

Strikingly direct:
dickens's introduction
of mr. gradgrind's
character



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Early in *Hard Times*, Dickens develops the portrait of Gradgrind in the classroom delivering a lesson centred on horses at his model school to his model students. Dickens carries Gradgrind's factual theories, utilitarianism and educational system principle into his domestic family life as well as his schoolroom. Throughout the novel's earliest chapters, we begin to learn in more detail Gradgrind's philosophy put into practise and the interactions with the students that he teaches. Mr Gradgrind's name represents a powerful example of Dickens use of caricature. Gradgrind is a harsh, forceful-sounding word and the use of repeated G's and a short 'a,' creates the automatic presumptions that the reader has towards him. The word grind represents something being worn down, for example machinery, and this is a large aspect of Coketown life. Grinding something, is reducing it to what you want it to be. Just like Gradgrind is sculpturing his students into representatives of himself.

Dickens uses descriptive language that reflects the personality of Mr Gradgrind. The repeated use of 'cellarage' conveys that his eyes are like caves, that they have room in them, reflecting a dark, dingy cellar. They reflect a cold, dank personality that lacks an authentic love and feeling for emotion and life. However, Dickens describes him as 'eagerly sparkled,' this shows an image of his eyes, but suggests in more detail that they are only alive when he is dealing with facts and figures. Dickens shows that Gradgrind has a 'square forefinger' portraying his obsession with a straight, ordered and uniformed way of living and learning. This also links to Gradgrind's dismissive action as he 'waved off the objections calling with his hand,' and

rejecting the way that Sissy has been brought up; he shows both his arrogance and his control of others.

Grandgrind's language fits his character throughout this text. Dickens uses language that indicates that Gradgrind has a harsh and controlling personality. The short clipped sentences, ' Thomas Gradgrind, sir. A man of realities. A man of facts and calculations,' all underline and suggest a man who doesn't waste words, Mr Gradgrind is able to articulate exactly what he wants to put across to his students quickly and more importantly efficiently. The repetition of his names, ' Thomas Gradgrid, Thomas—Thomas Gradgrind,' conveys his importance and his awareness of his standing and his place in the hierarchy of Coketown. Mr Gradgrid shows this control by telling Sissy how she should introduce herself ' Don't call yourself Sissy,' Gradgrind humiliates her and shows her who has authority. Gradgrind also tells her that the circus and horses have no place in the schoolroom, she isn't entitled to share her own opinion, 'you mustn't talk about that, here' and ' you mustn't tell us about the ring, here.' Sissy is told not to address her father in that way, again illustrating Gradgrind's control over his students. Gradgrind wants Sissy to propose her father as ' a veterinary surgeon, a farrier and horse-breaker,' Gradgrind wants to cabal her father with factual definitions. Sissy seems to accept what he says but we can tell she is truly frightened of him through her body language. The use of Gradgrind's mathematical language conveys his obsessive nature and Dickens portrays this using humour; ' multiplication table always in his pocket,' ' pair of scales' and ' simple arithmetic,' all show that he is not using any ' fancy,'

language or allowing any emotion, instincts, affections or feelings to be shown. His actions and thoughts are based on logic facts, period.

Mr Gradgrind, interacts with his students in different ways, treating them differently because of the facts and figures that they possess. Sissy is nervous, polite and embarrassed 'number twenty, blushing...curtseying,' when Gradgrind interacts with her. Dickens shows us her vulnerability and embarrassment when she is unable to define a horse. The children at his school are numbers in a system and not given names, Dickens dehumanises them, 'pitchers to be filled with facts' implies that he won't allow them to do subjects that are creative or involve the imagination, these children aren't allowed to be breathing, living, emotional beings. Dickens uses a metaphor that indicates war and destructive imagery 'seemed a kind of cannon loaded to the muzzle with facts,' gives the reader a sense of the force of his character and passionate belief that Gradgrind will 'blow' the children out of their childhood. Gradgrind tells us the true extent he will go to until facts and figures are all these children live by, 'imagination to be stormed away,' he won't allow for any imagination or fancy in the classroom and it therefore must be discarded. One of the most significant features of this passage is when Sissy Jupe is asked to define a horse, 'Girl number twenty unable to define a horse!' Sissy is unable to give Gradgrind a factual definition of a horse, as she knows the creatures well as breathing, loving animals. Sissy's father works with them everyday, she has grown up with them in her everyday life, not thinking of them as a statement of the exact meaning of a word. Throughout the novel, Sissy discovers that she can't fully understand

facts and figures and her difficulty to understand them becomes harder; this scene is just the beginning of her struggles in the schoolroom

Thomas Gradgrind is a representative character of the utilitarian principle of Victorian political economy, a man who prizes facts above anything else. He is introduced into *Hard Times* as a harsh, controlling, hard-nosed, shaped-tongued protagonist, who is dismissive of others and his opinions are conveyed forcefully and he uses them to be in control and impetuously obeyed. Gradgrind is controlled over his theory of educational system based on the importance of facts and figures. Subsequently when Gradgrind asks Bitzer for his definition of a horse, after Sissy cannot, he refers to Bitzer as his name and not a number like Sissy previously. Gradgrind attempts to make his mark on Sissy by applying his way of teaching to her but eventually comes to the realisation that there is a fault in the educational system.