

Learning objective: To understand the conditions that the poor lived in in Victorian times and consequently learn something more about the Victorian context and how writers effectively describe their plight.

Starter:

Introduce the concept of class, perhaps by writing the word on the board and asking students what they understand by the word. They might start by suggesting they are in classes within school and this can lead in to a discussion of people being separated by age etc and how this concept is extended within society.

If it is a weaker class perhaps write up a dictionary definition of the word and ask what they think of the definition (for example, from the Penguin English dictionary: ‘a group in society sharing the same economic or social status or the system of differentiating society by classes.’)

If some of the other lessons on introducing the Victorian era have been done from www.morelearning.net then the pictures of people can be used as an interesting discussion point (for example, ‘Do you think this person looks upper class?’ ‘What makes you think this?’ etc)

Introduction:

The teacher reads out the following words (these are also on the attached sheet in case you wish to display them) which are all taken from the *Oliver Twist* extracts:

gruel	the most crowded and densely inhabited part of the town
the spoons being nearly as large as the bowls	a narrow street more dirty and miserable than any they had passed yet
wild with hunger	neglected appearance
a long grace was said over the short commons	There was no fire in the room
desperate with hunger	ragged children

What sort of scene(s) do students think is being described from these words? Perhaps ask students in pairs to write down their ideas, thinking carefully about the words used.

Take ideas on the IWB – asking questions such as, ‘Why does a narrow street make the area seem more miserable than a wide street? Why has the writer chosen this adjective?’ ‘Can anyone tell us whether the statement about the spoons and the bowls shows that the spoons are big or the bowls are small? Which is more likely? Why is this an effective way to explain it rather than just writing, ‘the spoons were small’?’

Development:

The teacher reads the two extracts out (both from *Oliver Twist*) and students highlight or underline any words or phrases which they think typify the social conditions of the poor. Point out that some have been discussed already as examples.

Students compare their ideas in pairs and explain the reasons behind their choices. They might even make a list or diagram to compare their ideas and then share this with another pair.

The class can be brought back together to discuss findings or you can ask them to make up bigger groups to share their ideas further.

Plenary:

Either individually or in pairs students write down five key concepts about Victorian society using the attached sheet as a framework (alternatively this can be displayed as an example format on the IWB).

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From *Oliver Twist* by Charles Dickens – Chapter 2

The room in which the boys were fed, was a large stone hall, with a copper at one end: out of which the master, dressed in an apron for the purpose, and assisted by one or two women, ladled the gruel at mealtimes. Of this festive composition each boy had one porringer, and no more--except on occasions of great public rejoicing, when he had two ounces and a quarter of bread besides.

The bowls never wanted washing. The boys polished them with their spoons till they shone again; and when they had performed this operation (which never took very long, the spoons being nearly as large as the bowls), they would sit staring at the copper, with such eager eyes, as if they could have devoured the very bricks of which it was composed; employing themselves, meanwhile, in sucking their fingers most assiduously, with the view of catching up any stray splashes of gruel that might have been cast thereon. Boys have generally excellent appetites. Oliver Twist and his companions suffered the tortures of slow starvation for three months: at last they got so voracious and wild with hunger, that one boy, who was tall for his age, and hadn't been used to that sort of thing (for his father had kept a small cook-shop), hinted darkly to his companions, that unless he had another basin of gruel per diem, he was afraid he might some night happen to eat the boy who slept next him, who happened to be a weakly youth of tender age. He had a wild, hungry eye; and they implicitly believed him. A council was held; lots were cast who should walk up to the master after supper that evening, and ask for more; and it fell to Oliver Twist.

The evening arrived; the boys took their places. The master, in his cook's uniform, stationed himself at the copper; his pauper assistants ranged themselves behind him; the gruel was served out; and a long grace was said over the short commons. The gruel disappeared; the boys whispered each other, and winked at Oliver; while his next neighbours nudged him. Child as he was, he was desperate with hunger, and reckless with misery. He rose from the table; and advancing to the master, basin and spoon in hand, said: somewhat alarmed at his own temerity:

'Please, sir, I want some more.'

