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## Analysis Of Hard Times By Charles Dickens

Charles Dickens' presentation of characters throughout the novel *Hard Times* is significant to the perception of the story and the individual characters. Often, the voice of the author can easily sway one's opinions on the novel they have written, as can be seen in *Hard Times*. Dickens' presentation of Louisa Gradgrind in *Hard Times* allows readers to see the emotional and moral value that those in the lower classes may experience, and the emotional emptiness that often resulted from upper-class societies in the Victorian Era.

Louisa first began to understand the value in lower-class life through experiences with Sissy that allowed her to understand the deeper sense of humanity that can often be found in lower-class life. Towards the end of the novel, Dickens reflects on the knowledge that Louisa has gained through Sissy. He writes, " But, happy Sissy's happy children loving her... she holding this course as part of no fantastic vow, or bond, or brotherhood, or sisterhood, or pledge, or covenant, or fancy dress, of fancy hair, but simply as a duty to be done- did Louisa see these things of herself? These things were to be." This passage demonstrates how the life that Sissy has had directly impacts and shapes the life that Louisa is in the process of leading. From Sissy, Louisa was able to begin to comprehend how life shouldn't just be of the mind, but should instead be an active and more free-spirited existence, something that Sissy was able to pass on to Louisa because of her upbringing. Although Louisa is not able to see these things of herself at this point in time, she is able to value Sissy and the lower-class' humanity and strive for a fuller existence.

At a young age, Louisa and her brother quickly realized that they were not to engage in the activities of the lower classes, but she decides to break the mold by reaching out to them. This portrayal makes her look like more of a struggling hero than a monotonous member of upper-class society. Through her representation, we see that Louisa has a special gift of understanding and empathizing with members of a more impoverished society. In order to help Mr. Blackpool with his many burdens, Louisa decides to give him some money. Dickens writes, "Louisa colored, and a purse appeared in her hand. The rustling of a banknote was audible, as she unfolded one and laid it on the table. 'Rachael, will you tell him- for you know-how, without offense- that this is freely his, to help him on his way? Will, you entreat him to take it?'. This presentation of Louisa as someone who is in support of the message and desires of the lower class society so much that she is willing to sponsor them financially. She connects with their humanity and vulnerability, which creates in her a feeling of envy on some level but also allows her to value them and their way of a pure, honest, and well-rounded life. Throughout *Hard Times*, Louisa struggles with how to abide by social norms, yet still be her own individual person. Louisa desired to please her family, so she married Mr. Bounderby because it was socially acceptable. However, she soon realized that she had made a huge mistake. She was now trapped in a loveless and unsatisfactory marriage. Her entire family knew that she wasn't particularly fond of Bounderby, as Tom says, "' My sister Loo?' said Tom. 'She never cared for old Bounderby... Why won't you tell me, Mr. Harthouse, that you really suppose my sister does care for old Bounderby,'" (138). Louisa had a desperate need to be accepted by her family, but in acting on that need she was left feeling hollow and numb to herself and her surroundings. Dickens' presentation of Louisa shows a girl who makes choices based on others, instead of herself, which allows the reader to enter into her emotional pain as they can

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understand the frustration and dissatisfaction she is dealing with. Later on in the novel, we find Louisa having a very important conversation with her father in which she explains why she wishes that her marriage would have been based on love and not on social standing, as can be seen by those in the lower classes and how jealous she is of those who got to make such decisions out of something deeper than simple practicality. This presentation of the reader shows her emotional anxiety and emptiness that leads to her appreciation of a simpler life. Louisa always had a dream of what her life would be like had she not had to hold herself up to the impossible intellectual standards of the upper-class society. Through the imagination of her ideal life, Dickens was able to represent the feeling of emptiness and dissatisfaction that can result from the wealthier and more rigid social classes. He writes, "Neither, as she approached her old home now, did any of the best influences of old home descend upon her. The dreams of childhood- its airy fables, its graceful, beautiful, humane, impossible adornments of the world beyond... what had she to do with these?" (197). Dickens is able to show through this passage the sharp contrast between Louisa's desired childhood, and the reality of her childhood, which she has yet to fully recover from. He presents her return to home as a very sad and empty experience, unlike one would expect from a child returning home after being away. This small sentiment beautifully presents the numbness and dissatisfaction that Louisa experienced as a result of living the upper-class life that she never truly wanted, and presents her as a character weakened by the emptiness of money and knowledge.

In addition to her desire for a more emotionally charged life, Louisa has a sense of family that couldn't be seen in most upper-class families, including her own. The small sense of family that the Gradgrinds did have was so clearly in contrast with the behaviors of most upper classes, that they painted those classes as more emotionless societies. As Tom stood angry before Louisa after he learned of her sharing the fact that he was the bank robber, Dickens writes, "They all confusedly went out- Louisa crying to him that she forgave him, and loved him still and that he would one day be sorry to have left her so, and glad to think of these her last words, far away- when someone ran against them. Mr. Gradgrind and Sissy, who were both before him while his sister yet clung to his shoulder, stopped, and reconciled". Dickens presents Louisa as a girl desiring to connect deeply with her emotions and moral standards through her family, yet is constantly being discouraged to do so. Because of this, she is left feeling discontent and empty. She tries to leave behind her emotional disconnectedness by supporting her brother and is crushed when he fails to do the same. The conflict between Tom and Louisa that Dickens presents shows Louisa as a numb and confused character trying to go against the grain of the overly structured and factual citizens of upper-class Victorian England.

Lastly, Louisa makes it clear from the beginning of *Hard Times* that she feels burned by her upper-class upbringing and wishes her life had been more wholesome and balanced, and less factually based. Gradgrind soon realizes this, allowing Dickens to express the inevitable fall that will come from those in the upper-class society in the Victorian Era who have grown up without a true sense of themselves. As Gradgrind is speaking to Louisa, he comes to know her true feelings inside and says, "The only support on which I leaned, and the strength of which it seemed, and still does seem, impossible to question, has given way in an instant. I am stunned by these discoveries. I have no selfish meaning in what I say, but I find the shock of what broke upon me last night to be very heavy indeed". Finally, Louisa is able to share with her father all of the emotional emptiness that she has been feeling so that he can understand her struggles and begin to adjust his own opinions based upon her experiences. This presentation of these two characters coming together as one force shows how a life based on information instead of action and enriching experience is a life that will eventually crumble, which is exactly what

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Louisa was experiencing. Dicken's portrayal of Louisa in this circumstance can completely sway the reader towards the point of wanting to stand in the fight against facts because ultimately we have so much more to learn from the lower class than anyone could ever learn from the shallow upper-class society.

Dickens' presentation of Louisa Gradgrind in *Hard Times* allows the readers to understand the emotional and moral value that those in the lower classes may experience, as well as the emotional emptiness that often resulted from the upper-class societies in Victorian England. Through Louisa's conversations with Sissy, personal experience, and an abnormal sense of moral and emotional justice that she feels, Dickens is able to accomplish his goal of demonstrating how upper-class systems do not play out as intended and often people can gain so much more from leading a simpler, more well-rounded life as can be seen in lower-class societies at the time.

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