

REVIEW

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Charles Dickens

HARD TIMES

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Charles Dickens • *Chronicler of an Age*

Charles Dickens, the great English novelist, was born February 7, 1812, in Portsmouth, on the southern coast of England. His father lost his job with the navy pay office when Charles was three, and the family moved to London. All of Dickens's youth was spent in a state of financial uncertainty: his father's fortunes fluctuated considerably, and Charles was never able to attend school regularly. At age 12 he worked 12 to 16-hour days in a shoe polish factory when his family was imprisoned for debt. Later when his father came into a small inheritance, Charles was allowed a taste of formal education, only to have this opportunity snatched away when his father found himself again in debt. By age 15, Charles knew what it was to go hungry and to yearn for a decent education. He had also developed a permanent fear of poverty. These experiences were to serve him well in his future as a novelist, when he was able to recreate the conditions of the underprivileged from the vantage point of personal experience.

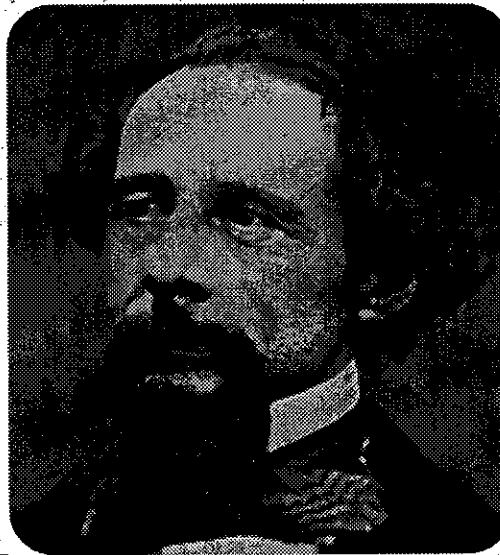
At age 15 Charles began to work as an office boy for two attorneys. In this position he taught himself shorthand, which enabled him to become a newspaper reporter. Meanwhile, he yearned for a career as an actor, but finally gave up this notion at age 22 when he had achieved a considerable reputation as a journalist.

In 1834 Dickens began to publish short narrative sketches under the pseudonym "Boz" in the *Morning Chronicle*. In 1836, on his 24th birthday, *Sketches of Boz*, his first book, was published. That same year he received an invitation from a publisher to write the text to accompany a series of art prints; the resulting publication was Dickens's first novel, *The Pickwick Papers*.

Over the course of the next twenty years, Dickens became a prolific novelist, traveler, lecturer, and father of ten children. His novels all concern social conditions and issues of the Victorian era: poverty, unfair educational systems, the unsafe and difficult working conditions of England's laborers, and the rigid social restrictions of England's class system. His travels took him more than once to America, where he lectured and spoke

out against slavery.

Many of his books were, in part, autobiographical: *Oliver Twist* (1838) and *David Copperfield* (1849) both trace the fortunes of young men who struggle out of poverty to achieve respect, as does *Great Expectations* (1860), which follows a poor young man who receives a mysterious inheritance. Still others of Dickens's novels chronicle other historical periods, like *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), set in the French Revolution. As Dickens's family grew, so did his worries about money: his obsession with avoiding poverty led him to write many of his greatest works quickly, like *A Christmas Carol*, written in just a few days in 1843.



Hard Times, written in 1854, is considered one of Dickens's best social-protest novels. He wrote it for serialized publication: that is, one chapter of the book was published every week for several months in a magazine that Dickens edited. This manner of publication causes the writer to have to construct exciting passages each week, without necessarily knowing how the novel will conclude. Following the serialization, Dickens published the book in its entirety. Dickens's *Little Dorrit* (1855) and *Bleak House* (1852) were published in similar fashions and exhibit the passion and ingenuity of a tireless writer.

