

Hard Times

Character Profile

Josiah Bounderby played by *Ifan Huw Dafydd*



Relationship to the other characters in the play:

Employer of	Tom, Bitzer, Rachael & Stephen
'Benefactor' and Employer of	Mrs Sparsit
Friend to	Thomas Gradgrind
Acquaintance of	James Harthouse
Husband to	Louisa
Son of	Mrs Pegler

Identify Mr Bounderby's journey through the play:

- ◆ Successful banker and mill owner
- ◆ Marries Louisa Gradgrind
- ◆ Bank is robbed
- ◆ Marriage fails because of Louisa's 'adultery' with Harthouse
- ◆ His total life is revealed as a sham when Mrs Sparsit finds his mother, thus refuting his false history of early childhood hardship and being a 'self-made man'

What is the key moment in Mr Bounderby's story?

The revelation of his mother.

What are Mr Bounderby's key lines in the play?

"I'm Josiah Bounderby of Coketown and my mother deserted me when I was a child, but I managed to drag myself out of the gutter."

"Anyhow, here I am Mrs Gradgrind, with nobody to thank for my being here but myself."

How does Mr Bounderby change throughout the play?

He goes from being a fat pompous ass to a fat blubbering idiot.

What are your personal feelings towards Mr Bounderby?

I would be very likely to smack him in the gob should I ever run into him in a pub.

Commentary:

“When reading Dickens we are always looking for some significance in the names he gives his characters. Is Bounderby so named because he was by nature a bounder, a cheat, a deceiver who seeks advancement at the expense of others? In fact, ‘Bounder’ was Dickens’s original choice of name for him. Dickens condemns Bounderby from the start by his calculated description: ‘A man with a great puffed head and forehead, swelled veins in his temples, and such strained skin to his face that it seemed to hold his eyes open and lift his eyebrows up.’ This follows immediately after Gradgrind has threatened Louisa with Bounderby’s displeasure. By creating the link between Bounderby and Louisa, between old age and youth, Dickens reinforces this repulsive effect. She marries him out of a sense of duty to her family and not through feelings of love. Bounderby’s self-complacency is one of his more unattractive qualities. He is assured that he is worthy of respect and esteem because he is a self-made man. It is his constant boast that he has made his own way in the world and achieved success without the help of anyone. He sees himself, too, as a benefactor to his employees. Those two features are given expression in his first conversation with Harthouse: ‘I’ll state a fact to you. It’s the pleasantest work there is, and it’s the lightest work there is... So now we may shake hands on equal terms. I say, equal terms, because although I know what I am, and the exact depth of the gutter I have lifted myself out of... I am as proud as you are.’ Of course, the inaccuracy of the first part of what he says is blatantly clear, and the untruth of the second is dramatically revealed later when his mother identifies herself. There is not a single redeeming feature in Bounderby’s character. He is, as Dickens frequently describes him, a ‘bully’. None of the goodness in the novel ever affects him. Even the presence of both Sissy and Rachael has no effect on him. Dickens does appear to bring him low by his mother’s revelations, but we are bound to believe that he will survive even that. He is, however, to be humiliated at the moments of his death, for he dies in a fit in the street. He had hoped to make sure through his will that his name would always be honoured, but Dickens tells us that the law - for which Bounderby claimed to have such admiration - would effectively turn his plan into an unrealised dream, and the only ones who would gain would be the lawyers!”

from **York Notes - Hard Times** by Dominic Hyland. York Press. 1997. (page 64)

“In an important respect Bounderby is characterised as the equivalent in the economic sphere of Gradgrind’s role in the educational area. Just as Gradgrind reduces the complex process of learning and growing up to a simplistic formula, Bounderby the factory owner and banker applies a reductionist approach to his employees. The method of characterisation is also similar, employing a host of metaphors to suggest character, and where Gradgrind was *square* Bounderby is *puffed* and *inflated*. The differences between the two men are also important and the characterisation of Bounderby, unlike that of Gradgrind, does not change. To the very end, the man who is a bully of humility remains linked with images of unyielding coarseness and cruelty and, even after his death, his will leaves a legacy of conflict and chicanery. The man himself, again unlike Gradgrind, does not change, and the exposure of his lie about his family background does nothing to dent his bullying, violent nature. It is worth stressing just how ugly Bounderby is as a human being because he should not be viewed merely as a caricature of the bloated capitalist who hypocritically exploits his employees. On the human level, he is a very unpleasant individual whose cruel treatment of his own mother... is quite in character with the man who heartlessly told the young Sissy... about her father’s disappearance.”

