

### Hard Times

Dickens portrait of early industrialization parallelizes Matrix-like crop fields where human beings are turned into power. This was an age where men, women, and children were working side by side in damp, dirty factories for eight to twelve hours a day. It was once estimated that forty-nine thousand children under sixteen years of age were working in the dismal conditions of factory life. Dickens was no stranger to this type of living. His father had lost the family fortune and was sent to prison leaving Charles to enter the work force by age twelve. Dickens also had an insiders view on how the other half lived. After his mother had passed away, leaving enough money to get her husband out of prison and Charles into school, Dickens eventually acquired a job observing and documenting Parliament meetings during the reform movement. Dickens characterizes life in the industrial revolution as the mechanization of society with a need for the balance between fact and fiction, noting that each class represents different morals.

The process of the mechanization of society does not begin in the work place, but rather in the school system (for those whom could afford it). Education is based solely on facts and does nothing to try and inspire or teach creativity in the new youth. In one of the opening scenes, we see Mr. Gradgrind asking a working class child to define a horse. When the young lady, Sissy, described a horse the way any child might today, Mr. Gradgrind was a little upset, a fellow student, Bitzer, gave a technical definition of a horse and was applauded. Mr. Gradgrind begins, at the earliest stages in life, to brainwash society and turn them into working zombies. He not only stops in the schools, but brings his teachings home to his own family. His children, Tom and Louisa, spend so much time studying and learning that they become disconnected with society and their own emotions. Mr. Gradgrind feels “love” should not be any consideration at all to Louisa when given the decision to marry a man she does not approve. His social class “facts” should be the governing decision. It takes Sissy’s presence in the house and life of Louisa to open her heart and learn what “love” really is.

Sissy's role in Hard Times represents Dickens view of the need to balance fact and fiction. Sissy grew up with the circus, her father being a performer. She also represents, for the most part, the impact of the working class. After being adopted by Mr. Gradgrind, a middle classman, and being taught the values and "facts" of life, Sissy cannot help being confused. She reads deep into the questions being asked of her and responds with the people in mind. A good death toll is not a concern of the families of the victims. These are things businessmen and the middle/upper class do not consider when approached with a query. She is the person who brings compassion for the fellow man into the lives of the middle classmen in which she resides. Tom and Louisa grow up not having enjoyed life. They were discouraged of all events involving the fancy nature of true life; they were punished for going to see the circus. Sissy, growing up in the circus, came out to live an enjoyable and well-balanced life, free of the constraints placed on the Gradgrind children. Louisa, who grew up on fact alone, marries unhappily. It takes Sissy's creativity and compassion to give Louisa an idea of what love may be. Fact and fiction also take on different roles depending on the interpreter. Mr. Bounderby feels all workers want to be fed from the "golden spoon" in life; the lazy people want everything handed to them. The workers see themselves as hardworking individuals who are getting a raw deal.

Dickens view of the upper class and their way of life is made clear through James Hawthorne. The ultimate love interest in Louisa's life, Hawthorne is a rich man who has done everything. In his profession of love, Hawthorne notes the many worldly adventures he has been included in and how bored he was with them all, noting how Louisa gives purpose and thrill to his life. Then, when asked to leave town, Hawthorne agrees to do so with no real effort to stay with the "love of his life." This is a man who has been everywhere and done everything and bored with it all. He lives his life one cheap thrill at a time. He has little regard for people except as objects for him to throw around at will. Dickens does give Hawthorne some good qualities. He persuades Tom to rethink his life and how he has treated the one person who loves him, his sister Louisa. Hawthorne also attempts to help out Blackpool, a troubled old working class man who seems unable to rid himself of his wife. The class difference brought up in the movie is made relevant through the plea of Blackpool to Bounderby in asking for a way to rid

himself of his drunken wife. He is informed that without money, one is stuck with the decisions they make in life. If Blackpool had been wealthy, he would be able to leave his wife for Rachel; a working class lady who befriends and falls in love with Stephen during his wife's repeated disappearances.

“For better or worse,” the working class is portrayed as a genuine, down to earth type people who recognize the problems in the factories. The middle class represents a group of people who are not all quite there, a group lacking motivation or purpose. And the upper class represented by being totally disconnected with the goings on of everyday life, people who are living solely for them.