

## Part 6 The Summary and Book Report

### I. Read the following passages carefully, and write a summary of each of them.

1

Some 300 kilometres to the east lies Jiayuguan, now a city of 120,000 people, 37,000 of whom work in the massive Jiuquan Iron and Steel Complex. Until some 30 or so years ago there was nothing here but the Gobi desert.

When prospectors came looking for mineral resources under the surface of the desert, conditions were so atrocious that 11 lost their lives. A memorial to them now stands in the middle of the city that has been built beside the massive works, which were founded there after the discovery of rich deposits of ore and coal.

That plant was named after what was then the nearest town, Jiuquan, some 25 kilometers to the east.

It is not quite true to say that there was nothing here; since the 14th century, in Ming times, there has been a great fort, set midway between the snow-topped Qilian Mountains to the south and the Black Hills to the north, guarding the 15-kilometre-wide Jiayuguan Pass and putting a full stop to the Great Wall.

This was an eight-year posting for the ancient soldiers, a point poignantly made by a large sounding stone in one corner of the fort. Striking it with a little stone produces a noise like the chirping of a swallow. Depending upon the note, the soldiers believed they could tell if all was well at home. I could not help reflecting on the feelings of the man whose stone struck the wrong note.

It is the best-preserved of all the Great Wall forts and was built on the site of much earlier fortifications because it was the gateway into China from the west. The wall runs north and south of the fort, anchored by a guard tower in the foothills of the Qilians to the south and the Black Hills to the north. The climb to the northern tower is rewarded with a spectacular view of the stony desert that seems to stretch away forever- except where the new city and its steel works stand.

2

Charles Dickens was born at Portsea on 7 February 1812 and christened Charles John Huffham. When he was eleven, his father was imprisoned for debt. As there was nowhere else for them to go, his mother and seven brothers and sisters joined their father in prison. Charles was lucky. A kindly relative found him work labelling bottles in a factory.

It is hard for us to imagine how the young boy must have felt about these events. It is perhaps difficult to understand the social significance attached to such things in those days. For Charles, it was total shame, and there was his lowly menial job to add to this. The experience of these months must have haunted him all his life. John Forster, his closest friend and biographer, tells us that he never told anyone else about it, except his wife.

This experience might help to explain the nagging emotional insecurity and restlessness which friends perceived behind the magnetizing eyes, the vivacious personality and, later, the extremely

successful author. It might also go some way to explaining Dickens's burning sympathy for the poor and socially oppressed, which is one of the hallmarks of his work.

When he was fifteen, Charles began work in a lawyer's office in London. He must have found the nature of the work slow and tedious for, only eighteen months later, he became a freelance reporter of parliamentary debates. His first publication, *Sketches by Boz*, began to appear in magazines when he was still only twenty-one.

"The rest", as they say, "is history". *The Pickwick Papers* was published in serial form, like all of his novels, over 1836 and 1837. *Oliver Twist* also appeared in 1837. These were followed by *Nicholas Nickleby* in the next two years and *The Old Curiosity Shop* in the two years after that. All were enormous successes.

He wrote another ten novels over the following twenty-four years, the most famous of which are *A Christmas Carol* (1843), *David Copperfield* (1849-50), and *Great Expectations* (1860-61). In addition to this he continued to be active in journalism. During the 1850s he contributed regular weekly articles to various publications and was involved with the setting up and editing of a number of his own.

What is most impressive about Dickens is his astonishing, apparently limitless energy. When he was not writing he was either travelling (in the early 1840s he went to America, Italy, Switzerland and France), taking part in amateur theatricals both as actor and producer, or, from 1858, giving series after series of readings from his own works. In addition to this he became the father of ten children from his marriage to Catherine Hogarth in 1836.

He must have been a tiring, if entertaining, companion. Lionel Trilling wrote that "the mere record of his conviviality is exhausting." His biographers suggest he was dedicated to games, fun and almost any kind of celebration with an almost childish intensity. One of his favourite pastimes was taking a very long walk at high speed. He is said to have covered, on foot, every street in every corner of London.

In 1866 he travelled to America for the second time for a series of public performances. It is not surprising that by this time his health was beginning to fail. Friends tried to persuade him to slow down, but, perhaps out of a feeling of duty to his public, perhaps simply because of his temperament, he refused to do this. On 8 June 1870 he suffered a stroke after a full day's work and died the following day. So popular had he become that in at least one foreign country, Italy, his death made frontpage headlines.

- James O'Driscoll

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If these aspects of life in cities are the answer to why so much more violence exists there than elsewhere, the situation might seem to be hopeless, for they are aspects of life which are absolutely basic to cities as we know them. Wherever there is urban life, there will be violence. Moving people out of old cities and putting them in new ones does nothing to change the situation. The new town of Milton Keynes, about fifty miles north of London, is an example. It was built more or less as a unity, but great care was taken to make sure that the buildings blended with the natural scenery, that all the facilities which people could want were close at hand, and to save the people the danger and unpleasantness of traffic outside their front doors. And yet Milton Keynes

has one of the highest incidences of assault and vandalism in Britain.

Why this should be so is not hard to understand. The planners did nothing to disturb the urban pattern of specialization and impersonality leading to frustration which has been identified. Indeed, the feeling of lack of control is probably greater in Milton Keynes than elsewhere precisely because it was planned in such detail, by faceless architects and bureaucrats, and on a very large scale.

The only way we can escape from this vicious circle is if we can create circumstances where people feel more in control of their destinies and freer to organize their lives and surroundings. The appearance of communes is an attempt to create these circumstances. So far, of course, they have had no effect on the amount of violence in cities. There are very few of them and understandably they are based in the country.

They are, however, a step in the right direction in two important ways. First, they are organized on a small scale, and secondly they are organized by individuals rather than an official organization. Both of these features are vital if we want to avoid slipping back into the negative aspects of city life discussed above.

All that can be done by governments is to nudge people gently in the right direction by taking every opportunity to foster a sense of community. If not many opportunities exist, it is all the more important that those that do exist are taken. One of those is to ensure that all public services are organized on the smallest scale possible. Another is to ensure that those guilty of violent behaviour are not further alienated by harsh punishments but encouraged to see themselves as part of the community. Wherever planning of any kind is really necessary, architecture is all-important in determining whether a community spirit will exist. Evidence that improvements are possible comes from the establishment of a number of neighborhood councils in inner city areas and from their successful achievements.

The significant point about these councils is that they were set up by voluntary action. It should be obvious from the preceding argument that direct action by the state can do little to turn the tide of violence, and indeed sometimes makes it worse. The problem of violence can only be solved by us. It is worth commenting that our immediate assumption that a community problem is something that has to be solved by a government, rather than by the members of the community themselves, is responsible for the feelings of alienation that lead to violence in the first place.

The suggestions made above for solving the problem of urban violence are obviously not very spectacular. By their nature they cannot be implemented overnight, since they imply voluntary action on the part of individuals. Nor, when and if these improvements are effected, can a dramatic decrease in the amount of violence be expected. This is because, as was suggested by the comparison of London and Athens, urban violence results from a mental attitude gradually induced by circumstances, and not directly from the circumstances. It follows that, if the circumstances are changed, the mental attitude of violence will only gradually disappear.

- James O'Driscoll

**II. Write book reports on books *Brave New World* written by Aldous Huxle and *In Contempt* written by Christopher A. Darden**