



Reading a classic novel

In the nineteenth century, some writers wanted their readers to understand more about the lives of others. In those days before television and the Internet, books were one of the most important ways of persuading people to think about the rest of the world.

In Chapters 3 and 17 of his novel *Hard Times*, Charles Dickens describes Coketown, an industrial city in the north of England. Read his description of Coketown in these extracts.



It was a town of red brick, or of brick that would have been red if the smoke and ashes had allowed it; ... 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. 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 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 all more like one another, inhabited by people equally like one another, who all went to and fro at the same hours, with the same gait 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.

... The streets were hot and dusty on the summer day, and the sun was so bright that it even shone through the heavy vapour dropping over Coketown, and could not be looked at steadily. Soots emerged from low underground passages into factory yards, and on its steps, and porches, and ceilings, wiping their sootier visages, and contemplating soot. The whole town seemed to be lying in oil. There was a stifling smell of hot oil everywhere. The steam-engines shone with it, the flames of the Hards were soiled with it, the mills throughout their moors were soiled and sootied in ... their inhabitants, wasting with heat, soiled languidly in the dust. But no temperature made the melancholy coal elephants more mad or more wise. Their wearisome heads went up and down at the same rate to hot weather and cold, wet weather and dry, fair weather and foul. The measured motion of their shoulders on the walls, was the substance Coketown had to draw for the shades of rattling wheels, while, for the summer heat of insects, it could offer, all the year round, from the doors of Monday to the night of Saturday, the whirr of shafts and wheels.