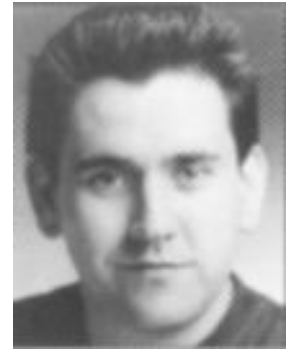
from **An Advanced Guide to Hard Times** by Sean Sheehan. Hodder and Stoughton. 2000. (page 8)



Hard Times

Character Profile

James Harthouse played by *Richard Elis*



Relationship to the other characters in the play:

Acquaintance of	Thomas Gradgrind
Acquaintance of	Josiah Bounderby
'Friend' to	Tom
Potential Lover of	Louisa
'Foe' of	Sissy Jupe

James Harthouse is also present in scenes with Stephen Blackpool and Mrs Sparsit

Identify Mr Harthouse's journey through the play:

- ◆ He comes from London to Coketown supposedly as someone interested in Mr Gradgrind's Party
- ◆ He meets Louisa
- ◆ He courts Louisa
- ◆ He is persuaded to leave by Sissy

What is the key moment in Mr Harthouse's story?

When he is told by Sissy Jupe that he has hurt Louisa -

"If I have caused distress, it was not my intention."

Although he is a bit of a cad, he is not malicious. This piece of knowledge from Sissy genuinely disturbs him.

What is Mr Harthouse's key line in the play?

"What will be, will be."

He says this earlier on in the play to Louisa, in tandem with:

"It's the only truth going."

He then says it again to the audience, as he leaves, just after he has been 'found out' by Sissy.

How does Mr Harthouse change throughout the play?

Everyone thinks he is a nice chap, but it turns out that he has been a bad boy all along!

Perhaps there is a slight moral twinge for him at the prospect of hurting Louisa, but it passes.

What are your personal feelings towards Mr Harthouse?

I enjoy playing him because of his final exit. It's great because he should take the audience by surprise. Those who are not familiar with the story should be shocked by his duplicitous nature.

Any other observations?

I am happy he's not a puppet!

Commentary:

"James is a stranger to Coketown who is trying to make connections to improve his prospects in life. He is painted as somebody whom we cannot trust, who is prepared to use people. He falls in love with Louisa and is prepared to have an adulterous liaison with her. But Sissy Jupe persuades him to leave Coketown. James Harthouse appears unmoved no matter what situation he finds himself in, and handles people coolly. This gives him a certain attractiveness, yet he has no depth of feeling for anybody. He has always been '*weary of everything*' and suffered '*varieties of boredom*'.

from **York Notes - Hard Times** by Dominic Hyland. York Press. 1997. (page 72)

"Harthouse is not unpleasant in the way that Bitzer and Mrs Sparsit are but he is equally deficient as a human being. He is intelligent but so lacks a moral centre that out of mere boredom he is happy to connive the break-up of Louisa's marriage. It is a complete lack of principles that makes him so uncaring."

from **An Advanced Guide to Hard Times** by Sean Sheehan. Hodder and Stoughton. 2000. (page 11)



Hard Times

Character Profile

Tom Gradgrind played by *Marc Frankum*



Relationship to the other characters in the play:

Son of	Mr and Mrs Gradgrind
Brother to	Louisa
Employee of	Josiah Bounderby
'Friend' to	James Harthouse
'Foe' to	Stephen Blackpool
Professional Rival to	Bitzer

Identify journey through the play:

- ◆ Tom is dissatisfied with his upbringing and has a need to be compensated
- ◆ He goes to work in Bounderby's Bank which provides him with a chance to achieve his needs
- ◆ He becomes more forceful and influential with his sister Louisa and convinces her to marry Bounderby for his sake as a way to assist with his gambling habits
- ◆ He strikes up a friendship with Harthouse who becomes his confidante
- ◆ His gambling debts escalate and he decides that his only way out is to steal money from the bank
- ◆ He sees an opportunity to 'stitch up' Stephen Blackpool and implicates him in the robbery
- ◆ He sticks by Bounderby in the hope of not being suspected
- ◆ Stephen Blackpool hints at Tom's involvement in the robbery, before he dies
- ◆ Tom, on the advice of Sissy, escapes to hide at Mr Sleary's circus
- ◆ Louisa and Mr Gradgrind confront him, but arrange with Mr Sleary to spirit him away to Liverpool to sail for America
- ◆ Bitzer arrives to stop the escape, but it goes ahead as planned and Tom leaves a bitter man

What is the key moment in Tom's story?

The robbery of the bank

What is Tom's key line in the play?

