

Life and works

Charles Dickens was born in Portsmouth, on the southern coast of England, in 1812. He had an **unhappy childhood**. His father was imprisoned for debt and at the age of 12 he was **put to work in a factory**. When the family finances improved and his father was released, he was sent to a school in London. At 15, he found employment as an office boy at a lawyer's and studied **shorthand** at night. By 1832 he had become a **very successful shorthand reporter of parliamentary debates** in the House of Commons, and began to work as a **reporter for a newspaper**. In 1833 his first story appeared and in 1836, still a newspaper reporter, he adopted the pen name 'Boz', publishing *Sketches by 'Boz'*, a collection of articles and tales describing London's people and scenes, written for the periodical *Monthly Magazine*. It was immediately followed by *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club* (also known as *The Pickwick Papers*), which was published in **instalments** and revealed Dickens's humorous and satirical qualities. Dickens married Catherine Hogarth in April 1836, and during the same year he became editor of *Bentley's Miscellany* and published the second series of *Sketches by 'Boz'*. After the success of *The Pickwick Papers*, Dickens started a **full-time career as a novelist**, producing work

of increasing complexity at an incredible rate, although he also continued his **journalistic and editorial activities**. *Oliver Twist* was begun in 1837 and continued in monthly instalments until April 1839. *Nicholas Nickleby* was published in 1839. Although he was a republican, Dickens took strongly against the United States when he visited the country in 1842. In October of that year his *American Note* appeared, in which he advocated international copyright and the abolition of slavery. *Martin Chuzzlewit*, part of which was set in America, appeared in 1844, one year after the publication of *A Christmas Carol* (→ Text Bank 48-49), the first of Dickens's successful Christmas books. The protagonists of his autobiographical novels, *Oliver Twist* (1838), *David Copperfield* (1850) (→ Text Bank 50-51) and *Little Dorrit* (1857), became the **symbols of an exploited childhood** confronted with the bitter realities of slums and factories. Other works include *Bleak House* (1853), *Hard Times* (1854) and *Great Expectations* (1861), which deal with the **conditions of the poor and the working class** in general. By the time of his sudden death in Kent, in 1870, Dickens had drawn adoring crowds to his public appearances in England, Scotland and Ireland; he had met princes and presidents and had amassed a fortune. He was buried in Westminster Abbey.



1. Jeremiah Gurney, portrait of Charles Dickens, 1867-68.



2. A scene from Robert Zemeckis's *A Christmas Carol* (2009), inspired by Dickens's book.



Characters

Dickens shifted the social frontiers of the novel: the 18th-century realistic, upper-middle-class world was replaced by the one of the lower orders. He was the creator of characters and caricatures who live immortally in the English imagination: Mr Pickwick, Mr Gradgrind (→ T61), Scrooge and many others. His aim was to arouse the reader's interest by exaggerating his characters' habits as well as the language of the London middle and lower classes, like lodge-house keepers, shopkeepers and tradesmen, whose social peculiarities, vanity and ambition he ridiculed freely, though without sarcasm. He was always on the side of the poor (→ T59, T60), the outcast and also the working class.

Children are often the most important characters in Dickens's novels. A lot of instances of good, wise children as opposed to worthless parents and other grown-up people (→ T60) illustrate in fiction the reverse of the natural order of things: children become the moral teachers instead of the taught, the examples instead of the imitators. The novelist's ability lay both in making his readers love his children and putting them forward as models of the way people ought to behave to one another.

A didactic aim

This didactic stance was very effective, since the result was that the more educated, the wealthier classes acquired knowledge about their poorer neighbours, of whom they previously knew little or nothing. Dickens's task was never to get the most wronged and suffering to rebel, or even encourage discontent, but to make the ruling classes aware of the social problems without offending his middle-class readers.

Style and reputation

Dickens employed the most effective language and accomplished the most graphic and powerful descriptions of life and character ever attempted by any novelist. He did so with his careful choice of adjectives, repetitions of words and structures, juxtapositions of images and ideas, hyperbolic and ironic remarks. He is considered as the greatest novelist in the English language.

