

**VICTORIAN ENGLAND:  
DICKENS: AN  
OVERVIEW**



# VICTORIAN ENGLAND: DICKENS: AN OVERVIEW

## Description

Through an in-depth analysis of primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain the basic facts behind Dickens' life and his major literary works, how those stories took their inspiration from the struggle between the Bourgeoisie and the Proletariat in Victorian society, and why Dickens' works are still studied, over 100 years after his death.

## Subjects

English / Language Arts, European History, World History

## Grade Level

11-12

## Duration

180 minutes (2 x 90 min)

## Tour Links

- Westminster Abbey, Poet's Corner
- Charles Dickens Museum, London

## Essential Questions

- Why is Charles Dickens considered to be one of the greatest writers and poets of the Victorian Age?
- How did Dickens' major works portray the masses of Victorian England? Were these portrayals accurate?
- Can Dickens be considered a socialist in the mid-19th century sense of the word?
- Why was Victorian London a contrast in cultures caught in the throes of the industrial revolution, Bourgeois masters living "upstairs" and Proletariat workers living "downstairs"?
- How did the Victorians respond to the literary works of Charles Dickens?
- Why are the works of Charles Dickens still important, over 100 years after his death?

## Academic Summary

The chimes were ringing the three quarters past eleven at that moment.

“Forgive me if I am not justified in what I ask,” said Scrooge, looking intently at the Spirit’s robe, “but I see something strange, and not belonging to yourself, protruding from your skirts. Is it a foot or a claw!”

“It might be a claw, for the flesh there is upon it,” was the Spirit’s sorrowful reply. “Look here.”

From the foldings of its robe, it brought two children; wretched, abject, frightful, hideous, miserable. They knelt down at its feet, and clung upon the outside of its garment.

“Oh, Man! look here. Look, look, down here!” exclaimed the Ghost.

They were a boy and girl. Yellow, meagre, ragged, scowling, wolfish; but prostrate, too, in their humility. Where graceful youth should have filled their features out, and touched them with its freshest tints, a stale and shriveled hand, like that of age, had pinched, and twisted them, and pulled them into shreds. Where angels might have sat enthroned, devils lurked, and glared out menacing. No change, no degradation, no perversion of humanity, in any grade, through all the mysteries of wonderful creation, has monsters half so horrible and dread.

Scrooge started back, appalled. Having them shown to him in this way, he tried to say they were fine children, but the words choked themselves, rather than be parties to a lie of such enormous magnitude.

“Spirit! are they yours?” Scrooge could say no more.

“They are Man’s,” said the Spirit, looking down upon them. “And they cling to me, appealing from their fathers. This boy is Ignorance. This girl is Want.

Beware them both, and all of their degree, but most of all beware this boy, for on his brow I see that written which is Doom, unless the writing be erased.

Deny it!” cried the Spirit, stretching out its hand towards the city. “Slander those who tell it ye! Admit it for your factious purposes, and make it worse! And bide the end!”

“Have they no refuge or resource?” cried Scrooge.

“Are there no prisons?” said the Spirit, turning on him for the last time with his own words. “Are there no workhouses?”

The bell struck twelve.

*Charles Dickens, A Christmas Carol, (1843)*

Charles Dickens, considered by many to be England’s greatest literary figure of the Victorian age, conjures up visions of plum pudding and Christmas punch, quaint coaching inns and cozy firesides, but also of orphaned and starving children, misers, murderers, and abusive schoolmasters. In many ways, Dickens was 19th century London personified. He survived its mean streets as a child and, largely self-educated, possessed the genius to become the greatest writer of his age. His novels and short stories stand today as masterpieces read the world over.

Through an in-depth analysis of primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain the basic facts behind Dickens' life and his major literary works, how those stories took their inspiration from the struggle between the Bourgeoisie and the Proletariat in Victorian society, and why Dickens' works are still studied, over 100 years after his death.

## Objectives

1. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain basic facts behind Dickens' life and how his personal story might have influenced his major literary works.
2. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain how Dickens' characters often took their inspiration from the struggle between the Bourgeoisie and the Proletariat in Victorian society.
3. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain why Dickens' works are still studied, over 100 years after his death.