"Father has a proposal and it would do me a great deal of good if you would make up your

mind to say 'yes', Loo."

Said to Louisa before Mr Gradgrind tells her of Bounderby's proposal of marriage. This is the reason why she marries Bounderby, in order to do Tom 'a great deal of good'.

How does Tom change throughout the play?

He becomes more manipulative, self-obsessed and more troubled as he falls deeper into despair.

What are your personal feelings towards Tom?

I think he is spiteful, vindictive, self-obsessed, desperate and unrepentant, (at least in the play). What a fantastic part to play.

Any other observations?

I feel he gets off too lightly.

In the book we discover that he regrets his behaviour for the rest of his life. Louisa is informed:

"He died in hospital, of fever... and died in penitence and love of you: his last word being your name."

Commentary:

"From the beginning, Tom is drawn as someone who will readily use people. He abuses Louisa's blind devotion in order to serve his own purposes. He frequently encourages her to please Bounderby so that he can gain favours from him. At another point, he uses Stephen Blackpool to help him, unwittingly, to rob the bank. Finally, he is dependent on a whole host of characters to help him escape the clutches of the law. He is intent on gaining some revenge for the upbringing he had to endure: 'I mean, I'll enjoy myself a little, and go about and see something. I'll recompense myself for the way in which I have been brought up'. He incurs heavy gambling debts and is forced to steal from the bank. That he is not a natural thief, however, is made clear by the frightened behaviour he shows after the robbery, for example, in his meeting with James Harthouse: 'Oh! Mr Harthouse. I am hard up, and bothered out of my life... I am in a horrible mess'. His greatest humiliation, though, is ultimately, to be found disguised as a black servant 'in a preposterous coat'. Dickens has made his own feelings towards Tom abundantly clear in his descriptions of him as a 'whelp'. This cowering, hangdog appearance becomes a feature of his make-up: 'He had long been a down-looking young fellow, but this characteristic had so increased of late, that he never raised his eyes to any face for three seconds together'.

from **York Notes - Hard Times** by Dominic Hyland. York Press. 1997. (page 66)

"The characterisation of Tom Gradgrind is similar to that of Louisa in that he is also portrayed as a victim of a dysfunctional family. Unlike his sister, he lacks imagination and empathy for others. Louisa's imaginative capacity as a child expresses itself as she gazes into the fire. Tom himself notes, 'You seem to find more to look at in it than ever I could find'. He suffers, like his sister, from a lack of the emotional security that his parents should have provided, but it affects his character in a different way and he becomes the sullen reprobate who exploits his sister and Stephen Blackpool."

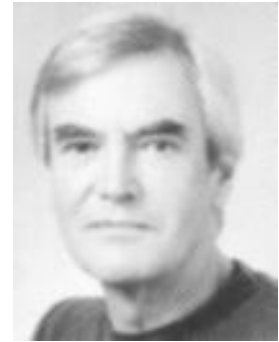
from **An Advanced Guide to Hard Times** by Sean Sheehan. Hodder and Stoughton. 2000. (page 9)



Hard Times

Character Profile

Thomas Gradgrind played by *Owen Garmon*



Relationship to the other characters in the play:

Father to	Louisa and Tom
Husband to	Mrs Gradgrind
Friend and Father-in-Law to	Josiah Bounderby
Master and Benefactor to	Sissy Jupe
Teacher of	Louisa, Tom, Sissy and Bitzer
Member of Parliament for	the inhabitants of Coketown

Identify Mr Gradgrind's journey through the play:

- ◆ Mr Gradgrind has established a school in which he occasionally teaches
- ◆ He gives his daughter, Louisa, in marriage to his friend Mr Bounderby
- ◆ He becomes a Member of Parliament for Coketown
- ◆ He learns the value of feelings and emotions through his daughter
- ◆ He discovers that his son, Tom, has robbed Mr Bounderby's bank
- ◆ He arranges, with the help of Mr Sleary, to have Tom sent abroad

What is the key moment in Mr Gradgrind's story?

The key moment for Gradgrind is when he discovers, through bitter personal experience, that his education 'system', based exclusively on the acquisition of facts, has failed to equip his daughter, Louisa, with any means of dealing with feelings and emotions. This experience changes his whole outlook on life.

What is Mr Gradgrind's key line in the play?

He has two key lines:

a) The first words of the play:

"Now, what I want is, Facts. Nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life."

b) When Louisa tells him of the emotionally barren, love-less life she has endured as Bounderby's wife, his immediate reaction is:

"I never knew you were unhappy, child."

How does Mr Gradgrind change throughout the play?

