



A man of realities

In the industrial city of Coketown, a place dominated by grim factories and oppressed by spirals of black smoke, the dark-eyed, rigid man Thomas Gradgrind has established a school.

Charles Dickens
Hard Times
(1854)

Chapter 2

Thomas Gradgrind, sir. A man of realities. A man of fact and calculations. A man who proceeds upon the principle that two and two are four, and nothing over, and who is not to be talked into allowing for anything over¹. Thomas Gradgrind, sir – peremptorily² Thomas – Thomas Gradgrind. With a rule and a pair of scales³, and the multiplication table always in his pocket, sir, ready to weigh and measure any parcel of human nature, and tell you exactly what it comes to. It is a mere question of figures⁴, a case of simple arithmetic. You might hope to get some other nonsensical belief into the head of George Gradgrind, or Augustus Gradgrind or John Gradgrind, or Joseph Gradgrind (all suppositious⁵, no existent persons), but into the head of Thomas Gradgrind – no, sir!

In such terms Mr Gradgrind always mentally introduced himself, whether to his private circle of acquaintance⁶, or to the public in general. In such terms, no doubt, substituting the words 'boys and girls', for 'sir', Thomas Gradgrind now presented Thomas Gradgrind to the little pitchers⁷ before him, who were to be filled so full of facts.

Indeed, as he eagerly sparkled at them⁸ from the cellarage⁹ before mentioned, he seemed a kind of cannon loaded to the muzzle¹⁰ with facts, and prepared to blow them clean out of the regions of childhood at one discharge¹¹. He seemed a galvanizing apparatus¹², too, charged with a grim mechanical substitute¹³ for the tender young imaginations that were to be stormed away¹⁴.

'Girl number twenty,' said Mr Gradgrind, squarely pointing with his square forefinger, 'I don't know that girl. Who is that girl?'

'Sissy Jupe, sir,' explained number twenty, blushing¹⁵, standing up, and curtsying¹⁶.

'Sissy is not a name,' said Mr Gradgrind. 'Don't call yourself Sissy. Call yourself Cecilia.'

'It's father as calls me¹⁷ Sissy, sir,' returned the young girl in a trembling voice, and with another curtsy.

'Then he has no business to do it,' said Mr Gradgrind. 'Tell him he mustn't. Cecilia Jupe. Let me see. What is your father?'

'He belongs to the horse-riding, if you please, sir.'

Mr Gradgrind frowned¹⁸, and waved off the objectionable calling with his hand¹⁹.

'We don't want to know anything about that, here. You mustn't tell us about that, here. Your father breaks²⁰ horses, does he?'

'If you please, sir, when they can get any to break, they do break horses in the ring, sir.'

'You mustn't tell us about the ring, here. Very well, then describe your father as a horsebreaker. He doctors sick horses, I dare say?'

'Oh yes, sir.'

'Very well, then. He is a veterinary surgeon, a farrier²¹ and horsebreaker. Give me your definition of a horse.'

(Sissy Jupe thrown into the greatest alarm²² by this demand.)

'Girl number twenty unable to define a horse!' said Mr Gradgrind, for the general behoof²³ of all the little pitchers. 'Girl number twenty possessed of no facts, in reference to one of the commonest of animals! Some boy's definition of a horse. Bitzer, yours.'

The square finger, moving here and there, lighted suddenly on Bitzer, perhaps because he chanced to sit in the same ray of sunlight which, darting in²⁴ at one of the bare windows of the intensely whitewashed room, irradiated Sissy. For, the boys and girls sat on face of the inclined plane in two compact bodies, divided up the centre by a

- 1 who is ... over. Che non si lascia convincere ad ammettere niente di più.
- 2 peremptorily. Perentoriamente.
- 3 a pair of scales. Una bilancia.
- 4 figures. Cifre.
- 5 suppositious. Immaginarie.
- 6 acquaintance. Conoscenze.
- 7 pitchers. Recipienti.
- 8 sparkled at them. Li guardava con i suoi occhi sfavillanti.
- 9 from the cellarage. Dalle caverne (degli occhi).
- 10 a kind ... muzzle. Una specie di cannone caricato fino all'imboccatura.
- 11 at one discharge. Con una scarica.
- 12 galvanizing apparatus. Impianto elettrolitico.
- 13 a grim ... substitute. Un arcigno surrogato meccanico.
- 14 stormed away. Espugnate.
- 15 blushing. Arrossendo.
- 16 curtsying. Facendo un inchino.
- 17 It's ... calls me. È mio padre che mi chiama.
- 18 frowned. Aggrottò le sopracciglia.
- 19 waved ... his hand. Liquidò la disdicevole professione con un gesto della mano.
- 20 breaks. Doma.
- 21 farrier. Maniscalco.
- 22 thrown ... alarm. Enormemente allarmata.
- 23 for the ... behoof. A beneficio.
- 24 darting in. Penetrando.



