

HARD TIMES

(Charles Dickens)

The passage below is taken from **HARD TIMES** written by Charles Dickens in 1854. The novel illustrates the dreary conditions of workers in industrial England in the mid-19th century and the effects of a merely "Utilitarian" vision of life, which deprived people of their identity by suppressing all creative and spiritual values.

COKETOWN

It was a town of red brick, or of red brick that would have been red if the smoke and ashes(1) had allowed it; but as matters stood(2) it was a town of unnatural red and black like the painted face of a savage. It was a town of machinery and tall chimneys, out of which interminable serpents of smoke trailed themselves for ever and ever, and never got uncoiled(3). It had a black canal in it, and a river that ran purple with ill-smelling dye(4), and vast piles of building full of windows where there was a rattling(5) and a trembling all day long, and where the piston of the steam engine worked monotonously up and down, like the head of an elephant in a state of melancholy madness. It contained several large streets all very like one another, and many small streets still more like one another, inhabited by people equally like one another, who all went in and out at the same hours, with the same sound upon the same pavements, to do the same work, and to whom every day was the same as yesterday and tomorrow, and every year the counterpart of the last and the next.

1. ashes = cenere
2. as matters stood = come stavano i fatti
3. trailed themselves... uncoiled = si allungavano ininterrottamente e non si disperdevano mai
4. ill-smelling dye = tintura maleodorante
5. rattling = frastuono

gen 29-17.44

Check your understanding

The novel is set in Coketown, "coke" being a kind of coal used in industry to feed steam engines. Coketown becomes the symbol of industrial towns in Victorian times.

1. Consider the first paragraph. What effect does the coal smoke have on the outward appearance of the town? Does the simile tell us anything about the kind of the life which is led there?
2. Industrial pollution is described at the beginning of the second paragraph. Point out what refers to:
 - air
 - noise
 - water
3. What narrative technique does the writer use? First person, third person?
4. How would you describe the language used? Simple, complex, colloquial, formal, descriptive?

feb 3-18.04

HARD TIMES

The story takes place in the industrial north, in one of the mill towns of Lancashire and highlights the effects of the industrial revolution on men and the environment.

- **COKETOWN** is the fictional name of the town where the novel is set;
- Main themes: the exploitation of the working class by an unfeeling, self-righteous middle class of industrialists and the damaging consequences of emphasising factual knowledge;
- Main features of **COKETOWN**: red brick, machinery, tall chimneys, a black canal, a river, vast piles of buildings full of windows, several large streets like one another, many small streets like one another, people like one another;
- People lead a very monotonous life since they all do the same things at the same time, and all days and places are alike.

feb 1-11.31

Charles Dickens

Charles Dickens (1812-1870) was the most popular Victorian novelist and one of the most significant English writers of all times. Many of his novel first appeared in English periodicals, and the various instalments were awaited by the public with real enthusiasm.

Dickens excelled in depicting the life of the working and lower middle classes. He is famous for his vivid pictures of London's poorer districts and his criticism of social injustice. His characters have little psychological development but are described with great realism, as well as with humour and a sense of human sympathy, in a style that reproduced the popular speech with which he was so familiar.

Dickens was able to create a whole world of human beings animated with the movement of life.

His best known novels include *Oliver Twist* and *Hard Times* which are novels of social conditions; *The Pickwick Papers*, in which he revealed his genius as a comic writer; *Burnaby Rudge* and *A tale of two cities*, two historical novels; *A Christmas Carol*, the most famous of his Christmas stories and *David Copperfield* which is generally considered his masterpiece and is largely based on events of his life.

feb 3-18.11

The Industrial Revolution

In the course of the 18th century scientific and industrial progress brought about radical changes in the methods of making goods. The invention of machinery and the discovery of new power sources caused the growth of the factory system of production and led to the transformation of the whole economic and social system. All these deep changes are generally known by the name of Industrial Revolution. Slow at first, the transformation gathered speed between 1760 and 1815 and from England it soon spread to other European countries and the USA. The Industrial Revolution first spread in Britain because it had plenty of raw materials: cotton could easily be imported and coal and iron were present in British Isles. The great increase in population made quite a large labour force available. During the 18th century Britain enjoyed general political and civil stability. New markets were opened up overseas and a large navy had to be supplied. A series of great inventions in the mechanical field provided the necessary technical instruments. The first change occurred in the textile industry, where some new inventions revolutionized the traditional process of spinning and weaving. James Watt improved the steam engine and applied it to the new machinery. Gradually the steam engine supplanted the power supplied by men and water, so coalmines became the main wealth of the country. One important effect of this industrial growth was the improvement in transport. The raw materials and the finished products had to be moved. Developments in Britain involved roads, canals, railways and shipping. In 1814 George Stephenson built his first successful steam locomotive and later the first real railway line, which was opened between Stockton and Darlington in 1825.

feb 2-16.51