Gradgrind changes from being an emotionally dead human being concerned only with facts and calculations, a 'machine', into a feeling, emotionally aware individual, sensitive to his own needs and the needs of other people.

What are your personal feelings towards Mr Gradgrind?

Gradgrind is basically a decent man who honestly believes that his devotion to facts, to his rigid educational 'system', is the best way of bringing up children. He is misguided but sincere. He has the capacity to change, and admit he has been mistaken, and learn from his mistakes.

Any other observations?

"I often say to Mr Gradgrind that there is reason and good intention in much that he does - in fact, in all that he does - but that he overdoes it. Perhaps by dint of his going his way and my going mine, we shall meet at last."

from a letter, dated 17th of June 1854 written by Charles Dickens to Henry Cole, Secretary of the Government's Department of Science and Art.

Commentary:

"No name seems to reward our attention so much in *Hard Times* as that of Gradgrind, with all its connotations of slavish attention to petty detail - the 'grind' - and its concern with the different stages of our lives - the 'grade' or 'grad'. Because of his insistence that his children should attend to factual matters alone, they are in danger of never developing fully as people. However, Gradgrind is not all bad. It is he who offered Sissy a home. And this action was very much against the advice and wish of Bounderby, who saw in it a threat to Louisa and Tom. And, indeed, this action does have a profound effect on Louisa and on the other members of the Gradgrind family. In many ways Dickens is sympathetic towards Gradgrind. He never attributes ill-will to him and Gradgrind never hurts anyone intentionally. Louisa, who we may well regard as the victim of her father, assures him, *'I have never blamed you and I never shall.'* But there is some ambivalence in Dickens's depiction of Gradgrind. For, having observed in the beginning of Book the Third a distinct change of heart in him, we then find, in Chapter 5 of the same book, that he has become supportive of Bounderby and even somewhat dictatorial. Our unfavourable impression of him in this one episode, however, is fully offset by his later forgiving attitude towards Tom, and his wish to help him escape punishment. That, indeed, is a change from the Gradgrind who would have penalised his children for stealing a peep at a circus."

from **York Notes - Hard Times** by Dominic Hyland. York Press. 1997. (page 63)

"Thomas Gradgrind... begins as a caricature and ends as a very human and sympathetic character... His inflexible and narrow understanding of human development is based on 'utilitarianism', which discards anything that cannot be said to be strictly useful. It produces two very unhappy children and the novel reveals the full human cost of his misguided though well-meaning intention to conduct his family life strictly in accordance with his rationalistic philosophy. As the story draws to a close, Gradgrind becomes a broken and disillusioned man who abandons his political career but becomes a wiser and better person. Gradgrind is the spokesperson of the rationalistic, utilitarian doctrine and his failure can be interpreted as the symbolic failure of this system. He can also be seen as a parent who spends too little time with his wife and children, thinking professional life more important than family life...and who finds out the hard way what is really important in life."

from **An Advanced Guide to Hard Times** by Sean Sheehan. Hodder and Stoughton. 2000. (page 7)



Hard Times

Character Profile

Rachael played by *Taylor Jones*



Relationship to the other characters in the play:

Close Friend of
Friend to
Employee of

Stephen Blackpool
Mrs Blackpool, Sissy and Louisa
Josiah Bounderby

Identify Rachael's journey through the play:

- ◆ Rachael loves Stephen, but he is married and they cannot be together. They have to remain good and loyal friends
- ◆ Rachael is approached by Stephen's landlady to look after Stephen's sick wife, (who is a friend from her youth). She tends to her and comforts Stephen
- ◆ Stephen loses his job, as an eventual consequence of not joining the union, which was because of a promise he made to Rachael. She comforts him and defends him in front of Louisa
- ◆ When Stephen has to leave Coketown, she makes him promise to keep in touch
- ◆ Rachael goes to see Mr Bounderby to let him know that Stephen could and would never have stolen the money from the bank, (that he has been accused of stealing), because he was offered a 'great deal of money' by Mrs Bounderby and he refused it
- ◆ Rachael looks for Stephen and finds him injured down a pit
- ◆ She holds his hand as he dies

What is the key moment in Rachael's story?

When she goes to tell Mr Bounderby the truth about Stephen and is not believed by him.

What is Rachael's key line in the play?

"It goes against me to mistrust anyone - but when I am so mistrusted - when we all are - I cannot keep such things from my mind."

How does Rachael change throughout the play?

She loses her ability to trust people.

What are your personal feelings towards Rachael?

I admire her strength, courage and selflessness. She has an amazing ability to withstand so much heartache. She is extremely strong.