- 50 narrow interval²⁵; and Sissy, being at the corner of a row on the other side, came in for the beginning of a sunbeam, of which Bitzer, being at the corner of a row on the other side, a few rows in advance, caught the end. But, whereas the girl was dark-eyed and dark-haired, that she seemed to receive a deeper and more lustrous colour from the sun when it shone upon her, the boy was so light-eyed and light-haired that the self-same rays appeared to draw out of him what little colour he ever possessed. His cold eyes would hardly have been eyes, but for²⁶ the short ends of lashes²⁷ which, by bringing them into immediate contrast with something paler than themselves, expressed their form. His shortcropped²⁸ hair might have been a mere continuation of the sandy freckles²⁹ on his forehead and face. His skin was so unwholesomely³⁰ deficient in the natural tinge, that he looked as though, if he were cut, he would bleed white.
- 60 'Bitzer,' said Thomas Gradgrind. 'Your definition of a horse.'
- 'Quadruped. Graminivorous³¹. Forty teeth, namely twenty-four grinders³², four eye-teeth, and twelve incisive. Sheds coat³³ in the spring; in marshy countries, sheds hoofs³⁴, too. Hoofs hard, but requiring to be shod with iron. Age known by marks in mouth.'
- 65 'Now girl number twenty,' said Mr Gradgrind. 'You know what a horse is.'
- She curtsied again, and would have blushed deeper, if she could have blushed deeper than she had blushed all this time. Bitzer, after rapidly blinking at³⁵ Thomas Gradgrind with both eyes at once, and so catching the light upon his quivering³⁶ ends of lashes that they looked like the antennae of busy insects, put his knuckles³⁷ to his freckled forehead, and sat down again.
- 70

- 25 narrow interval. Stretto spazio.
26 but for. Se non fosse per.
27 lashes. Ciglia.
28 shortcropped. Corti.
29 sandy freckles. Lentiggini gialle.
30 unwholesomely. Malsanamente.
31 Graminivorous. Erbivoro.
32 grinders. Molari.
33 Sheds coat. Perde il pelo.
34 hoofs. Zoccoli.
35 blinking at. Aver guardato di sottocchi.
36 quivering. Tremanti.
37 knuckles. Nocche.

LITERARY COMPETENCE

> VOCABULARY

1 READ the text and match the highlighted words with their Italian translation.

- | | |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1 riempiti | 6 sciocco |
| 2 domatore di cavalli | 7 lentiginosa |
| 3 imbiancata | 8 cura |
| 4 avrebbe sanguinato | 9 pesare |
| 5 fila | 10 con impazienza |

> COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING A TEXT

2 READ the text again and answer the following questions.

- Where does the scene take place?
- What is this place like?
- What is Thomas Gradgrind doing?
- Who does he pick on?
- What does Gradgrind object to about her?
- What is the girl asked by Mr Gradgrind?
- Who is Bitzer?
- What is he remarkable for?
- What does he provide?



> COMPETENCE: ANALYSING AND INTERPRETING A TEXT**3 FOCUS** on Mr Gradgrind.

- 1 Complete the table below with words or phrases describing his physical appearance, interests and instruments of work.

Physical appearance	Interests	Instruments of work

- 2 Which overall impression do these details create?
- 3 What does he represent?
- 4 His name is composed of two words: 'grade', a particular standard or level of quality of a product, and 'grind', to crush into powder. The onomatopoeic sound and the inferred meaning of this name suggest a lot about this educator's personality. Which definition would you choose to describe him?

4 FOCUS on the students and answer the following questions.

- 1 How does Mr Gradgrind refer to them?
- 2 How does he call them?
- 3 How would you describe most of his students' personalities?
- 4 How does the girl differ from the other students? How is this difference underlined?

5 IDENTIFY the theme of the extract.

> COMPETENCE: ESTABLISHING LINKS AND RELATIONSHIPS

- 6 DISCUSS.** *Hard Times* is in many ways a novel about the social condition of poverty, but very few of its major characters are actually poor. With that in mind, do you think the book does an effective job of shaping our view of poverty? Why or why not?