Dickens's later life was characterized by extensive travel: he divorced his wife in 1858 and traveled around the world performing public readings of his works. He was hailed everywhere as the greatest writer of his age, with unparalleled powers of observation, great understanding of human nature, and mastery of many techniques. His novels made particularly delightful reading aloud because of their richly drawn and distinctive characters. In June 1870, during one of these reading tours, he suffered a stroke and died instantly at age 58. For three days, thousands of British citizens passed by his open casket in Westminster Abbey to pay their final respects to the most beloved of English writers. Dickens's novels continue to provide a rich legacy of delightful fiction as well as a dense record of life in Victorian England. ★

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SETTING

1840s England, the beginning of the Victorian era. *Hard Times* is set in the mythical town of Coketown, England, an industrial city filled with brick factories which belch black smoke into the air, creating an unhealthy and unpleasant environment. The name "Coketown" symbolically represents a town in which "coke," a fuel byproduct of coal, is produced. Some critics believe that Dickens based Coketown on Birmingham, an industrial city in the English midlands, or on Preston, a textile-manufacturing city which Dickens visited to observe a worker's strike in January 1854, just as he began to write *Hard Times*.

THEMES

Dickens sets out in *Hard Times* to criticize several British institutions while weaving a compelling story about the disintegration of the Gradgrind family. Frequently referred to as his "industrial novel," Dickens's main idea in the book is to expose the failings of British industrialization, which put thousands of people to work in horrid conditions, paying them low wages and dehumanizing them.

His secondary source of criticism is the Victorian trend in education called "utilitarianism," in which students were taught only facts and learned to respect only science and mathematics, while devaluing emotions, the powers of the imagination, and passions in general. Dickens himself believed strongly in the necessity of introducing children to fantasy, fable, gameplaying, and storytelling, all activities which stimulate the healthy exercise of the emotions, a practice which he promoted in the education of his

own ten children. In *Hard Times* Dickens paints a very dismal picture of the so-called "Hard Facts" approach to education and shows its ruinous effects particularly on the Gradgrind children.

As in many of his novels, Dickens also reveals a critical attitude toward England's rigid social class system. He contrasts the natural and loving atmosphere of Sissy's life as a circus performer with the cold and unemotional drawing room of the Gradgrinds. He also takes a critical stance toward the pretension of the Gradgrinds' middle class life as well as the snobbery of Bounderby's life of wealth and privilege. He is particularly critical of the conditions in

which Stephen Blackpool and his fellow textile factory workers must live, and the inequities in the economic system which kept workers living in squalid conditions while the rich squandered their resources on luxuries.

PLOT

As the play opens, Thomas Gradgrind discovers that his children, Louisa and Tom, have been sneaking out of the house to watch a circus which has set up camp on

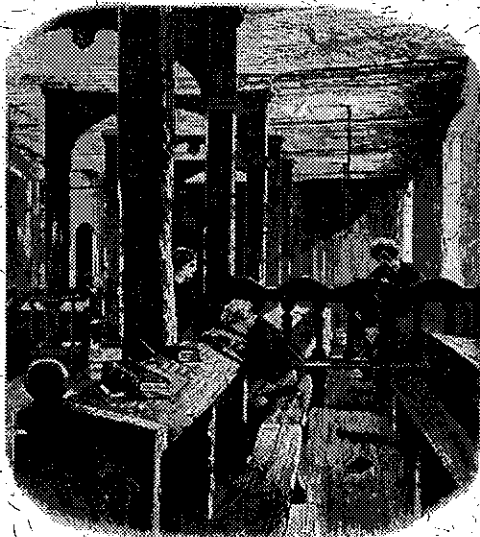
the edge of their industrial city. He highly disapproves of this or any sort of entertainment, and he is raising his children and teaching his pupils the concepts of "Hard Facts." In order to prove the efficacy of this education method, Gradgrind takes on, as a student in his school and boarder in his home, Sissy Jupe, whose father has disappeared from the circus. Sissy quickly finds the life of "Hard Facts" to be a stifling one, and she befriends the gloomy Louisa, who longs for a life where curiosity and emotions

Charles

HARD

are allowed. Sissy is easily humiliated by Bitzer, the star pupil in Bounderby's school, who ridicules her.

Louisa has come to the attention of Josiah Bounderby, a friend of her father's, a banker and manufacturer in Coketown. Bounderby is fond of telling the story of how he rose out of poverty to a position of importance, overcoming the obstacles of a troubled childhood in which his mother deserted him, leaving him in the care of a drunken grandmother. Tom Gradgrind, Louisa's brother, encourages Bounderby's interest in his sister, as he believes that a connection with Bounderby could lead to a job in Bounderby's bank. Bounderby too is scandalized that Louisa and Tom have been to the circus, calling



The typical English schoolroom of the period was cold and cheerless.