Commentary:

"Like Sissy, Rachael is a marvellous example of a good woman. She provides for Stephen Blackpool much the same kind of support that Sissy offers to the people in her world. The two women meet only towards the end of the book. In her anxiety about Rachael, Sissy asks if she can visit her. Rachael gives her the highest praise possible for her kind of influence: 'If it hadn't been mercifully brought about, that I was to have you to speak to, times are when I think my mind would not have kept right. But I get hope and strength through you.' This is the very same service that Rachael had performed for Stephen in his trials. Stephen, estranged from his wife, had fallen in love with Rachael. The moral pressures of the time made that relationship difficult - Rachael's good name is threatened by her being seen in the company of a married man - but she offers Stephen a sincere and lasting friendship. Her moral courage is displayed in her kindness, too, to Stephen's drunken wife. And she continues to look after her, long after Stephen is dead. Rachael cannot think evil of anyone. She parallels Sissy in the subplot. In her final trial, when suspicions about Stephen's guilt seem confirmed by his failure to return to Coketown, she does find it difficult to forgive Louisa for her supposed complicity with Tom. But later she begs to be forgiven for such thoughts as, 'It goes against me to mistrust anyone'. The real depths of the love she has for Stephen are never made clear to the reader until that terrible moment when she realises that he has fallen into the pit. We then witness a hysteria that could perhaps never have been anticipated in a woman with such self-control. However, it is the emotional expression of one who has, in Stephen's interests, restrained herself for so long. Many a Victorian heart at that point would, no doubt, have wished that it had been possible for Rachael to have made her feelings so eloquently known to Stephen long before the tragedy."

from **York Notes - Hard Times** by Dominic Hyland. York Press. 1997. (page 70)

"(Her) role seems to be largely symbolic, (but) her characterisation seems stronger (than Stephen's). This may be due to the positive values and virtues she embodies... Rachael comes across as a warm person, with a degree of self-awareness and self-confidence that is lacking in Stephen."

from **An Advanced Guide to Hard Times** by Sean Sheehan. Hodder and Stoughton. 2000. (page 11)



Hard Times

Character Profile

Mrs Sparsit played by Valmai Jones



Relationship to the other characters in the play:

Housekeeper to
Role Model to
'Exposer' of

Josiah Bounderby and Louisa
Bitzer
Mrs Pegler

Mrs Sparsit has scenes with most of the characters in the play

Identify Mrs Sparsit's journey through the play:

- ◆ She begins the story having sunk from the aristocracy to the level of housekeeper for Mr Bounderby
- ◆ She sinks still further when Mr Bounderby marries Louisa - she is sent to live at the bank
- ◆ After the robbery she wriggles her way back into Bounderby's house, claiming she is too distressed to live at the bank for the time being
- ◆ She works her way back into Bounderby's good books due to her nosy over-zealousness and mean streak - i.e. she spies on Louisa and Harthouse and breaks the news to Bounderby
- ◆ She finds and exposes Mrs Pegler - Bounderby's mother - at which point she hits rock bottom when she is publicly scolded by Bounderby
- ◆ She experiences a hollow triumph at Bounderby's ('the Noodle') death, but leaves ill equipped to deal with the harsh realities of Victorian life

What is the key moment in Mrs Sparsit's story?

Banishment to the bank, which hardens her already mean nature.

What are Mrs Sparsit's key lines in the play?

"But if I am to sink, others must descend with me."

and

"My late husband was descended from the Powlers."

How does Mrs Sparsit change throughout the play?

I don't think she changes as such, except to become more conniving, mean-natured, bitter and sycophantic. However, I feel that it is a terrible thing to have to be nice to a swine like Bounderby in order to survive.

What are your personal feelings towards Mrs Sparsit?

I feel sorry for her. Apparently a lot of 'gentle folk' found themselves impoverished and forced to rely on slender personal resources in Victorian times. Whether she was always a spoilt, self-centred woman or whether she became embittered due to her descent in life is not explained by Dickens. I feel that he has no sympathy for her and she certainly is a howling snob, although she is prepared to be chummy with a social inferior provided they share her self-serving attitude to life. She considers everyone else in the play her social inferior which, from her point of view, they are. She is easily the most morally inferior, (next to the noxious Bounderby), but then, in modern parlance, she has no morals; however, Tom is very morally deficient. Morality for Mrs Sparsit is a cut and dried archaic matter of maintaining social order. I think she comes across in the book, play and performance as more upper-middle than aristocratic and from a socialist point of view - she stinks!

