

A CHRISTMAS CAROL

The New Poor Law of 1834

Grade Level(s): 6-9

Duration: 30-45 minutes

Activity: Students will learn to analyze a political poster to gain insight on workhouses and to better understand the feeling of opposition towards the new Poor Laws.

Materials: Background and poster worksheets with questions

Procedure:

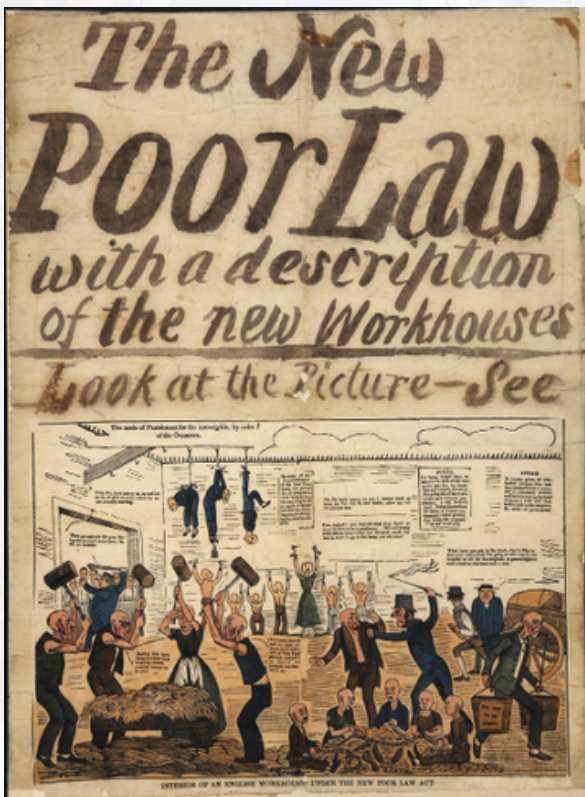
1. Pass out background and worksheets (or print poster size images and hang around the room instead)
2. Students will work in groups to analyze and discuss the political poster.
3. After each discussion they will answer the questions that go with each portion of the poster.

Background:

Before 1834, just before the time of Dickens' "A Christmas Carol", the cost of looking after the poor was growing more expensive every year. This cost was paid for by the middle and upper classes in each town through their local taxes, and they began to feel as though they were paying the poor to be lazy and avoid work. In fact, Ebenezer Scrooge, a character in "A Christmas Carol", believed that prisons and workhouses would solve the poor's problems and this was a common idea in British society at the time.

As a result, a new Poor Law was introduced in 1834. It was intended to lower the cost of taking care of the poor by creating a system that would be used all over the country.

Under the new Poor Law, with the exception of special circumstances, poor people could now only get help if they were prepared to leave their homes and go into a workhouse. Inmates were treated poorly and made to abide by harsh rules.



Although most people did not have to go to the workhouse, it was always threatening if a worker became unemployed, sick or old. Increasingly, workhouses contained only orphans, the old, the sick and the insane. Not surprisingly the new Poor Law was very unpopular. It seemed to punish people who were poor through no fault of their own.

The poster below is an example of how those who were against the new poor laws felt about life inside of the workhouses. This poster is really made up of several smaller pictures. In this activity you will analyze small parts of the poster at a time to better understand their opposition.