Dickens's novels were influenced by the Bible, fairy tales, fables and nursery rhymes, by the 18th-century novelists and essayists, and by Gothic novels. His plots are well-planned even if at times they appear a bit artificial, sentimental and episodic. Certainly the conditions of publication in monthly or weekly instalments discouraged unified plotting and created pressure on Dickens to conform to the public taste.

London was the setting of most of his novels: he always seemed to have something new to say about it and showed an intimate knowledge of it. He gradually developed a more radical social view, although he did not become a revolutionary thinker. He was aware of the spiritual and material corruption of daily reality under the impact of industrialism; the result was an increasingly critical attitude towards his society (→ T59, T60). In fact, in his mature works Dickens succeeded in drawing popular attention to public abuses, evils and wrongs by mingling descriptions of London misery and crime with the most amusing sketches of metropolitan life.

COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING INFORMATION

- 1 READ about Dickens's life and works on page 37 and complete the factfile.

BORN:	_____
CHILDHOOD:	_____
EDUCATION:	_____
BEGINNING OF LITERARY CAREER:	_____
WORKS:	_____
POLITICAL IDEAS:	_____
REPUTATION:	_____

- 2 READ the rest of the text and answer the following questions.

- 1 What characters did Dickens create?
- 2 What was the aim of his work?
- 3 What were the most important features of his style?
- 4 What were the main sources of his novels?
- 5 Where were his novels set?
- 6 What was the writer's attitude towards society?



CURIOSITY

Dickens had a photographic memory of people and places in his childhood, which he used in his writings.

He was fascinated by hypnotism and attempted to use it to cure his children.

He was an obsessive compulsive: it was his habit that he used to rearrange hotel furniture and sleep with his head to the north.

A *Christmas Carol* was published at around the same time as the use of Christmas trees and carols became widespread and the first Christmas cards appeared.

In 1846 Dickens founded Urania Cottage, a refuge for the redemption of 'fallen women', who were taught domestic skills and reintegrated into society.

About 400 films and TV series based on his works. Dickens have been adapted so far.

Hard Times

PLOT

This novel is set in an imaginary industrial town named Coketown (→ T62). Thomas Gradgrind (→ T61), an educator who believes in facts and statistics, has founded a school where his theories are taught, and he brings up his two children, Louisa and Tom, in the same way, repressing their imagination and feelings. He marries his daughter to Josiah Bounderby, a rich banker of the city, 30 years older than she is. The girl consents since she wishes to help her brother, who is given a job in Bounderby's bank, but the marriage proves to be unhappy. Tom, who is lazy and selfish, robs his employer. At first he succeeds in throwing the suspicion on an honest workman, but he is finally discovered and obliged to leave the country. In the end Mr Gradgrind understands the damage he has caused to his children and gives up his narrow-minded, materialistic philosophy.

SETTING

The fictional city of Coketown stands for a real industrial mill town in mid-19th-century Victorian England. It is a sort of brick jungle: the machines of factories are like mad elephants, and their smoke looks like serpents. This place of 'hard facts' and 'hard lives' seems to be turned into some kind of magical but hellish land.

All the buildings, which are covered with soot coming from the coal burnt in factories, are the same. However, nothing seems to bother the mill owners. They seem to be proud of the polluted air of Coketown. To some, the black residue that wraps up the town may symbolise productivity and industry. To others, it may just be depressing.

STRUCTURE

Hard Times is divided into three sections, or books, and each book is divided into separate chapters.

Book One, 'Sowing', shows us the seeds planted by the Gradgrind/Bounderby education: Louisa, Tom and Stephen Blackpool. Book Two, 'Reaping', reveals the harvesting of these seeds: Louisa's unhappy marriage, Tom's selfishness and criminal ways, Stephen's rejection from Coketown. Book Three, 'Garnering', is linked to a dominant symbol – instability – which is no longer the solid 'ground' upon which Mr Gradgrind's system once stood.

