

*Hard Times's James Harthouse - Harbinger of Dreams*

Manipulatively twisting the deprived individuals of Coketown to cure his incessant boredom, James Harthouse of Charles Dickens's *Hard Times* flawlessly reveals the emotional suppression industrialism has created in the Victorian world. A wealthy son with little to achieve in his own town, Harthouse arrives on the blackened streets of industrial Coketown seeking to find some form of entertainment. His journey leads him to the restrained Louisa Bounderby and her self-centered brother Tom Gradgrind. Harthouse soon discovers the eagerness for fancy their rigid upbringing has created, a trait stressed by the feelings of Sissy Jupe, a lower-class girl the Gradgrind household takes in. Making use of this deficiency, Harthouse attempts to gain Louisa's affections through the alteration of those around her and his powerful charisma while ignoring the possible threat of intervention by others. Exposing the longing created by Tom and Louisa's deprivation before facing defeat in the face of Sissy's love, Harthouse solidifies Dickens's caustic arguments against industrialism through his own role as an emotional catalyst for the cold satire of Coketown.

Harthouse's arrival in this town and fast friendship with Tom cue the beginning of the novel's radical transformations. His invitation to the younger man of a rich smoke and "intimate" conversation after first meeting him make Tom feel uncommonly respected after years of treatment as the moody and dishonest child he has become without love (Dickens 137). Easily slipping into place as Tom's closest friend, Harthouse becomes an "agreeable demon" in his manipulation and uses his new acquaintance as a

way to learn more about Louisa's forced marriage to the mill owner of Coketown (137). Tom's dependency on Louisa makes him a vital asset in Harthouse's forming plot to befriend the young woman and leads to his constantly taking advantage of Tom's emotional weaknesses by flattering the "whelp" into showing complete "admiration of his patron" (178). Tom's lack of social awareness embodies the sentimentally naïve nature of industrial views, weakening him to Harthouse's grasp as he changes his views to please his friend despite all the factual sense he was once taught. Through filling Tom's emotional gaps and raising the younger man's selfish ego, Harthouse gains control with an emotional respect previously unknown to Tom Gradgrind.

Having thus exploited the weakness of Coketown's factual obsession, Harthouse proceeds to employ this chance in further use of his false caring and sweet words with Louisa. Her brother's past insistence that her marriage, which in no way grants her a "fanciful, fantastic or... sentimental" existence, merely makes things "uncommonly jolly" for him, uncovering the dead-end future the young woman surrendered herself to for her brother's sake (103, 138). This emotionally misguided trait from her utilitarian childhood finds comfort in the views Harthouse offers her, giving her a belief "in a wider and nobler" world than she once knew (168). As their close friendship continues, Louisa is tempted as this image of "the very Devil" lures her away from the cold-hearted life society encourages her to lead (180). A flawed emotional state and inexperience with love from her hollow upbringing entice her into "descending" from her previous way of living into a "pit of shamed ruin" as her affections for Harthouse grow (201). When Harthouse confesses that she is his "dearest love" and attempts to convince her to have an

affair with him, Louisa fears ruining her life of utilitarian ideals and flees (215). She retreats to accuse her father of robbing the “sentiments of [her] heart” and “garden that should have bloomed” within her, which were instead crushed under the weight of her studies (215). The torrential storm of “heavy drops” during this time results in burst pipes, overflowed drains, and “streets... under water,” blasting away the factual rigidity with the strength of undefeatable emotion returning to Coketown once more as “feelings once suppressed” break loose (210, 213, 218).

Meanwhile, Harthouse’s downfall begins as he misleadingly awaits Louisa’s arrival for the affair he anticipated. He becomes “horribly bored by existing circumstances” when she vanishes, making the wait “like the Holy Office and slow torture” to his demonic traits (225). The change in probable actions from Louisa’s bursting emotions misleads Harthouse’s shallow games, flawlessly terminating his strategies with newborn truth and feeling. He resorts to repetitively asking Tom about Louisa’s whereabouts, forgetting the false meeting he had set up earlier to distract the younger man from his potential relationship with Louisa.

As his elaborate scheme unravels before him and causes Louisa and Tom’s growing annoyance, the kind and serious Sissy appears to stop any chance of further damage. Her “modest fearlessness” and truthful character counteract Harthouse’s collapsing plans as her emotionally rounded personality work out schemes, giving his artificial character a distinct feeling of unease (229). Sissy’s unshakable faith in her own heart grants her the wisdom to inform Harthouse that he is to immediately “depart from this place” and forget Louisa, dictating this imperative as the “only reparation” for his

otherwise twisted power (231, 232). The vision that her low-class upbringing grants her proves the justice of her sentimental integrity, crushing the falsities of Harthouse's inexperienced plotting. Becoming a "Great Pyramid of failure" from his defeat at the hands of a mere "stroller," and despite his embodying the utilitarian definition of monetary happiness, Harthouse surrenders the immense power he has built to return home, notifying his relatives of his perpetual and superficial boredom (233).

Though he exits Coketown as the superficially weak persona he has always embodied, Harthouse's presence in Dickens's *Hard Times* doubtlessly serves a vital position in the awakening of feeling and emergence of honest emotions within the novel. His powerful use of dreams and desires, especially in the cases of Tom and Louisa, exhibit the temptation of fancy in the confines of Coketown's industrially rigid walls. Through his dedication to the alteration and manipulation of their restricted emotions and the overpowering defeat he faces from the truthfulness of Sissy and the now-passionate Gradgrind children, Harthouse unveils both the power of exploitation in the emotionally underdeveloped industrial world and the weakness such strategies face when confronted with honest and dedicated acts from those who know better. This exposed power and weakness characterize Dickens's strong opposition to the industrial world, supplementing his argument against the detached, factory-based economy of his own time and marking it for a proper defeat.

Works Cited:

Dickens, Charles. *Hard Times*. New York, NY: Signet, 1980.