

Louisa as victim



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Charles Dickens' *Hard Times* is a bleak book. Its characters are a collection of victims and victimizers, each pitiable or damnable. Of this sorrowful lot, perhaps the most tragic individual is Louisa Gradgrind. Ingrained since childhood with various "Facts" and "ologies," Louisa is rendered emotionally sterile by her "eminently empirical" father, her "whelp" of a brother, and her boorish husband. When a charismatic young charmer unleashes within her a flood of feeling, she recognizes her life to be empty, and is deeply changed. Louisa's transition, from a model of "Fact" to a victim thereof, is a profound event, and forms the climax of the major plot line. Dickens crafts the metamorphosis expertly in the chapters immediately following the bank robbery (VIII through XII of Book II) by sending Louisa through a carefully structured sequence of events – metaphorically described by Mrs. Sparsit as a "staircase." These events show Louisa to be a complex and dynamic character, able to recognize her misery, yet unable to escape it. Dickens first sets Louisa toward her transition after the bank robbery. Louisa fears her brother Tom may know something about what happened that he is not telling, and goes to his room late one night to find out. She approaches him as always, in love, beseeching him with "Tom, have you anything to tell me? If you ever loved me in your life, and have anything concealed from everyone besides, tell it to me" (189). Disregarding her, Tom replies to this emotional plea with a cold "I don't know what you mean, Loo. You have been dreaming" (189). She tries again and again to solicit an answer, pouring her heart out to her brother. Tom, however, remains unresponsive. Her last question, "Have you nothing more to tell me?" (191), after she has already said goodnight, indicates that Louisa is not satisfied by her brother's claim to ignorance, and that she suspects he is hiding

something. With this scene Dickens reveals a small change in Louisa; she no longer places absolute trust in her brother. The author peels away one of Louisa's most important relationships. By beginning to discover the truth about her brother, Louisa has opened Pandora's box, and starts to think about the quality of her other relationships. Her husband, the blustery Mr. Bounderby, certainly seems in need of review. One morning shortly after her encounter with Tom, Louisa finds herself fed up with her husband when he becomes upset over a minor dispute involving Mrs. Sparsit. "'What is the matter with you?' asked Louisa, coldly surprised. 'What has given you offense?'" (195). Louisa has never challenged Bounderby so openly, and indeed Mr. Harthouse thought that "she looked at [Bounderby]...with a proud color in her face that was a new change" (195). Louisa seems to be developing some mettle, and with it becoming less content with her life. Indeed, "the Sparsit action upon Mr. Bounderby ... strengthened the dangerous alienation from her husband" (195). In this scene Dickens propels Louisa further toward rejection of her current life by having her realize her disdain for Mr. Bounderby. The next stair Dickens creates for poor Louisa to step down upon is the death of her mother. Mrs. Gradgrind has always been sickly, and her death does little to change her role in the novel. However, with her last words to Louisa she tells of "something – not an ology at all – that your father has missed" (199). While the old woman does not know what that something is, her mention of it confirms in Louisa what she has already begun to realize, that her life is blank. She ventures further down her staircase. It is important to note that Louisa has not come to all these realizations by herself, but has found a willing guide – tempter really – in the charming and knavish form of Mr. James Harthouse. Harthouse is a bored,

well-to-do man who has come to Coketown to become acquainted with the way of things there. He has set his sights on Louisa, and “ in degrees so fine that she could not retrace them if she tried” (196) has grown with her in “ confidence against her husband” (195). Dickens uses Harthouse as a catalyst for Louisa’s rejection of the people in her life and as the primary agent for her change of character. When he makes his move one stormy night when Bounderby is away, James Harthouse unwittingly releases a flood of emotion in Louisa, and ushers the major story line toward its climax. As he begs and pleads with Louisa to love him, professing his undying devotion, she is clearly confused. She knows adultery is wrong, but cannot deny the feelings welling up within her, feelings she has ignored her entire life. Later she will tell her father, “ if you ask me whether I have loved him, or do love him, I tell you plainly, Father, that it may be so. I don’t know” (218). The point is that Louisa has encountered something with which she cannot cope, despite all her training. In this disconcerted and jumbled state, Louisa tricks Harthouse into leaving, and flees home to confront her father. In this climactic scene Louisa blasts her father’s utilitarian system, and the reader sees her to be fully aware of the gaping hole in her life where soul and spirit should be. “ Colorless,” “ disheveled,” “ defiant” and despairing” (215), Louisa demands of her father, “ How could you give me life, and take from me all he inappreciable things that raise it from the state of conscious death? Where are the faces of my soul? Where are the sentiments of my heart? What have you done, oh, Father, what have you done with the garden that should have bloomed once, in this great wilderness here?” (215). This passionate speech is, of course, a significant departure from the girl who was a model of “ Fact.” Dickens has built Louisa up to this point, and now she can no longer

suppress her emotions . Her words are elegant and poetic; she employs vivid metaphors. Soliloquizing with the drama of a dying diva, the tragic girl finally collapses into an “ insensible heap” (218) while crying to her father “ in a terrible voice, ¶I shall die if you hold me! Let me fall upon the ground!” (218). Louisa has, to say it bluntly, snapped. She could no longer take so meaningless a life, and fought her way free. She does not return to Mr. Bounderby, but ironically finds herself now being cared for by Sissy, the girl she once ignored. With Sissy’s help, Louisa will go on in life, and reclaim some of those things denied to her. Dickens’ forecast for her is hopeful and positive:”...Happy Sissy’s children loving her; all children loving her; she, grown learned in childish lore; thinking no innocent and pretty fancy ever to be despised; trying hard to know her humbler fellow-creatures, and to beautify their lives of machinery and reality with those imaginative graces and delights without which the heart of infancy will wither up; the sturdiest physical manhood will be morally stark death, and the plainest national prosperity figures can show will be the Writing on the Wall – she holding this course as part of no fantastic vow, or bond, or brotherhood, or sisterhood, or pledge, or covenant, or fancy dress, or fancy fair, but simply as a duty to be done.” (292)Louisa survived her descent down the staircase, and indeed emerged stronger. Through the ordeal Dickens has shown Louisa to be a complex and dynamic character; she has the insight to see past the world that entraps so many around her and the courage and strength of will to escape it. Though it is difficult to label any of the characters in *Hard Times* “ triumphant,” Louisa does overcome great odds to free herself. While most of Dickens’ characters learn nothing throughout the novel, Louisa, driven by

her extreme circumstances, perseveres – a single bright ember burning amongst the gray ash.