CHARACTERS

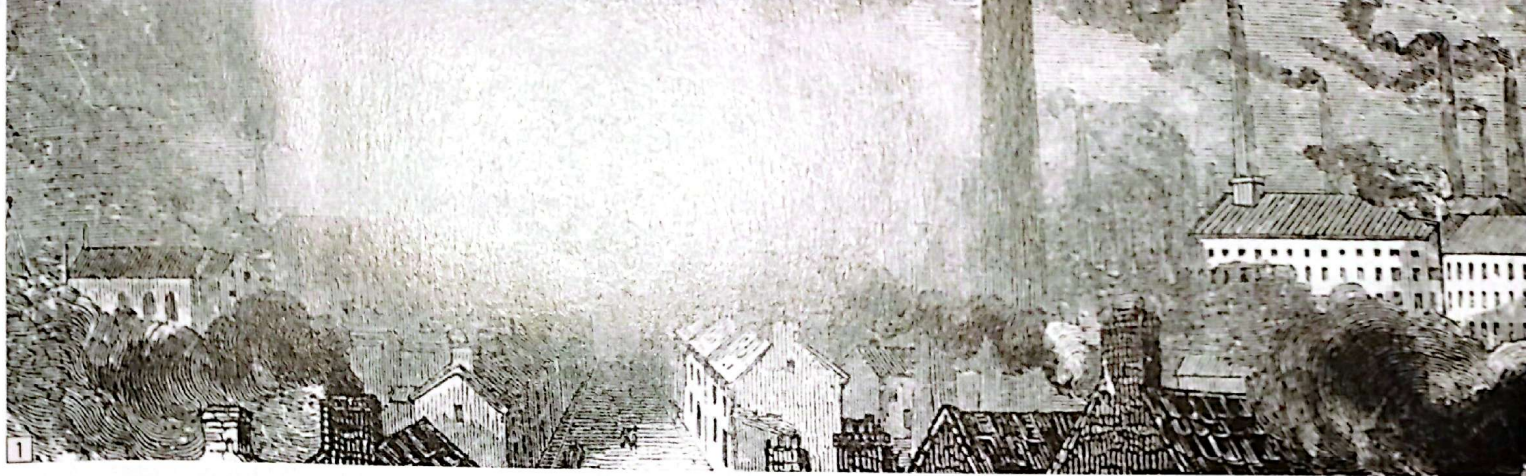
The philosophy of Utilitarianism (→ 5.3) comes forth largely through the actions of Mr Gradgrind and his follower Bounderby: as the former educates the children of his family and his school through facts, the latter treats the workers in his factory as emotionless objects that are easily exploited for his own self-interest.

Mr Gradgrind believes that human nature can be measured, quantified and governed entirely by reason. Indeed, his school tries to turn children into little machines that behave according to such rules.

Dickens's primary aim in *Hard Times* is to illustrate the dangers of the teaching method called 'object lesson', originally conceived as a method of education arising from children's own experiences and suited to their particular stage of development, but distorted in its introduction to English schools. There, form acquired more importance than subject matter, leading to lessons where humans were actually dehumanised.

COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING INFORMATION

1 READ about *Hard Times* and answer the following questions.



The following extract deals with the description of the industrial centre of Coketown, where the story is set and where Mr Gradgrind and his friend Mr Bounderby are now walking.

Coketown, to which Messrs Bounderby and Gradgrind now walked, was a triumph of fact; it had no greater taint of fancy¹ in it than Mrs Gradgrind herself. Let us strike the key-note², Coketown, before pursuing our tune.

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 serpents of smoke trailed themselves³ for ever and ever, and never got uncoiled⁴. It had a black canal in it, and a river that ran purple with ill-smelling dye⁵, 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 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.

These attributes of Coketown were in the main inseparable from the work by which it was sustained; against them were to be set off, comforts of life which found their way all over the world, and elegancies of life which made, we will not ask how much of the fine lady, who could scarcely bear to hear the place mentioned. The rest of its features were voluntary, and they were these.

