

An Introduction to *Hard Times*: its structure

The novel is divided into three sections, “Sowing,” “Reaping,” and “Garnering”—are a reference to the Biblical saying: ‘for whatsoever a man soweth [sowed], that shall he also reap’. Besides, these agricultural titles are ironic alongside the industrial focus of the novel. In the first section, the seeds are planted for the rest of the novel—Sissy comes to live with the Gradgrinds, Louisa is married to Bounderby, and Tom is apprenticed at the bank. In the second section, the characters reap the results of those seeds—Louisa’s collapse, Tom’s robbery, and Stephen’s exile. In the third section, whose title, “Garnering,” literally means collecting or picking up the pieces of the harvest that were missed, the characters attempt to restore equilibrium (a state of balance) to their lives, and they face their futures with new emotional resources at their disposal. The titles of the sections, however, refer not only to the harvesting of events, but also to the harvesting of ideas. In the first chapter of *Hard Times*, Gradgrind declares his intention to “plant” only facts in his children’s minds, and to “root out everything else,” such as feelings and fancies. This metaphor returns to haunt him when, just before her collapse, Louisa points to the place where her heart should be and asks her father, “[W]hat have you done with the garden that should have bloomed once, in this great wilderness here?” Louisa implies that by concentrating all his efforts on planting facts in his children’s minds, Gradgrind has neglected to plant any sentiments in their hearts, leaving her emotionally barren.

One of the critics summarizes the plot selectively and subjectively, focusing on the fate of Stephen Blackpool as both a social and political issue, i.e. on Stephen as working-class and on his desire to divorce his drunken wife. When he goes to see Bounderby to ask for help in divorcing his wife, Bounderby lets him know bluntly that divorce is only for the rich, and Simpson notes acerbically his and ‘Mr Dickens’ disgust [that] neither death nor the laws will divorce him’. The same critic reminds us of the idea of agricultural development embodied in the titles of each book of *Hard Times* (Sowing, Reaping, and Garnering) when he rehearses some aspects of the plot.