## Procedure

### I. Anticipatory Set

- Writing / Question: What does the name Charles Dickens bring to mind? (5 min)
- Handouts – Copies of the primary sources and readings from the websites listed below. (5 min)

### II. Body of Lesson

- Lecture / PPT – Brief Overview of Victorian Britain and Charles Dickens (20 min)
- Video – Charles Dickens Documentary (45 min)
- Independent Activity – Students read the primary sources and articles Dickens and Victorian London, taking notes as appropriate. (30 min)
- Suggestion: Have the students read some of these articles for homework the night before class to prepare for class discussion.
- Suggestion: Assign different readings by student groups.
- Group Activity – Discussion on struggle between the Bourgeoisie and the Proletariat in Victorian London. (30 min)

### III. Closure

- Assessment – Essay / DBQ: Did Charles Dickens, through the use of his major characters, capture the essence of the Victorian Era in 19th century London? What was his goal in writing about poverty? Ultimately, how did Victorians respond?

## **Extension**

### **On tour: Dickens Museum**

While on tour, students can visit the Charles Dickens Museum at 48 Doughty St. in London. The museum contains manuscripts, rare editions and personal items from Dickens himself and is housed in the only remaining London home of the Victorian Age writer. According to sources, Dickens lived in the home from 1837-1839, writing Oliver Twist and Nickolas Nickleby while living there.

## Web Links

### Lesson Plan Websites

- [www.watertowncsd.org/webpages/jwitt/files/the%20life%20of%20charles%20dickens.ppt](http://www.watertowncsd.org/webpages/jwitt/files/the%20life%20of%20charles%20dickens.ppt)  
The Life of Dickens (PowerPoint) – from J. Witt, English teacher at Watertown High School (NY)
- [dickensmuseum.com/](http://dickensmuseum.com/)  
Charles Dickens Museum – in a former Dickens House, 48 Doughty Street, London
- [dickens2012.org/](http://dickens2012.org/)  
Dickens 2012 website celebrating the 200th birthday of Charles Dickens – great resource for both primary and secondary sources
- [telegraph.co.uk/culture/charles-dickens/9018185/Dickenss-London-in-pictures.html](http://telegraph.co.uk/culture/charles-dickens/9018185/Dickenss-London-in-pictures.html)  
“Dickens’s London: in pictures” website from The Daily Telegraph newspaper, published in London
- [bl.uk/learning/langlit/dickens/poverty/wealth.html](http://bl.uk/learning/langlit/dickens/poverty/wealth.html)  
“Dickens in Context: Poverty and Wealth” website from the British Library – copious amount of primary and secondary sources on Dickens and his literary works in the context of 19th century Victorian society
- [dickens.ucsc.edu/resources/teaching-aids.html](http://dickens.ucsc.edu/resources/teaching-aids.html)  
“The Dickens Project” website at the University of California Santa Cruz
- [teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1](http://teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1)  
Reading Like a Historian: Primary Source Documents (video) – great 2 minute video on how to incorporate primary sources into the Common Core and history classes – from Shilpa Duvoor of Summit Preparatory Charter High School in Redwood City, CA – highly recommended for teachers
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=R37vY3NGKes](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R37vY3NGKes)  
Charles Dickens Documentary (Biography Channel video)

### Background Information

- [www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles\\_Dickens](http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Dickens)  
Wikipedia – Charles Dickens (gives a good overview of the poet and his works)
- [www.passports.com/group\\_leaders/on\\_the\\_road/the\\_united\\_kingdom/london](http://www.passports.com/group_leaders/on_the_road/the_united_kingdom/london)  
On the Road: London – city facts on London from Passports Educational Travel

### Other Relevant Passports Lesson Plans

- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/england/sadler-report-child-labor](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/england/sadler-report-child-labor)  
Victorian Britain – Sadler Report on Child Labor

## Key Terms

- Bourgeoisie
- *Daily Telegraph*
- Debtors Prison (UK)
- Proletariat
- Socialism
- Victorian
- Workhouses