The master was a fat, healthy man; but he turned very pale. He gazed in stupified astonishment on the small rebel for some seconds, and then clung for support to the copper. The assistants were paralysed with wonder; the boys with fear.

'What!' said the master at length, in a faint voice.

'Please, sir,' replied Oliver, 'I want some more.' The master aimed a blow at Oliver's head with the ladle; pinioned him in his arm; and shrieked aloud for the beadle.

From *Oliver Twist* by Charles Dickens – Chapter 5

They walked on, for some time, through the most crowded and densely inhabited part of the town; and then, striking down a narrow street more dirty and miserable than any they had yet passed through, paused to look for the house which was the object of their search. The houses on either side were high and large, but very old, and tenanted by people of the poorest class: as their neglected appearance would have sufficiently denoted, without the concurrent testimony afforded by the squalid looks of the few men and women who, with folded arms and bodies half doubled, occasionally skulked along. A great many of the tenements had shop-fronts; but these were fast closed, and mouldering away; only the upper rooms being inhabited. Some houses which had become insecure from age and decay, were prevented from falling into the street, by huge beams of wood reared against the walls, and firmly planted in the road; but even these crazy dens seemed to have been selected as the nightly haunts of some houseless wretches, for many of the rough boards which supplied the place of door and window, were wrenched from their positions, to afford an aperture wide enough for the passage of a human body. The kennel was stagnant and filthy. The very rats, which here and there lay putrefying in its rottenness, were hideous with famine.

There was neither knocker nor bell-handle at the open door where Oliver and his master stopped; so, groping his way cautiously through the dark passage, and bidding Oliver keep close to him and not be afraid the undertaker mounted to the top of the first flight of stairs. Stumbling against a door on the landing, he rapped at it with his knuckles.

It was opened by a young girl of thirteen or fourteen. The undertaker at once saw enough of what the room contained, to know it was the apartment to which he had been directed. He stepped in; Oliver followed him.

There was no fire in the room; but a man was crouching, mechanically, over the empty stove. An old woman, too, had drawn a low stool to the cold hearth, and was sitting beside him. There were some ragged children in another corner; and in a small recess, opposite the door, there lay upon the ground, something covered with an old blanket. Oliver shuddered as he cast his eyes toward the place, and crept involuntarily closer to his master; for though it was covered up, the boy felt that it was a corpse.

The man's face was thin and very pale; his hair and beard were grizzly; his eyes were bloodshot. The old woman's face was wrinkled; her two remaining teeth protruded over her under lip; and her eyes were bright and piercing. Oliver was afraid to look at either her or the man. They seemed so like the rats he had seen outside.

'Nobody shall go near her,' said the man, starting fiercely up, as the undertaker approached the recess. 'Keep back! Damn you, keep back, if you've a life to lose!'

'Nonsense, my good man,' said the undertaker, who was pretty well used to misery in all its shapes. 'Nonsense!'

'I tell you,' said the man: clenching his hands, and stamping furiously on the floor,--'I tell you I won't have her put into the ground. She couldn't rest there. The worms would worry her--not eat her--she is so worn away.'

The undertaker offered no reply to this raving; but producing a tape from his pocket, knelt down for a moment by the side of the body.

'Ah!' said the man: bursting into tears, and sinking on his knees at the feet of the dead woman; 'kneel down, kneel down --kneel round her, every one of you, and mark my words! I say she was starved to death. I never knew how bad she was, till the fever came upon her; and then her bones were starting through the skin. There was neither fire nor candle; she died in the dark--in the dark! She couldn't even see her children's faces, though we heard her gasping out their names. I begged for her in the streets: and they sent me to prison. When I came back, she was dying; and all the blood in my heart has dried up, for they starved her to death. I swear it before the God that saw it! They starved her!' He twined his hands in his hair; and, with a loud scream, rolled grovelling upon the floor: his eyes fixed, and the foam covering his lips.

The terrified children cried bitterly; but the old woman, who had hitherto remained as quiet as if she had been wholly deaf to all that passed, menaced them into silence. Having unloosened the cravat of the man who still remained extended on the ground, she tottered towards the undertaker.

Exploring Literature

Five key points about Victorian society

Point about Victorian society	Quotation from the text (or other evidence) to prove it is right