

Teacher Notes - 10.1

The scene at Bob Cratchit's unassuming little abode is pivotal to the development of the novella. Dickens uses the opportunity to put forth a poignant criticism of the unfeeling members of a disconnected upper class and to present a highly sentimentalized portrait of the lower classes. This picture is designed to address and undermine Victorian class prejudice and awaken Dickens' readers to the harsh realities of poverty. In 1843, when *A Christmas Carol* was written, England had particularly stringent laws in governing the payment of debts and the condition of penury. These draconian rules forced many poor people into prisons and provisional workhouses. At the same time, many prominent politicians and theorists were attempting to justify these conditions with arguments designed to de-legitimize the rights of the underclass, a move that further hindered the ability of the poor to affect the governing of their own society.

Dickens was particularly disgusted with the writings of Thomas Robert Malthus, a wealthy man, who argued in his *Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798) that population growth would always outpace food supply resulting in unavoidable and catastrophic poverty and starvation. (His equations, long since debunked, postulate that population growth will occur according to a geometric sequence, while food supply will grow according to an arithmetic sequence.) In his pamphlet "The Crisis," Malthus supported the Poor Laws and the workhouses, arguing that any man unable to sustain himself had no right to live, much less participate in the development of society. Dickens alludes to Malthus in Stave One, when Scrooge echoes the economist's views on overpopulation in his rebuke of the portly gentlemen. The Cratchits are Dickens' defense against this large-scale, purely economic, almost inhuman mode of thought--a reminder that England's poor are all individuals, living beings with families and lives who could not and should not be swept behind a math equation like some numerical discrepancy.