Commentary:

"Through Mrs Sparsit, Dickens makes one of the novel's attacks on English class-consciousness. Bounderby's claim to greatness is that he has a housekeeper who was related to a good family. She has nothing else to recommend her except this tenuous link with the allegedly genteel Scadgers and Fowler families. But such a link, or claim to a link, is enough to establish her worth in the world of the *nouveau riche*. Dickens shows that such a valuation is misplaced, and that she can represent insinuating evil more perhaps than any other person in the novel. The picture of this elderly widow whose harshness and meanness of nature seem summed up in the mittens she wears, is one of Dickens's studies in repulsion. She speaks hypocritically with 'an affectation of humility'. She is a fitting companion for Bounderby, the 'Bully of humility', for whom she harbours feelings. Her severe appearance, with hooked nose and 'dense black eye-brows', expresses her bitter moral outlook. She widens the rift between Bounderby and Louisa, and, in her frenetic zeal to re-establish her position in Bounderby's household, hunts Louisa. And she also hunts down Bounderby's mother, Mrs Pegler. There is some threat of caricature in the depiction of Mrs Sparsit, but this is offset by her many functions in the novel. There is even a point when, after her first meeting with James Harthouse, Dickens seems to suggest that she has developed in that short while some feelings for him; she is visibly disturbed after he has gone."

from **York Notes - Hard Times** by Dominic Hyland. York Press. 1997. (page 71)

"Mrs Sparsit's character matches the uncongenial sound of her name. She is mean-spirited to the very core of her being, and ranks alongside Bounderby as one of the two most unpleasant characters in the world of *Hard Times*. Her unpleasantness is psychologically interesting and, although Dickens does not delve deeply into the mind, there is something very morbid about the enjoyment she takes in following the break-up of the marriage between Louisa and Bounderby."

from **An Advanced Guide to Hard Times** by Sean Sheehan. Hodder and Stoughton. 2000. (page 11)



Hard Times

Character Profile

Stephen Blackpool played by *Glyn Pritchard*



Relationship to the other characters in the play:

Husband to	Mrs Blackpool
Friend to	Rachael
Employee of	Josiah Bounderby
Victim of	Tom

Identify Stephen's journey through the play:

- ◆ He seeks a divorce from his wife and fails
- ◆ He knows he can never be with Rachael
- ◆ He is sent to Coventry by the union for refusing to join due to a promise he has made Rachael to not get involved
- ◆ He is sacked by his employer, Mr Bounderby
- ◆ On the request of Tom, (who claims he might be able to help him), he hangs around the bank after closing for three days
- ◆ He leaves Coketown, looking for work elsewhere
- ◆ He is blamed for the bank robbery
- ◆ He receives a letter from Rachael asking him to come back to Coketown to clear his name
- ◆ He falls down a disused pit on his way back to Coketown
- ◆ He dies, hinting to Mr Gradgrind that his son Tom has information about the robbery

What is the key moment in Stephen's story?

His sacking from the mill.

What is Stephen's key line in the play?

"'Tis a muddle."

How does Stephen change throughout the play?

He goes from a depression to a deeper depression!

What are your personal feelings towards Stephen?

I think he is a man of conviction and his word, with a well developed sense of fair play. I like him.

Commentary:

"Only forty, but spoken of as 'old Stephen'... The most damning comment on Stephen is made by James Harthouse in 'Mrs Sparsit's Staircase'. In conversation with Louisa, he speaks of him as 'an infinitely dreary person... Lengthy and prosy in the extreme'. The description is not inappropriate. Though Dickens tells us that Stephen's own assessment of his situation was that he had only 'a peck of trouble', the impression he conveys with monotonous regularity is one of carrying a dreadful weight of sorrow. Of course, the reader is bound to sympathise with 'old Stephen' - but he does test our tolerance. Stephen is dogged, first of all, by his mistake in marriage. He has a drunken wife who constantly leaves him and is unfaithful to him. He tries to build up a new life with Rachael but the wife returns. At work, too, he is at a loss; he is at odds with his fellow-workers and with his boss. Stephen can be his own worst enemy; he is an ill judge of character and confides in people who obviously despise him, like Bounderby. He is an easy dupe for the scheming Tom Gradgrind. He is not a man of this world. He even botches the attempt to clear his name by falling down a disused mine. Only Stephen, we are persuaded to think, would choose to travel at night across a place full of pits!"

from **York Notes - Hard Times** by Dominic Hyland. York Press. 1997. (page 70)

"Stephen Blackpool plays an important part in the plot of the novel but his characterisation has some weaknesses. His passive suffering strikes many readers as unconvincing and his reason for not joining with his fellow workers in a trade union is especially so. His role seems to be largely symbolic... Stephen is rendered... as a passive victim."

