in caricatured form. Just as Dickens presents the Political Economy – Utilitarian beliefs mainly as slogans, so he uses shorthand and leitmotiv: Louisa's gazing into the fire symbolic of her stunted longing for feeling; Westminster as the 'national dustyard' where Gradgrind sifts at his 'parliamentary cinder heap', or Bounderby's 'turtle soup, venison and gold spoon' for the

¹⁰ Coles, p. 168

¹¹ David Craig, Introduction to *Hard Times*, Penguin, Harmondsworth 1969, p. 35

¹² Geoffrey Carnall, 'Dickens, Mrs Gaskell and the Preston Strike', *Victorian Studies*, 8, 1964, pp. 31–2

Hands' supposed aspirations. He uses gestures effectively as when Gradgrind, presenting Bounderby's proposal to Louisa, 'took a paper-knife in his hand, turned it over, laid it down, took it up again, and even had to look along the blade of it, considering how to go on' (p. 76). We also find a device often used by Dickens – that of presenting the human as non-human – to suggest the way in which humanity may be crushed, in Gradgrind's case by his ideological obsession, as in the second paragraph of the book, where Gradgrind is introduced, with his 'square wall of a forehead', and his eyes which find 'commodious cellarage in two dark caves' (p. 3). And the opposite device is used, the inanimate made living, as in the initial description of Coketown, suggesting that industrial forces have a nightmarish and oppressive life of their own, with the 'interminable serpents of smoke' and incessantly moving piston 'like the head of an elephant in a state of melancholy madness' (p. 18).

There is less humour and exuberant detail than usual but there are memorable examples, such as the description of circus-manager Sleary's daughter Josephine, a typical product of the circus in her deep-rooted attachments . . . 'a pretty fair-haired girl of eighteen, who had been tied on a horse at two years old, and had made a will at twelve, which she always carried about with her, expressive of her dying desire to be drawn to the grave by the two piebald ponies' (p. 29). Dickens's working notes show that humour was likely to be cut when space was short but there is much humour of various kinds, energetic and inventive in the circus descriptions, grim but lively in the case of Mrs Sparsit, and bitter and ironic as in the description of Parliament and its recruitment methods for the new industrial seats by 'the hard Fact fellows' (p. 98). There are sharp and telling contrasts of idiolect, as when Bounderby, introducing himself to upper-class James or Jem Harthouse, insists that: 'I am a bit of dirty riff-raff, and a genuine scrap of tag, rag and bobtail.' If anything could have exalted Jem's interest in Mr Bounderby, it would have been this very circumstance' (p. 100). Dickens is ingenious in the varied compliments constantly offered by Harthouse (whose languid speech patterns anticipate those of Wrayburn in *Our Mutual Friend*). On one occasion, telling Mrs Sparsit that her 'talent for – in fact for anything requiring accuracy – with a combination of strength of mind – and Family – is too habitually developed to admit of any question', he almost falls asleep over the compliment, 'it took him so long to get through, and his mind wandered so much in the course of its execution' (p. 152).

Sleary's circus comes across as a warm-hearted pre-industrial working environment, a kind of rambling extended family. And as was often the case in such environments (a farm or a shop, for example), women have

active roles to perform. They of course perform in a literal sense, and Dickens relishes their skill, zest and lack of decorum, dancing on tightropes, showing their legs, riding bare-backed, 'and one of them, alone in a Greek chariot, drove six in hand into every town they came to' (p. 28). However, the circus is a world outside the norm, and Dickens's presentation of the women of Coketown, across the class range (Mrs Sparsit excepted), is close to the stereotype exalted in such highly conservative books as Sarah Stickney Ellis's *The Women of England: Their Social Duties and Domestic Habits*, 1839, a best-seller that went through many editions. Louisa, Rachael and Mrs Pegler all play sacrificial roles. If they are variants on the 'ministering angel' type, Mrs Sparsit is close to the opposing female stereotype, monster-witch in this case, akin to (though wilder than) Mrs Norris in *Mansfield Park*, another genteely impoverished schemer. Mrs Sparsit is described with wonderful energy and inventiveness, especially in her pursuit of Louisa. Her ability to get from place to place 'with consummate velocity' is a 'mystery beyond solution' and suggests witch-like powers. 'A lady so decorous in herself and so highly connected, was not to be suspected of dropping over the banisters or sliding down them, yet her extraordinary facility of locomotion suggested the wild idea' (p. 151). And there is a demonic hint later, during her evening pursuit, when Dickens tells us 'the smaller birds might have tumbled out of their nests, fascinated by the glittering of Mrs Sparsit's eyes in the gloom, as she stopped and listened' (p. 164). The polar opposite of the lively circus women is Mrs Gradgrind, who must be one of the most crushed wives in English fiction.

After Stephen's death, Rachael ministers to his drunken widow and continues 'working, ever working, but content to do it, and preferring to do it as her natural lot' (p. 233). The usual energy of Dickens's writing is notably absent in many of the passages concerning Rachael, and this is true of a good deal of the Blackpool material, though not of the fine second interview with Bounderby in Book 2 Chapter v. Dickens neither grants Rachael a happy marriage nor Louisa a second chance – in marked contrast to Emma Gordon of the circus who, after her husband dies from a fall off an elephant, "married a Cheethemonger ath fell in love with her from the front – and he'th a Overtheer and makin' a fortune" (p. 220). Louisa is of course far more prominent than Rachael, and is also much less stereotyped, particularly in the early and middle sections of the book. She is interestingly enigmatic and secretive, and Dickens makes effective use of silence in her characterisation, as in the powerful proposal scene (Book 1, Chapter xv). Except for Mrs Sparsit, all the women in *Hard Times* are associated, in the

traditional manner, with love, sympathy and a desire to serve others. Dickens stresses the maternal side of the circus women, and as already stated, it is Sissy, the 'Power of Affection', who acts in Dickens's scheme as the agent of an embryonic (in *Hard Times* very embryonic) 'feminisation' or humanisation of society, a pattern seen to some extent in other industrial novels such as Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley*, or in Mrs Gaskell's *Mary Barton* and *North and South*. Our last picture of a humanised Gradgrind is of a 'white-haired decrepit man . . . making his facts and figures subservient to Faith, Hope and Charity, and no longer trying to grind that Heavenly trio in his dusty little mills' (p. 233) Dickens is not optimistic: Gradgrind is shown as derided, but as making a small impact in reforming his former associates and working for the good of society.

Hard Times was underrated in Dickens's lifetime but is now one of his most discussed works. What we may see as its flaws and ambivalences are historically revealing and are one of the reasons for the attention it has commanded in recent years. It is unusually interesting among his novels, an attempt to do something he had never done before, to construct a tight and concentrated attack upon theories and attitudes prevailing in his time – and still in ours. Dickens's protagonist in *Hard Times* is the heart of industrial society. He wrote in a letter to a friend a few months after finishing that the idea for the novel had 'laid hold of me by the throat in a very violent manner' (*PL*, VII, 453); and it is this well-focused fire, what Orwell called Dickens's 'generous anger', that gives *Hard Times* its immense power.

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