You saw nothing in Coketown but what was severely workful. If the members of a religious persuasion⁶ built a chapel there – as the members of eighteen religious persuasions had done – they made it a pious warehouse⁷ of red brick, with sometimes (but this only in highly ornamented examples) a bell in a bird-cage on the top of it. The solitary exception was the New Church; a stuccoed⁸ edifice with a square steeple⁹ over the door, terminating in four short pinnacles like florid wooden legs. All the public inscriptions in the town were painted alike, in severe characters of black and white. The jail¹⁰ might have been the infirmary, the infirmary might have been the jail, the town-hall might have been either, or both, or anything else, for anything that appeared to the contrary in the graces of their construction. Fact, fact, fact, everywhere in the material aspect of the town; fact, fact, fact, everywhere in the immaterial. The M'Choakumchild school was all fact, and the school of design was all fact, and the relations between master and man were all fact, and everything



was fact between the lying-in¹¹ hospital and the cemetery, and what you couldn't state in figures¹², or show to be **purchaseable** in the cheapest market and saleable in the dearest, was not, and never should be, world without end, Amen¹³.

A town so sacred to fact, and so triumphant in its assertion, of course got on well? Why no, not quite well. No? Dear me!

No. Coketown did not come out of its own furnaces, in all respects like gold that had stood the fire. First, the perplexing mystery of the place was, Who belonged to the eighteen denominations¹⁴? Because, whoever did, the labouring people did not. It was very strange to walk through the streets on a Sunday morning, and note how few of *them* the barbarous jangling¹⁵ of bells that was driving the sick and nervous mad, called away from their own quarter, from their own close rooms, from the corners of their own streets, where they lounged listlessly¹⁶, gazing at all the church and chapel going, as at a thing with which they had no manner of concern. Nor was it merely the stranger who noticed this, because there was a native organization in Coketown itself, whose members were to be heard of in the House of Commons every session, indignantly petitioning for acts of parliament that should make these people religious by main force¹⁷. Then, came the Teetotal Society¹⁸, who complained that these same people *would* get drunk, and showed in tabular statements¹⁹ that they did get drunk, and proved at tea parties that no **inducement**, human or Divine (except a medal), would induce them to forego²⁰ their custom of getting drunk. Then, came the chemist and druggist, with other tabular statements, showing that when they didn't get drunk, they took opium. Then, came the experienced chaplain of the jail, with more tabular statements, **outdoing** all the previous tabular statements, and showing that the same people *would* resort to low haunts²¹, hidden from the public eye, where they heard low singing²² and saw low dancing²³, and mayhap²⁴ joined in it; and where A. B., aged twenty-four next birthday, and committed for eighteen months' solitary²⁵, had himself said (not that he had ever shown himself particularly worthy of belief) his ruin began, as he was perfectly sure and confident that otherwise he would have been a tip-top moral specimen²⁶. Then, came Mr Gradgrind and Mr Bounderby, the two gentlemen at this present moment walking through Coketown, and both eminently practical, who could, on occasion, **furnish** more tabular statements derived from their own personal experience, and illustrated by cases they had known and seen, from which it clearly appeared – in short it was the only clear thing in the case – that these same people were a bad lot altogether, gentlemen; that do what you would for them they were never thankful for it, gentlemen; that they were restless²⁷, gentlemen; that they never knew what they wanted; that they lived upon the best, and bought fresh butter, and insisted on Mocha coffee, and rejected all but prime parts of meat, and yet were eternally dissatisfied and unmanageable²⁸.

4.2

The Industrial Revolution

Economic change

At the end of the 18th century, economic changes took place in England that would transform the country from an agricultural to an industrialised nation. The origins of the economic transformation can be traced back to the Black Death (→ Towards B2, p. 37) and the rise in living standards that followed it. The population increased in the 1500s and 1600s, and agriculture was intensified. First, open fields were enclosed into smaller portions of land to make more efficient arable farms. Moreover, the soil was drained and made more fertile, so that cereal production was greatly increased. Finally, animals were bred selectively, therefore producing more meat.

Economic activity was gradually diversified, especially through the manufacture of woollen cloth. People began acquiring more goods for the house, such as wardrobes, clocks and china. The clothing of ordinary people changed with the introduction of white linen underwear, of stockings, ribbons and hats. Clothing marked the beginning of the Industrial Revolution because mass consumption of machine-made goods started. Cotton was the leading sector of industrialisation.