from **An Advanced Guide to Hard Times** by Sean Sheehan. Hodder and Stoughton. 2000. (page 11)



Hard Times

Character Profile

Sissy Jupe played by *Catrin Rhys*



Relationship to the other characters in the play:

Daughter to
Pupil of
Maid to
'Sister' to
Friend to

Signor Jupe (who we never meet)
Mr Gradgrind
Mr Gradgrind and his family
Louisa
Rachael

Identify Sissy's journey through the play:

- ◆ Goes to Mr Gradgrind's school when she arrives in Coketown with her father and Mr Sleary's circus
- ◆ Visited by Bounderby and Gradgrind who offers to house and educate her when it is revealed that her father has abandoned her
- ◆ Time passes - she leaves school due to a supposed lack of intelligence
- ◆ She looks after Mrs Gradgrind and observes and listens to everything around her
- ◆ She becomes a confidante to Louisa
- ◆ Off her own back - she tells James Harthouse to leave
- ◆ She becomes closer to Gradgrind and Rachael
- ◆ Her quick thinking helps to save Tom by directing him to Mr Sleary's circus

What is the key moment in Sissy's story?

There are three key moments:

- a) Being left by her father
- b) Leaving the circus and seeing how others live
- c) Being told to leave school due to lack of intelligence

What is Sissy's key line in the play?

When she goes to visit James Harthouse to ask him to leave Coketown:

“You will do this ridiculous thing. I will trust to you, and you will trust to me.”

How does Sissy change throughout the play?

In the most straightforward sense, she grows up. She learns from Gradgrind, but she has also learnt from her father and the circus people. She becomes more and more confident, especially after Louisa’s crisis with James Harthouse.

Most significantly, she is the catalyst for change in others in the play. She becomes the living proof that to make a whole person both the head and the heart - fact and fantasy - needs to be nourished.

What are your personal feelings towards Sissy?

At first I thought she was innocent, naive and rather boring, but then I realised how strong and influential she was. She is the backbone to many characters - another child for Mr Gradgrind, a ‘sister’ to Louisa, a comfort to Rachael, an adviser to Tom. Sissy’s strengths don’t come from her head, in keeping with the Gradgrind philosophy, but from her heart. At the end of the play she is proof that the heart is stronger and more important.

Commentary:

“Sissy belongs to a long line of Dickens’s heroines. They are inevitably as pure as can be, angels on earth. Their influence is everywhere benign. From the time Sissy appears she is identified with heavenly light: the *‘ray of sunlight’*, we are told, *‘irradiated Sissy’*. From the beginning, she is subjected to various trials both at school and at home, first bullying in the classroom... that pursues her in the shape of Bitzer outside the classroom, and... her father abandons her to her fate, and she waits patiently, but in vain, for him to return. She waits with oils to soothe him after his journey. This role as one who soothes and cures is to be a major one for Sissy. She brings salve to each, even to the cynical James Harthouse. Tom says that she hates him but it is impossible to believe that she could hate anyone. Yet, though she has high spiritual qualities, she is seen to be in touch with earthly realities, too. When Tom Gradgrind is incriminated by Stephen’s dying words it is Sissy who rescues him by telling him to hide in Sleary’s circus. Sissy’s influence touches all, it seems. She comforts Rachael whilst she waits for Stephen to return to Coketown and is directly involved in the discovery of the dying Stephen.”

from **York Notes - Hard Times** by Dominic Hyland. York Press. 1997. (page 68)

“Sissy’s symbolic importance cannot be dissociated from her circus background, for unlike Louisa and Tom, she was nurtured by a warm and loving family environment in early childhood. As a young child she was influenced by values that oppose, and finally triumph over, those of Gradgrind and Bounderby... Sissy’s role in the events occupying the last book of the novel is paramount and she plays a crucial part in relations between Louisa, Rachael, Harthouse and Tom. She is able to empathise with Louisa and Rachael, offering friendship and solidarity, but she is also capable of dealing with Harthouse and her pragmatism is demonstrated more than once in the dramatic events that bring the story to an end. At a symbolic level this is tremendously important because it helps break down what has been seen as a simplistic opposition between reason and imagination in the novel. Her practical skills and powers of organisation are eminently rational but they are motivated by values and aspirations that have nothing in common with the mercantile ethics that Gradgrind once championed and which Bounderby personifies.”

from **An Advanced Guide to Hard Times** by Sean Sheehan. Hodder and Stoughton. 2000. (page 9)



Hard Times

Character Profile

Louisa played by *Tonya Smith*



Relationship to the other characters in the play:

