

LIFE IN THE INDUSTRIAL AGE

Link to Literature

In *Hard Times*, Charles Dickens protests the dehumanizing conditions of factory life in nineteenth-century England. In this excerpt from the novel, Dickens describes early morning in a fictional factory town named Coketown. (Coke is a form of coal.) In Coketown, people work under the harsh conditions of the early Industrial Revolution.

◆ As you read, think about what it might have been like to work in a factory like the one described in this excerpt. Then, on a separate sheet of paper, answer the questions that follow.

From *Hard Times* by Charles Dickens

The Fairy palaces burst into illumination, before pale morning showed the monstrous serpents of smoke trailing themselves over Coketown. A clattering of clogs upon the pavement; a rapid ringing of bells; and all the melancholy mad elephants, polished and oiled up for the day's monotony, were at their heavy exercise again.

Stephen bent over his loom, quiet, watchful, and steady. A special contrast, as every man was in the forest of looms where Stephen worked, to the crashing, smashing, tearing piece of mechanism at which he laboured. Never fear, good people of an anxious turn of mind, that Art will consign Nature to Oblivion. Set anywhere, side by side, the work of God and the work of man; and the former, even though it be a troop of Hands of very small account, will gain in dignity from the comparison.

So many hundred Hands in this Mill; so many hundred horse Steam Power. It is known, to the force of a single pound weight, what the engine will do; but, not all the calculators of the National Debt can tell me the

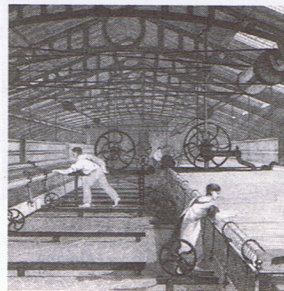
capacity for good or evil, for love or hatred, for patriotism or discontent, for the decomposition of virtue into vice, or the reverse, at any single moment in the soul of one of these its

quiet servants, with the composed faces and the regulated actions. There is no mystery in it; there is an unfathomable mystery in the meanest [poorest] of them, for ever. . . .

The day grew strong, and showed itself outside, even against the flaming lights within. The lights were turned out, and the work went on. The rain fell, and the

Smoke-serpents, submissive to the curse of all that tribe, trailed themselves upon the earth. In the waste-yard outside, the steam from the escape pipe, the litter of barrels and old iron, the shining heaps of coals, the ashes everywhere, were shrouded in a veil of mist and rain.

The work went on, until the noon-bell rang. More clattering upon the pavements. The looms, and wheels, and Hands all out of gear for an hour.



Cotton factory, 1835

Source: *Hard Times*, by Charles Dickens, originally published in 1845.

Questions to Think About

1. What kind of work does Stephen do?
2. According to Dickens, what is it impossible to calculate?
3. **Draw Inferences** Why does Dickens refer to the workers in the factory as "Hands"?
4. **Draw Conclusions** Based on this excerpt, what is Dickens' general attitude toward the Industrial Revolution?