PRIMARY

Thomas Gradgrind of Coketown and father teaches his children a factism which is the only thing that matters in the realm of their lives. Louisa, his daughter, is 15 years old and has been in the educational system since she was born. Louisa's younger brother, Tom, is a young man. Sissy Jupe, a former circus performer, is a warm and loving person who shows more life than facts and figures. Gradgrind's school, emphasizing facts and figures, is a philosophy of Josiah Bounderby, a middle-aged factory owner and the prime busybody who runs Coketown. Bounderby, Mrs. Pegler, who shows a great interest in Louisa, Harthouse is a wealthy young man with Louisa. Stephen Blackpool is a fellow worker in Bounderby's textile factory whom the laws of England forbid from divorce. Rachael is a fellow worker. Stephen Blackpool loves her.



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Sissy Jupe a "savage" and a poor influence on the school. Bounderby announces his intention to marry Louisa, who sees no choice but to accept despite the fact that she does not love him, because it will make the fortune of her brother, whom she

dearly loves.


CHARACTERS

a schoolteacher in Tom and Louisa. Gradgrind's pupils that facts and starth knowing, thus eliminating and emotions. Gradgrind, Thomas. the play begins, Louisa der that her father's edu- Tom Gradgrind, a selfish and rebellious ghter of a circus per- ri brought to live in uisa that there is more Bitzer, a student in the factual Gradgrind y is a bullying, mid- nker. Mrs. Sparsit is house for Mr. ysterious woman oundby. James man who falls in love of, a worker in an abusive wife not allow him to tory worker whom not marry. ★

Harthouse, who, bored with his travels, has decided to settle in Coketown. In order to win Louisa's confidence, Harthouse embarks on a friendship with Tom, who has taken up several vices (including gambling, drink, and deceit) since leaving his father's "house of facts." Knowing that the easiest way to her is through her brother, Harthouse decides to pursue Louisa. From the vantage point of her new home Louisa also observes Mrs. Pegler, a strange elderly woman who stands outside of Bounderby's house trying to get a glimpse of the inhabitants.

In the factory, the workers are attempting to form a labor union, but Stephen Blackpool refuses to join and is ostracized by his fellow laborers. Bounderby believes that Blackpool has refused unionization out of a respect for him and summons the worker to praise him. But Blackpool explains that he did not join because he distrusts labor organizers as much as he distrusts the bosses. Believing that Blackpool is a troublemaker, Bounderby fires him, knowing that the man will be unable to find other work in Coketown. Louisa, who has observed this scene and sees Blackpool for the principled man he is, pursues him to his impoverished home and offers him money for survival. Louisa is touched by his humility and Rachael's goodness. Tom, who has accompanied his sister into this squalid section of town, pulls Blackpool aside and tells him to stand outside the bank for an hour on each of the next three evenings, hinting that he may be able to find him a job as a cleaner at the bank. Stephen agrees to this strange

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MASQUERADE BALL ON HORSEBACK!
The Dance of Tullies on their Gay Hired.
THE HALL OF VIGILANCE AND MARCH AND THE HALL OF VIGILANCE.
THE FARMERS OF MIDDLETON

plan. But after three nights when nothing happens, Blackpool packs his few possessions and leaves Coketown to find employment elsewhere. What he doesn't know is that he has been observed standing outside the bank by Mrs. Sparsit and Bitzer, who has become a teller in the bank.