Daughter of	Mr and Mrs Gradgrind
Sister to	Tom
Friend to	Sissy Jupe
Wife of	Josiah Bounderby
Potential Lover of	James Harthouse
Nemesis of	Mrs Sparsit
Sympathiser to	Rachael and Stephen Blackpool

Identify Louisa's journey through the play:

- ◆ Louisa starts the play in Gradgrind's school being trained as a model child on a diet of facts alone
- ◆ Sissy arrives at the school which arouses her curiosity about the circus and gives her a taste of the outside world
- ◆ Tom leaves home, abandoning Louisa to a life of boredom
- ◆ Bounderby proposes to her and in her deadened state, in order to please Tom, she accepts
- ◆ Louisa marries and moves in with Bounderby
- ◆ James Harthouse appears, charming her with his unconventional approach to life
- ◆ Louisa allows Harthouse into her confidence
- ◆ Harthouse confesses his love to her
- ◆ She reaches a crisis point and runs to her father for help
- ◆ Bounderby delivers an ultimatum to get Louisa to return to his home and she refuses, remaining at her father's, attended by Sissy, in a 'separated' state

What is the key moment in Louisa's story?

When Mr Harthouse tells her he loves her; something that she has never heard before.

What are Louisa's key lines in the play?

"What does it matter?"

“Let it be so.”

How does Louisa change throughout the play?

From being almost a machine - cold and calculating - she starts to discover she has feelings. She changes by developing an understanding of her emotions.

What are your personal feelings towards Louisa?

I feel great pity for her, especially as her mother is continuously telling her how she wishes she'd never had a family. Louisa will never be able to live a normal life as long as she lives.

Commentary:

“Louisa is one of the older children in the Gradgrind family, and the main plot revolves around her. She marries Bounderby when she is eighteen, falls in love with Harthouse, is kind and helpful to Stephen Blackpool, lacks emotional expression, is protective towards Tom, and finally learns to deal with her emotions. Her father regards her as the exemplar in his family. When, for example, he catches her and Tom stealing a peep at the circus, his reaction is ‘what would your best friend say, Louisa?’ His remarks are not addressed to Tom. And, indeed, on this occasion as on others, she speaks for both the children. She defends their presence at the circus unashamedly, for she ‘wanted to see what it was like’. She defends Tom against any attack by his father by declaring that she persuaded him to accompany her. She is a precocious child. She treats the pompous Bounderby with contempt even early in the novel when he insists on a kiss from her. And, in the same episode, she amply demonstrates how dead she is to all feeling. Dead to all, that is, except her love for Tom. She would do anything for him. It is a measure of her moral development that she is finally courageous enough to choose truth rather than foolishly protect him. Through her, Dickens exemplifies the failure of education, as practised by Gradgrind, to develop sensibilities and emotions. Because of this immaturity she seems an easy victim to James Harthouse. But, for all the harm Harthouse may have done, he effects some good. It is an ironic result of his attentions to Louisa that she finally sees the relevance of emotions... Earlier, Dickens had indicated that there were possible depths to her character. She spends many quiet hours looking into the firelight and imagining many things. She has the gift of ‘wondering’, of imagination. But, whenever this reveals itself, it is repressed by external pressures. She herself even resists any full expression of it - hence her rejection of Sissy’s influence early on and her acceptance of Bounderby’s proposal of marriage. This act is easily seen as a triumph of the cynicism and despair in her nature.”

from **York Notes - Hard Times** by Dominic Hyland. York Press. 1997. (page 67)

“Louisa is the most psychologically rounded character in the novel and her characterisation refutes the criticism that in *Hard Times* Dickens reduces characters to mere types. The reader follows her development from childhood onwards and the psychological astuteness with which she is portrayed complements the more philosophical treatment of the social, political and educational ideas in the novel. Louisa’s spirited and imaginative nature is noted from her first appearance, and her natural repulsion towards Bounderby. The story of her growing up through adolescence into a young woman reveals the anguish she feels but cannot fully comprehend because of her age, limited experience and, crucially, emotional deprivation. Key moments in her life include the question of her marriage to Bounderby and her final encounter with Harthouse. Louisa’s capacity for love and need for affection are channelled into her concern for Tom, and Harthouse represents a very real temptation. Her fraught conversation with her father at the end of the second book carries tremendous emotional power even though the language may not strike us as realistic. Her recovery with the help of Sissy is touching but never sentimental and Dickens does not provide a fairytale happy ending for her in the last chapter of the novel.”

from **An Advanced Guide to Hard Times** by Sean Sheehan. Hodder and Stoughton. 2000. (page 8)