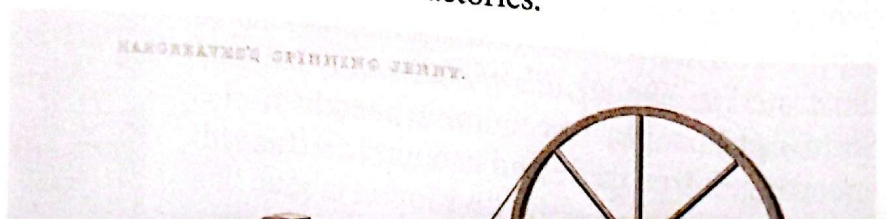
More and more people also began to consume things for pleasure, like tobacco, tea, coffee,

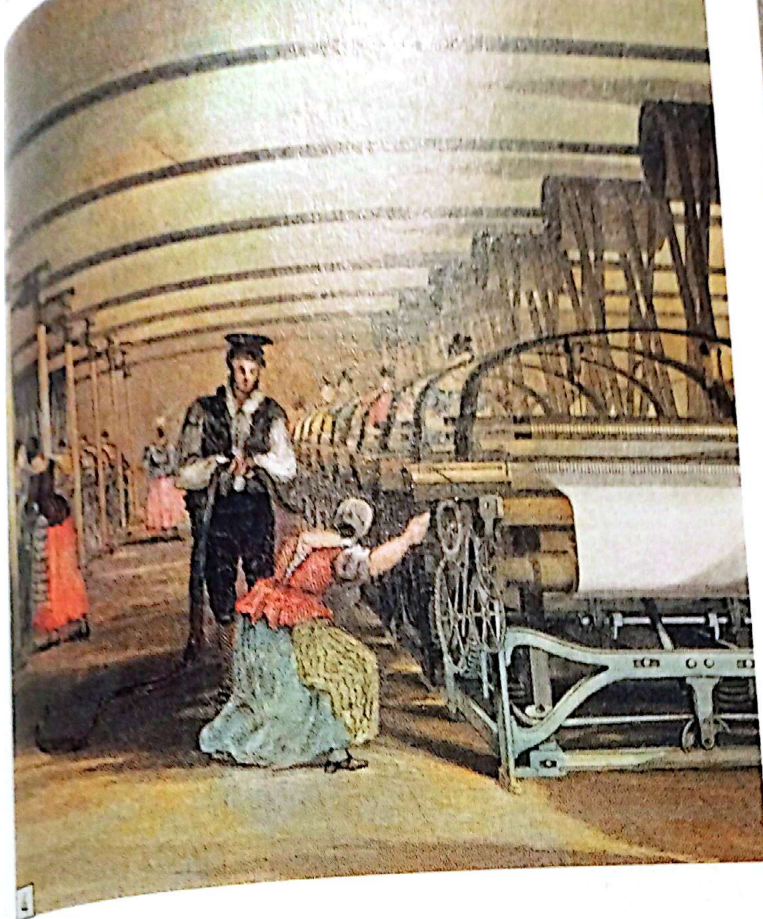
sugar or alcohol. Rural, household-based production supplied these new kinds of demand.

Technological innovation

During the 18th century there was a succession of technological innovations that transformed and improved the productivity of workers. Thomas Newcomen invented an effective and practical steam engine in 1712, which made pumping water out of coal mines possible; James Hargreaves's Spinning Jenny (ca 1764) increased spinning efficiency; in 1769 James Watt patented a steam engine that was more powerful and wasted less fuel than its predecessors.

Edmund Cartwright's loom (1787) linked cloth manufacture to water and steam power. As a result, cheaper products met the growing demand for goods. Heavy investment in technological development increased and innovation became linked to energy generated from coal. This changed the geography of the country, concentrating the new industrial activity near the coalfields of the Midlands and the North. People shifted from the rural South to the North and the Midlands, and small towns, the so-called 'mushroom towns', were constructed to house the workers near the factories.





The workers' life

Industrial cities lacked elementary public services – water-supply, sanitation, street-cleaning, open spaces –; the air and the water were polluted by smoke and **filth**; the houses, built in endless rows, were overcrowded. Women and children were highly prized by employers because they could be paid less and were easier to control. Besides, the fact that the children were so small meant they could move more easily in mines, or crawl between the machines in the cotton industry to carry out repairs.