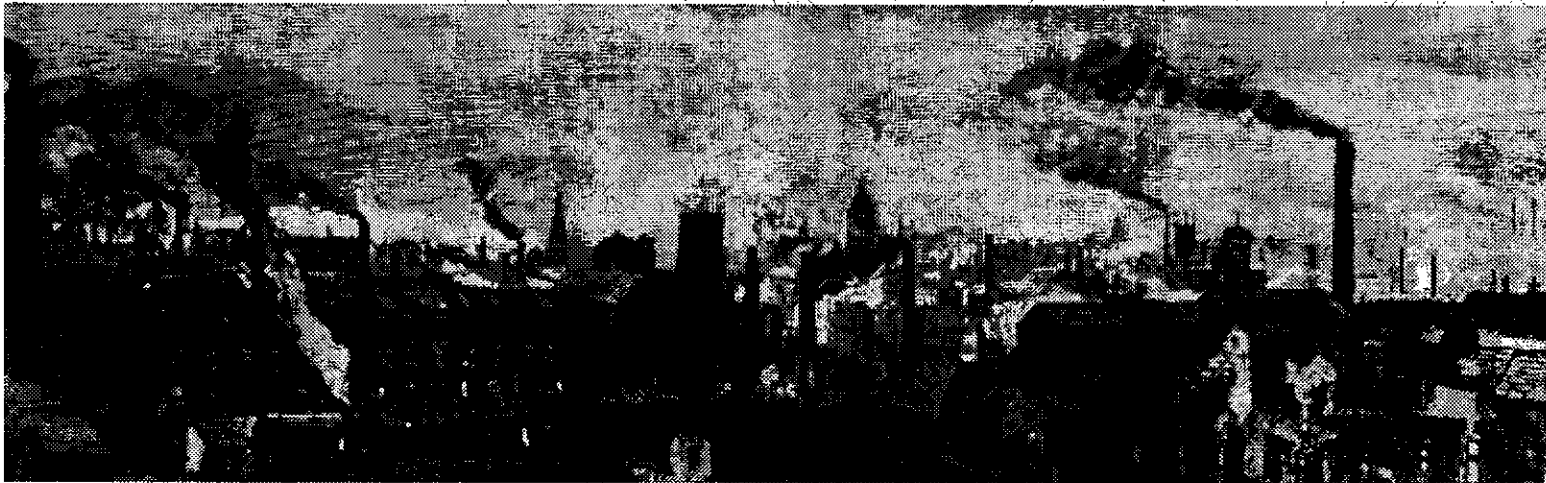
Two events occur which propel the remainder of the story: Bounderby's bank is robbed, and Harthouse gets Louisa to agree to rendezvous with him at a hotel when her husband is out of town. Stephen Blackpool is immediately suspected of the robbery and a posse of police set out to find him. Louisa, on her way to the rendezvous (observed by Mrs. Sparsit) thinks better of it and goes to her father's house to confront him with the failings of her education and unbringing. Harthouse has awakened emotions in her that she is incapable of understanding because she has always been taught to avoid emotion and trust only fact. Gradgrind sees what destruction his teachings have caused, particularly when he sees the kind-hearted Sissy assist Louisa,

who decides to remain in her father's house.

The end of the story features events and revelations involving all the major participants, many of whom come to grief over their mistakes. With hope for a brighter future for children and the working classes in England, Dickens ends the tale. ★

(above) a circus poster of the period.

(below) The town of Leeds in 1885 could have been Dickens's model for Coketown.



