

pleased gesture of recognition, put her finger up to her lips, and whispered, "Ellen's asleep."

"I'm not asleep, dears," answered a faint unearthly voice; "I was only praying. Is that Mr. Mackaye?"

"Aye, my lassies; but ha' ye gotten na fire the nicht?"

"No," said one of them, bitterly, "we've earned no fire tonight, by fair trade or foul either."

1850

CHARLES DICKENS

The following selection is from chapter 5 of *Hard Times*, a novel by Dickens (1812–1870). The picture of Coketown was based on his impressions of the raw industrial towns of central and northern England such as Manchester and, in particular, Preston, a cotton-manufacturing center in Lancashire.

From Hard Times

[COKETOWN]

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 themselves forever 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 buildings 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 persuasion built a chapel there—as the members of eighteen religious persuasions had done—they made it a pious warehouse of red

brick, with sometimes (but this is only in highly ornamented examples) a bell in a birdcage on the top of it. The solitary exception was the New Church; a stuccoed edifice with a square steeple 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 jail 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-in hospital¹ and the cemetery, and what you couldn't state in figures, or show to be purchasable in the cheapest market and salable in the dearest, was not, and never should be, world without end, Amen.

1854

1. Maternity hospital.

ANONYMOUS

In 1965 A. L. Lloyd, a collector of British folk songs, heard "Poverty Knock" from a weaver who had learned it sixty years earlier. The song dates from before that.

Poverty Knock¹REFRAIN²

Poverty, poverty knock!
 Me loom is a-sayin' all day.
 Poverty, poverty knock!
 Gaffer's° too skinny° to pay.
 Poverty, poverty knock!
 Keepin' one eye on the clock.
 Ah know ah can guttle°
 When ah hear me shuttle
 Go: Poverty, poverty knock!

*The foreman's / stingy**eat*

Up every mornin' at five.
 Ah wonder that we keep alive.
 Tired an' yawnin' on the cold mornin',
 It's back to the dreary old drive.

1. The sound of a 19th-century loom.

2. Repeated after each stanza.

and the like 'where angels fear to tread'; and so, meeting face to face and without mask the Humanity of the age, and speaking the truth as I conceive of it out plainly." The poem is a portrait of the artist as a young woman committed to a socially inclusive realist art. It is a daring work both in its presentation of social issues concerning women and in its claims for Aurora's poetic vocation; on her twentieth birthday, to pursue her career as a poet, Aurora refuses a proposal of marriage from her cousin Romney, who wants her to be his helpmate in the liberal causes he has embraced. Later in the poem, she rescues a fallen woman and takes her to Italy, where they settle together and confront a chastened Romney.

Immensely popular in its own day, *Aurora Leigh* had extravagant admirers (like Ruskin, who asserted that it was the greatest poem written in English) and critics who found fault with both its poetry and its morality. With its crowded canvas and melodramatic plot, it seems closer to the novel than to poetry, but it is important to view the poem in the context of the debate about appropriate poetic subject matter that engaged other Victorian poets. Unlike Matthew Arnold, who believed that the present age had not produced actions heroic enough to be the subject of great poetry, and unlike Alfred, Lord Tennyson, who used Arthurian legend to represent contemporary concerns, Barrett Browning felt that the present age contained the materials for an epic poetry. Virginia Woolf writes that "Elizabeth Barrett was inspired by a flash of true genius when she rushed into the drawing-room and said that here, where we live and work, is the true place for the poet." *Aurora Leigh* succeeds in giving us what Woolf describes as "a sense of life in general, of people who are unmistakably Victorian, wrestling with the problems of their own time, all brightened, intensified, and compacted by the fire of poetry. . . . Aurora Leigh, with her passionate interest in social questions, her conflict as artist and woman, her longing for knowledge and freedom, is the true daughter of her age."

The Cry of the Children¹

"Φεῦ, φεῦ, τί προσδέρεσθαι μ' ὀμῶσιν τέκνα,"
—Medea²

Do ye hear the children weeping, O my brothers,
Ere the sorrow comes with years?
They are leaning their young heads against their mothers,
And that cannot stop their tears.
5 The young lambs are bleating in the meadows,
The young birds are chirping in the nest,
The young fawns are playing with the shadows,
The young flowers are blowing toward the west—
But the young, young children, O my brothers,
10 They are weeping bitterly!
They are weeping in the playtime of the others,
In the country of the free.

