



## **ACC Context: Poverty and Family**

There was a common belief among wealthier people in Victorian times that poverty was simply a result of laziness. The Poor Law of 1834 removed any government support for people who struggled for money. Their only option was to enter a workhouse, which provided food and shelter in exchange for hard manual labour in cruel conditions. Those who got into debt were jailed in debtors' prisons until the money was paid. Scrooge refers to these establishments when he refuses to donate money to the charity collector in Stave One. Scrooge's description of the poor as the "surplus population" refers to an idea called Malthusianism, which Dickens strongly opposed. Malthusianism claims that poverty is caused by an excess of people and the only way to reduce poverty is to reduce the size of the population.

Dickens had a lot of first-hand experience of the suffering of the poor. His own father was put in a debtors' prison when Charles was 12 and he was taken out of school and made to work, which gave him a strong sense of injustice. He realised that poverty was usually the result of bad luck or unfortunate circumstances rather than laziness. Dickens' books are full of social commentary on the gap between rich and poor; he went to visit many places where poor people lived and worked and wrote about the things he witnessed, and his descriptions were often shocking to the upper classes who were ignorant of how much the poor really suffered.

Dickens had a complicated relationship with his family. As a child, he was forced to live apart from his parents and work in a warehouse while his father was in prison, which made Dickens deeply ashamed. When his father was released, Dickens' mother argued that he should be sent back to work in the warehouse anyway. Dickens' feelings of neglect and rejection by his parents may have influenced the scenes of young Scrooge alone at school in *A Christmas Carol*.

As an adult, Dickens raised a large family of his own. In 1843, when *A Christmas Carol* was released, he already had four children and his wife was pregnant with a fifth (they eventually had ten children, which was not uncommon for the time). He constantly struggled for money to support his family. In *A Christmas Carol*, Dickens presents an idealised and sentimental view of family in which love and companionship are more important than wealth. In real life, though, Dickens was disappointed in almost all of his children and annoyed by the financial burden they caused him throughout his life.

**How can this boost your context? Answer the questions:**

1. Why do you think the Poor Law was introduced in 1834? Who would have voted or supported this?
2. What is 'Malthusianism'?
3. How would have Dickens' own childhood experiences affected his feelings towards places such as workhouses or prisons?
4. Why would members of the upper class be ignorant to the suffering of the lower classes?
5. Why did Dickens have to leave school at such a young age? What effect would this have had upon him?
6. Why did Dickens write about themes such as family, love and companionship within his works?
7. In the poem 'London', Blake also refers to the sufferings of the poor. He describes their 'mind forged manacles' – how is this similar to what Dickens would have witnessed in his life?