

Charles Dickens "Hard Times" (A description of Coketown, the fictional location for the novel, based on the town of Preston, nr Manchester, England).

It was a town of red brick, or of brick that would have been red if the smoke and ashes had allowed it; but, as matters stood 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 (endless) serpents of smoke trailed themselves for ever an ever, and never got uncoiled. It had a black canal in it, and a river that ran purple with ill-smelling dye, and vast piles of building full of windows where there was a rattling and a trembling all day long, and where the piston of the steam-engine worked monotonously (same sound) up and down, like the head of an elephant in a state of melancholy (sad, depressing) 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...

A sunny midsummer day. There was such a thing sometimes, even in Coketown.

Seen from a distance in such weather, Coketown lay shrouded in a haze of its own, which appeared impervious (unaffected) to the sun's rays... The streets were hot and dusty on the summer day, and the sun was so bright that it even shone through the heavy vapour drooping over Coketown, and could not be looked at steadily. Stokers (people that attend to a fire) emerged from low underground doorways into factory yards, and sat on steps, and posts, and palings, wiping their swarthy visages (dark/dirty faces), and contemplating coals. The whole town seemed to be frying in oil. There was a stifling smell of hot oil everywhere. the steam-engines shone with it, the dresses of the hands were soiled with it, the mills throughout their many storeys oozed and trickled it. The atmosphere of those fairy palaces was like the breath of the simoom (hot/dry/dusty desert wind-Africa); and their inhabitants, wasting with heat, toiled languidly in the dessert. But no temperature made the melancholy-mad elephants more mad or more sane. Their wearisome heads went up and down at the same rate, in hot weather and cold, wet weather and dry, fair weather and foul. the measured motion of their shadows on the walls, was the substitute Coketown had to show for he shadows of rustling woods; while, for the summer hum of insects, it could offer, all the year round, from the dawn of Monday to the night of Saturday, the whirr of shafts and wheels.

Drowsily they whirred all through this sunny day, making the passenger more sleepy and more hot as he passed the humming walls of the mills. Sunblinds, and sprinklings of water, a little cooled the main streets and the shops; but the mills, and the courts and alleys, baked at a fierce heat.

Down upon the river that was black and thick with dye, some Coketown boys who were at large - a rare sight there - rowed a crazy boat, which made a spumous (foamy) track upon the water as it jogged along, while every dip of an oar stirred up vile smells. But the sun itself, however beneficent (performing good acts), generally, was less kind to Coketown than hard frost, and rarely looked intently into any of its closer regions without engendering (creating) more death than life. So does the eye of Heaven itself become an evil eye, when incapable or sordid (filthy) hands are interposed (interfere) between it and the things it looks upon to bless.

Q How was Charles Dickens influential in the Industrial Revolution?

A Dear Jackie,

The term 'industrial revolution' was coined by a nineteenth-century historian called Arnold Tonybee in the 1880s.

He saw that in the late eighteenth-century, Britain's economy had depended mainly on individual craftsmen, hand-tools and small workshop or domestic production; but that within a few generations this changed completely, shifting towards large powered machine production situated in factories.

This produced a great deal of new wealth for some, but meant that many people had to move to cities to find work, and that large factories, with chimneys belching smoke, were built over many green areas.

You can read a description of this spoliation in my novel *Hard Times*, in which I talk about the northern town of Coketown, where the factories disfigure the landscape and the workers are unhappy automata.

At the same time, I was impressed with the ability of industry to create wealth, and an industrialist like Rouncewell (from my novel *Bleak House*) represents the positive side of the Industrial Revolution as I saw it.

There was a whole genre of literature, known as 'the industrial novel', in which writers such as myself, Elizabeth Gaskell or Benjamin Disraeli wrote fictional accounts of the great changes that were going on around us. But it would be hard to say that any of us 'were influential in the Industrial Revolution' as such, none of us being industrialists, capitalists or factory owners.

This letter was written by a historian pretending to be Charles Dickens.

“Hard Times”
by Charles Dickens

1. Coketown is a fictional location. What city and country does this excerpt really portray?
2. What type of place is Coketown? What goes on there?
3. Choose ten descriptive words that you feel best portray this industrialized city?
4. According to the letter written to “Jackie” what did Britain’s economy depend on before the Industrial Revolution?
5. Name some positive and negative aspects of the Industrial Revolution that are mentioned in this letter?
6. Do you think Dickens was in favor of the Industrial Revolution? Explain.
7. Some people refer to the Industrial Revolution as the “Death of Nature.” Try to explain what they might mean by that statement. Do you agree? Why?