1. Barrett Browning wrote "The Cry of the Children" in response to the report of a parliamentary commission, to which her friend R. H. Home contributed, on the labor of children in mines and factories. Many of the details of Barrett Browning's poem derive from the report. See "Industrialism: Progress or Decline?" in *Victo-*

rian Issues, pp. 1587–89 below.

2. Alas, my children, why do you look at me? (Greek), from Euripides' tragedy *Medea*. Medea speaks these lines before killing her children in vengeance against her husband, who has taken a new wife. (The poem's title is spoken by the chorus.)

- Do you question the young children in the sorrow
 Why their tears are falling so?
- 15 The old man may weep for his to-morrow
 Which is lost in Long Ago;
 The old tree is leafless in the forest,
 The old year is ending in the frost,
 The old wound, if stricken, is the sorest,
 20 The old hope is hardest to be lost:
 But the young, young children, O my brothers,
 Do you ask them why they stand
 Weeping sore° before the bosoms of their mothers, *bitterly*
 In our happy Fatherland?
- 25 They look up with their pale and sunken faces,
 And their looks are sad to see,
 For the man's hoary anguish draws and presses
 Down the cheeks of infancy;
 "Your old earth," they say, "is very dreary,"
 30 "Our young feet," they say, "are very weak;
 Few paces have we taken, yet are weary—
 Our grave-rest is very far to seek:
 Ask the aged why they weep, and not the children,
 For the outside earth is cold,
 35 And we young ones stand without, in our bewildering,
 And the graves are for the old."
- "True," say the children, "it may happen
 That we die before our time:
 Little Alice died last year, her grave is shapen
 40 Like a snowball, in the rime." *frost*
 We looked into the pit prepared to take her:
 Was no room for any work in the close clay!
 From the sleep wherein she lieth none will wake her,
 Crying, 'Get up, little Alice! it is day.'
- 45 If you listen by that grave, in sun and shower,
 With your ear down, little Alice never cries;
 Could we see her face, be sure we should not know her,
 For the smile has time for growing in her eyes:
 And merry go her moments, lulled and stilled in
 50 The shroud by the kirk° chime. *church*
 It is good when it happens," say the children,
 "That we die before our time."
- Alas, alas, the children! they are seeking
 Death in life, as best to have:
- 55 They are binding up their hearts away from breaking,
 With a ceremen° from the grave. *shroud*
 Go out, children, from the mine and from the city,
 Sing out, children, as the little thrushes do;
 Pluck your handfuls of the meadow-cowslips pretty,
 60 Laugh aloud, to feel your fingers let them through!
 But they answer, "Are your cowslips of the meadows

Like our weeds anear the mine?³
 Leave us quiet in the dark of the coal-shadows,
 From your pleasures fair and fine!

65 "For oh," say the children, "we are weary,
 And we cannot run or leap;
 If we cared for any meadows, it were merely
 To drop down in them and sleep.
 Our knees tremble sorely in the stooping,
 70 We fall upon our faces, trying to go;
 And, underneath our heavy eyelids drooping,
 The reddest flower would look as pale as snow.
 For, all day, we drag our burden tiring
 Through the coal-dark, underground;
 75 Or, all day, we drive the wheels of iron
 In the factories, round and round.

"For, all day, the wheels are droning, turning;
 Their wind comes in our faces,
 Till our hearts turn, our heads with pulses burning,
 80 And the walls turn in their places:
 Turns the sky in the high window blank and reeling,
 Turns the long light that drops adown the wall,
 Turn the black flies that crawl along the ceiling,
 All are turning, all the day, and we with all.
 85 And all day, the iron wheels are droning,
 And sometimes we could pray,
 'O ye wheels,' (breaking out in a mad moaning)
 'Stop! be silent for to-day!'"

Ay, be silent! Let them hear each other breathing
 90 For a moment, mouth to mouth!
 Let them touch each other's hands, in a fresh wreathing
 Of their tender human youth!
 Let them feel that this cold metallic motion
 Is not all the life God fashions or reveals:
 95 Let them prove their living souls against the notion
 That they live in you, or under you, O wheels!
 Still, all day, the iron wheels go onward,
 Grinding life down from its mark;
 And the children's souls, which God is calling sunward,
 100 Spin on blindly in the dark.