Industrial labour imposed new work patterns, which no longer depended on the weather or change of season, but were determined by the mechanised regularity of the machine and a rational division of labour. Long working hours, about 65-70 a week, discipline, routine and monotony marked the work of industrial labourers. Food prices rose, diet and health deteriorated with an increase in the mortality rate.

COMPETENCE: READING AND ORGANISING INFORMATION

2 **READ** the text and complete the mind map about the reasons leading to the Industrial Revolution.

The Industrial
Revolution

3 **JOIN** the two halves of each sentence about the social consequences of the Industrial Revolution.

- 1 The population shifted from the r South
- 2 The 'mushroom towns' were built around
- 3 Employers preferred women and children because
- 4 The smoke and dirt
- 5 Overcrowding and lack of hygiene made
- 6 Industrial working conditions characterised by
- 7 The deterioration of diet and health led to

- A mechanisation, monotony and division of labour.
- B higher mortality.
- C to the industrial areas of the north and the Midlands.
- D they could be better exploited.
- E polluted the environment.
- F the mines and factories.
- G working and living conditions were appalling.

Reading and Use of English – Part 7

MULTIPLE MATCHING. You are going to read an article about the Industrial Revolution. For questions 1-10, choose from the sections (A-D). The sections may be chosen more than once.

Why did the Industrial Revolution start in Britain?

A

By the end of the 19th century, Britain controlled the largest empire in the history of the world. How did a small island acquire such military and economic power? The answer is because the Industrial Revolution started in Britain and gave it an enormous commercial and technological advantage. The factors that enabled this to happen came together in the late 18th century in the first Industrial Revolution.

The reasons are many and varied. The changes in agricultural production and farming methods had resulted in increased food production and an increased population. More and more people were moving from the countryside into towns as machines replaced manual labour in farming while factories created new employment. A wage-earning population created demand for more products, which led to increased production. Important changes in finance meant central banks, stock markets and joint stock companies which encouraged people to take risks with investments, trade and new technologies.

B

New scientific thinking born of the Enlightenment was increasingly applied to the mechanical and technical fields. The openness to new ideas in English culture, especially regarding science and reason, made England particularly receptive to innovation.

Another fundamental element in the birth of the new industrialisation was the availability of navigable rivers and canals. This provided cheap and rapid transportation of both raw materials and finished products. Adam Smith, in *The Wealth of Nations* (→ The Portrait, p. 243), saw this as a key reason for Britain's early success.

C

A further essential ingredient was the easy availability of coal and iron deposits. Much of the new technology was made of iron and powered by coal. This included the steam-powered machinery in textile factories and the train engines.

The government too encouraged new trade and technological advances through patent laws that allowed inventors to benefit financially from the 'intellectual property' of their inventions. It also supported global trade by increasing the navy's role in protecting trade and giving financial incentives to explore the world for new resources.

D

Moreover, urbanisation stimulated the booming new industries by concentrating workers and factories together. The new industrial cities became sources of wealth for the nation, but there was a price to pay. On the whole, working-class neighbourhoods were bleak, crowded, dirty and polluted. Factory employers demanded a complete change of pace and discipline from the slow pace of village life the new workers had left behind. At first there was also a lack of regulation that led to abuses like child labour and long working hours in difficult conditions. Another generation would pass before government imposed sanitation and decent working measures.

Which section of the text

explains that increased production meant more food and a growth in population?

1

expresses how new laws encouraged the spread of trade?

2

talks about the lack of proper provision for the working classes?

3

explains that efficient transportation of goods was an important advantage?

4

describes the Industrial Revolution as happening when it did because several important factors came together at the same time?

5

talks about financial incentives given to companies wanting to expand?

6

explains that scholars and craftspeople were influenced and inspired by new ideas?

7

talks about the dirty, crowded and insanitary living conditions of many workers at this time?

8

explains why an easily accessible source of energy was important?

9

describes the importance of easy and cheap transportation on water?

10