1. How desperate are the people trying to get into the workhouse?

2. What is the response of the workhouse master?

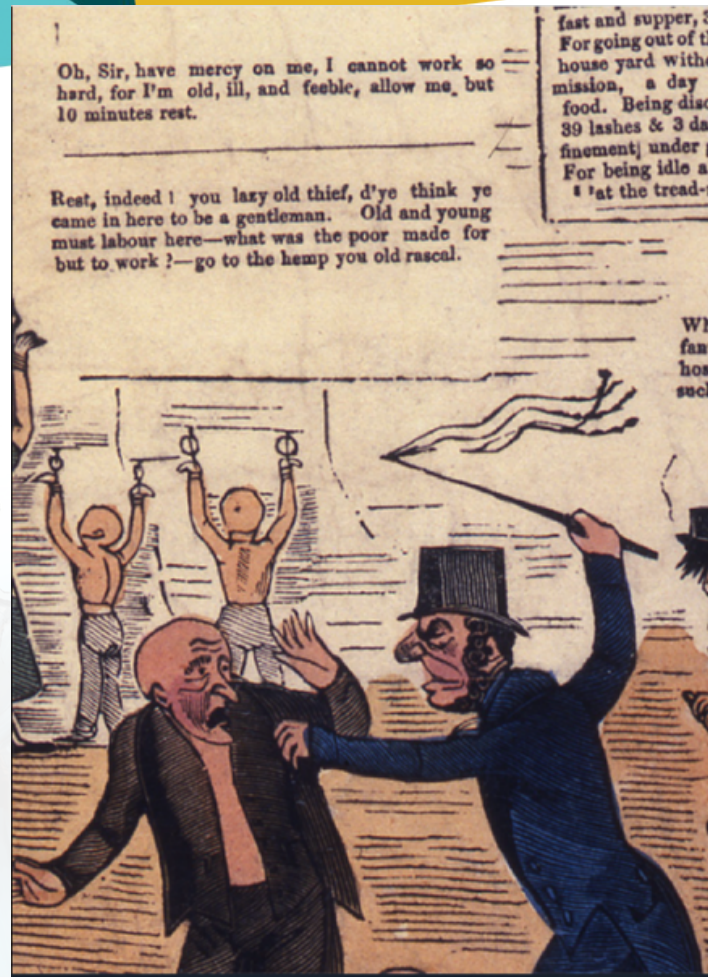


1. What work are these paupers doing?
2. Why do you think the paupers' heads have been shaved?

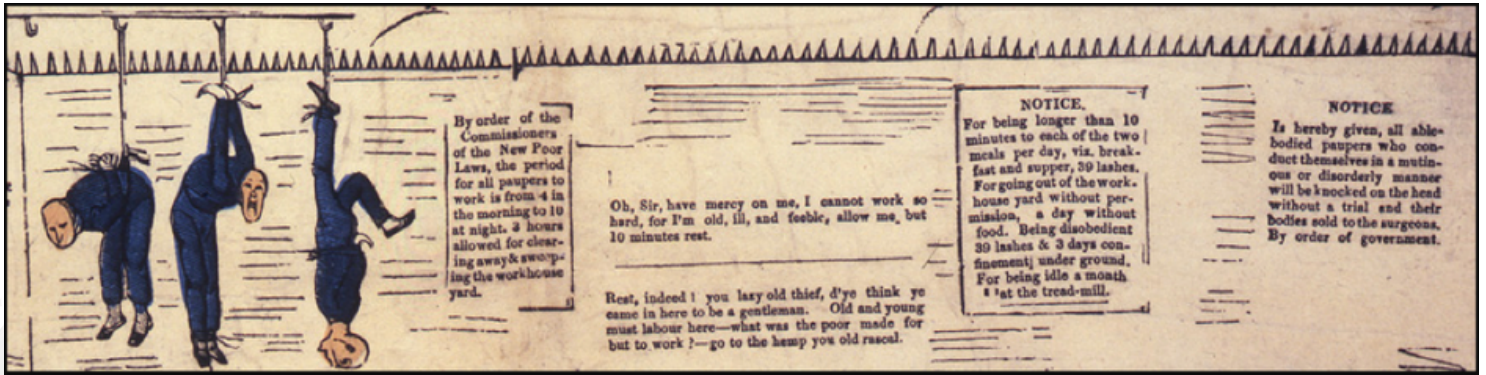


1. What has Joe got in the truck?

2. What is he going to do with it?



1. What can you tell about the treatment of the elderly from this part of the poster?
2. Why do you think that the government would go to drastic measures to be sure that people in workhouses were actually working?



Transcript

By order of the Commissioners of the New Poor Laws, the period for all paupers to work is from 4 in the morning to 10 at night. 3 hours allowed for clearing away & sweeping the workhouse yard

NOTICE. For being longer than 10 minutes to each of the two meals per day, viz. breakfast and supper, 39 lashes. For going out of the workhouse yard without permission, a day without food. Being disobedient 29 lashes & 3 days confinement under ground. For being idle a month at the tread-mill.

NOTICE is hereby given, all able-bodied paupers who conduct themselves in a mutinous or disorderly manner will be knocked on the head without a trial and their bodies sold to the surgeons. By order of government.

1. How long were inmates expected to work each day?
2. How many hours of sleep were they able to get?
3. What punishments do you see listed in the poster?