Suggesting HARD TIMES

from the Page
to the Stage

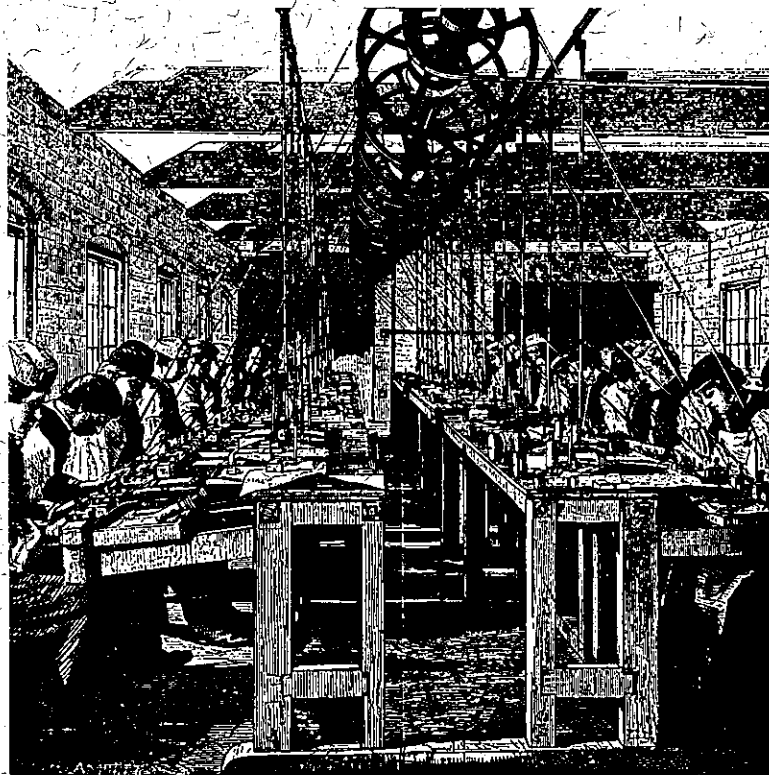
As with all of Dickens's novels, *Hard Times* contains a broad panorama of places and characters brilliantly described by this masterful storyteller. Bringing a novel to the stage always has its challenges—the novel is primarily a narrative form and the theatre is a forum for action and dialogue—but the richness of Dickens's prose makes the task of adaptation to the stage even more daunting. Adaptor Stephen Jeffreys has undertaken this task with a bold idea: he adapted this novel with its over 20 characters into a stage version played by four actors who play many roles. Which actor plays which role becomes part of the intrigue of the play: for example, one actor plays both Gradgrind and his own son, Tom; another actor plays both Bounderby (Louisa's husband) and Harthouse (Louisa's suitor). All the actors play other smaller roles, but these role assignments add a wealth of interest to the production as audiences are asked to watch actors play characters of opposite temperaments and opposite dynamics in the play.

This also means that the actors must rely mostly on their sense of invention to delineate the characters, since total changes in costume are impossible as the story moves swiftly.

Part of the excitement of this kind of production is seeing how inventive and creative actors can be.

The designers and director must also have a keen sense of awareness, not only to make the story clear, but to provide a space and stage trappings which will facilitate the actors' transformation process from one character to another.

The IRT's Upperstage theatre is equipped with a simple platform stage, surrounded by audience on



(above) The Industrial Revolution during the Victorian era enabled the development of factories like this one, which offered employment to many people, but often under dehumanizing conditions.

(below) Costume designs for *Hard Times* by Jeannette de Jong:
(left) Harthouse; (right) young Louisa.

three sides. This intimate setting allows the audience to feel a part of the action. Scenic designer John Stark has had to indicate each of the locations needed in the story—Bounderby's, Gradgrind's, the circus, the bank, the factory, Blackpool's room, etc.—with a scenic suggestion rather than a complete representation of these locations, so the play can move quickly from place to place in a fluid and easy manner. This style of theatre puts focus on the actor as the primary creative artist. By revealing the mechanics of the theatre to the audience's view, both audience and actors alike can take joy in the act of play-making and storytelling together.

Jeffrey's stage adaptation uses Dickens's rich language not only as dialogue, but as narrative. In addition to their dialogue as characters, all four actors also speak some of Dickens's descriptive language not as char-

acters but as storytellers. This technique allows the audience to hear the actual language of the novel, which is particularly important with Dickens, who makes meaning through his choice of rhythms, sounds, metaphors, and dialects. This inclusion of narrative is called "Chamber Theatre" and allows the adaptation of fiction to the stage to preserve the linguistic values of the writer.

Another aspect of Chamber Theatre is the element of selection: the adaptor must edit the novel down to a length that can work effectively onstage. If read aloud, the novel of *Hard Times* would span many hours. The stage adaptation spans less than two hours. This means that Jeffreys had the difficult task of eliminating characters, simplifying detail, and selecting the most important elements of the story to tell his theatre audience. The goal is to do this so skillfully that you won't know what's missing even if you read the complete novel.

Chamber Theatre allows the audience to feel the thrill of being swept away by reading a good book because it invites us to use our imagination. But Chamber Theatre also provides a complete theatrical

experience by bringing to life the words, characters and actions of the novel with movement, sound, costumes, lighting, and scenery. It is as if the pictures in our minds were literally springing to life off the pages of a beloved novel. ★

