

The Boy on the Canal

Thomas gulped and looked up at the skyline that rose from the ground in front of him: the yawning jaws of an enormous beast. Acrid smoke billowed from tooth-like towers and blotted the sun. He reflected, once again, that it couldn't have been more different to the tiny farm back home.

There had been rumours, back in the village, about the opportunities for a young boy in the city. He'd sat and listened as the old men told his older brother stories of pavements lined with gold and factories that reached the sun. Even as he'd lay there, eavesdropping quietly, he'd never imagined the scene that greeted him when he stepped from the carriage at Curzon Street station onto the streets of Birmingham.

The sights; the sounds; the smells, all of it melted together to paint a vivid picture of vibrant activity. Thomas had made sure to write home to his mother straight away; she hadn't even known he'd left, after all. Once the old men's stories had bled into his brain, there was never a chance he'd stay in the village. He'd left the next day, without a goodbye or anything other than the clothes on his back.

Once he'd wrapped his head around the assault on his senses, Thomas had set about trying to find work. It hadn't taken long. He was a scrawny boy by nature, short and thin but with strong arms and nimble fingers. "Perfect for working on the canals," his new gaffer had said.

Each morning, Thomas woke before the knockers and headed down to the canal and met up with the other dockers. From sunrise to sunset, he worked alongside men twice his size and thrice his age: unloading everything that the city needed to survive and loading everything it churned out for the rest of the world. It didn't matter it was wool coming in, or buttons heading out, Thomas had a hand in making sure it made its way on or off of the boats safely.

It always surprised him how much the other men groaned throughout the day. They were stout, sensible men who did the job well, but they moaned about the labour at every chance. For

Thomas, it was fascinating. For so long, his world had been the pens and meadows of the farm at home; suddenly, he was thrust into a life filled with opportunity and excitement.

Today was no different. Thomas had just finished unloading a cargo of wood, headed for who-knew-where, and Thomas took the opportunity to stare up at the factories that stood guard over the watery lifelines of Birmingham. He knew he was lucky; the jobs inside the factories were thankless and dangerous. The kids who made it out alive were all-to-eager to tell tales about missing fingers or broken limbs, often in exchange for a penny. Thomas liked their company when they all hid in the rundown buildings at nightfall, but he wouldn't trade with them for anything.

INFERENCE FOCUS

1. How is Thomas feeling in the first paragraph? What tells you this?
2. What was Thomas thinking as he heard the old men tell their stories?
3. What made him perfect for working on the canals?
4. Why didn't Thomas moan about the job?
5. Why didn't Thomas want to work in the factories?

VIPERS QUESTIONS

E

Look at the language in the first and final paragraphs. How has the description of the factories changed?

S

What was one of the first things Thomas did when he arrived?

R

Which train station did Thomas arrive at?

V

Find a word that means "three times".

V

What does the word "stout" tell you about the other workers?

Answers:

1. He is nervous or in awe. He gulps and the landscape is described as being like the jaws of an enormous beast. It is different to his home.
2. He wanted to leave to see what it was like
3. Being short, thin and strong. His appearance/body shape
4. It was exciting and different to him
5. They were dangerous

E: In the first paragraph they are like beasts - it's very negative. In the final paragraph they are standing guard over the canal - it's very positive

S: Wrote to his mother

R: Curzon Street

V: Thrice

V: They were strong/big, heavy build