Now tell the poor young children; O my brothers,
 To look up to Him and pray;
 So the blessed One who blesseth all the others,
 Will bless them another day.
 105 They answer, "Who is God that He should hear us,
 While the rushing of the iron wheels is stirred?"

3. A commissioner mentions the fact of weeds being thus confounded with the idea of flowers [Barrett Browning's note].

When we sob aloud, the human creatures near us
 Pass by, hearing not, or answer not a word.
 And we hear not (for the wheels in their resounding)
 Strangers speaking at the door:
 110 Is it likely God, with angels singing round Him,
 Hears our weeping any more?

Two words, indeed, of praying we remember,
 And at midnight's hour of harm,
 115 'Our Father,' looking upward in the chamber,
 We say softly for a charm.
 We know no other words except 'Our Father.'
 And we think that, in some pause of angels' song,
 God may pluck them with the silence sweet to gather,
 120 And hold both within His right hand which is strong.
 'Our Father!' If He heard us, He would surely
 (For they call Him good and mild)
 Answer, smiling down the steep world very purely,
 'Come and rest with me, my child.'

125 "But, no!" say the children, weeping faster,
 "He is speechless as a stone:
 And they tell us, of His image is the master
 Who commands us to work on.
 Go to!" say the children,—"up in Heaven,
 130 Dark, wheel-like, turning clouds are all we find.
 Do not mock us; grief has made us unbelieving;
 We look up for God, but tears have made us blind."
 Do you hear the children weeping and disproving,
 O my brothers, what ye preach?
 135 For God's possible is taught by His world's loving,⁴
 And the children doubt of each.

And well may the children weep before you!
 They are weary ere they run;
 They have never seen the sunshine, nor the glory
 140 Which is brighter than the sun.
 They know the grief of man, without its wisdom;
 They sink in man's despair, without its calm;
 Are slaves, without the liberty in Christdom,
 Are martyrs, by the pang without the palm;⁵
 145 Are worn as if with age, yet unretrievably
 The harvest of its memories cannot reap,—
 Are orphans of the earthly love and heavenly.
 Let them weep! let them weep!

They look up with their pale and sunken faces,
 150 And their look is dread to see,
 For they mind you of their angels in high places,

⁴ I.e., we gain our sense of the possibilities of God's love from our experience of love in the world.

⁵ Palm branch, symbol of victory.

With eyes turned on Deity.
 "How long," they say, "how long, O cruel nation,
 Will you stand, to move the world, on a child's heart,—
 155 Stifle down with a mailed heel its palpitant,
 And tread onward to your throne amid the mart?
 Our blood splashes upward, O gold-heaper,
 And your purple⁶ shows your path!
 But the child's sob in the silence curses deeper
 160 Than the strong man in his wrath."

1843

To George Sand¹

A Desire

Thou large-brained woman and large-hearted man,
 Self-called George Sand! whose soul, amid the lions
 Of thy tumultuous senses, moans defiance
 And answers roar for roar, as spirits can:
 5 I would some mild miraculous thunder ran
 Above the applauded circus,² in appliance
 Of thine own nobler nature's strength and science,
 Drawing two pinions, white as wings of swan,
 From thy strong shoulders, to amaze the place
 10 With holier light! that thou to woman's claim
 And man's, mightst join beside the angel's grace
 Of a pure genius sanctified from blame,
 Till child and maiden pressed to thine embrace
 To kiss upon thy lips a stainless fame.

1844

To George Sand

A Recognition

True genius, but true woman! dost deny
 The woman's nature with a manly scorn,
 And break away the gauds⁶ and armlets worn

ornaments

6. Color associated with royalty and (in poetry) with blood.

1. Pen name of the French Romantic novelist Amandine-Aurore-Lucile Dudevant (1804–1876), famous for her unconventional ideas and behavior. Barrett Browning discovered Sand's writing while an invalid, "a prisoner," and asserts that Sand, together with Balzac, "kept the colour in my life." A defender of Sand's genius to less-sympathetic friends critical of Sand's morality.

Barrett Browning writes to her friend Mary Russell Mitford (a novelist and dramatist) that Sand "is eloquent as a fallen angel . . . A true woman of genius!—but of a womanhood tired of itself, and scorned by her, while she bears it burning above her head."

2. A Roman spectacle that might include such entertainment as fights between humans and lions.