Working with 19th century texts



A Short Anthology and

suggestions for teaching

TEXT 1:

*Extract from* **A TALE OF TWO CITIES**

*Charles Dickens*

*There is terror in the carriage, there is weeping, there is the heavy breathing of the insensible traveller.*

*"Are we not going too slowly? Can they not be induced to go faster?" asks Lucie, clinging to the old man.*

*"It would seem like flight, my darling. I must not urge them too much; it would rouse suspicion."*

*"Look back, look back, and see if we are pursued!"*

*"The road is clear, my dearest. So far, we are not pursued..."*

*Out of the open country, in again among ruinous buildings, solitary farms, dye-works, tanneries, and the like, cottages in twos and threes, avenues of leafless trees. Have these men deceived us, and taken us back by another road? Is not this the same place twice over? Thank Heaven, no. A village. Look back, look back, and see if we are pursued! Hush! The posting-house.*

**Performing the text**

Work with two other people to produce a dramatic reading of the extract from *A Tale of Two Cities.*  Concentrate on conveying to the listeners the way Dickens creates suspense in this short section.

When you are ready, make your presentation to the class.

**Discussion**

Continuing in your original group of three, discuss things which you thought went really well in other groups’ presentations. What did you notice about the way they had responded to the punctuation? You could concentrate on how well you think each group read the last paragraph.

TEXT 2:

**CAPTAIN MURDERER**

*Charles Dickens (1861)*

The first diabolical character who intruded himself on my peaceful youth was a certain Captain Murderer. This wretch must have been an offshoot of the Blue Beard family, but I had no suspicion of the consanguinity n those times. His warning name would seem to have awakened no general prejudice against him, for he was admitted into best society and possessed immense wealth. Captain Murderer’s mission was matrimony, and gratification of a cannibal appetite with tender brides. On his marriage morning, he always caused both sides of the way to the church to be planted with curious flowers; and when his bride said, “Captain Murderer, I never saw flowers like these before: what are they called?” he answered, “They are called garnish for house-lamb,” and laughed at his ferocious practical joke in a horrid manner, disquieting the minds of the noble bridal company, with a very sharp show of teeth, then displayed for the first time. He made love in a coach and six, and married in a coach and twelve, and all his horses were milk-white horses with one red spot on the back which he caused to be hidden by the harness. For, the spot *would* there, though every horse was milk-white when Captain Murderer bought him. And the spot was the young bride’s blood. (To this terrific point I am indebted for my first personal experience of a shudder and cold beads on my forehead). When Captain Murderer had made an end of feasting and revelry, and had dismissed the noble guests, and was alone with his wife on the day month after the marriage, it was his whimsical custom to produce a golden rolling-pin and silver pie-board. Now there was this special feature in the Captain’s courtships, that he always asked if the young lady could make a pie-crust; and if she couldn’t, by nature or education, she was taught. Well. When the bride saw Captain Murderer produce the golden rolling-pin and silver pie-board, she remembered this, and turned up her laced silk sleeves to make a pie. The Captain brought out a silver pie-dish of immense capacity, and the Captain brought out flour and eggs and all things needful, except the inside of the pie; of materials for the staple of the pie itself, the Captain brought out none. Then said the lovely bride, “Captain Murderer, what pie is this to be?” He replied, “A meat pie.” Then said the lovely bride, “Dear Captain Murderer, I see no meat.” The Captain humorously retorted, “Look in the glass.” She looked in the glass, but still saw no meat, and then the Captain roared with laughter, and suddenly frowning and drawing his sword, bade her roll out the crust. So she rolled out the crust, dropping large tears upon it all the time because he was so cross, and when she had lined the dish with crust, and had cut the crust all ready to fit the top, the Captain called out, “*I* see the meat in the glass!” And the bride looked up at the glass, just in time to see the Captain cutting off her head; and he chopped her in pieces, and peppered her, and salted her, and put her in the pie, and sent it to the baker’s, and ate it all, and picked the bones.

Captain Murderer went on this way, prospering exceedingly, until he came to choose a bride from two twin sisters, and at first he didn’t know which to choose. For, though one was fair and the other dark, they were both equally beautiful. But the fair twin loved him, and the dark twin hated him, so he chose the fair one. The dark twin would have prevented the marriage if she could, but she couldn’t; however, on the night before it, much suspecting Captain Murderer, she stole out and climbed his garden wall, and looked in at his window through a chink in the shutter, and saw him having his teeth filed sharp. Next day she listened all day, and heard him make his joke about the house-lamb. And that day month, he had the paste rolled out, and cut the fair twin’s head off, and chopped her in pieces, and peppered her, and salted her, and put her in the pie, and sent it to the baker’s, and ate it all, and picked the bones.

Now, again, the dark twin had had her suspicions much increased by the filing of Captain Murderer’s teeth, and again by the house-lamb joke. Putting all things together when he gave out that her sister was dead, she divined the truth, and determined to be revenged. So, she went up to Captain Murderer’s house, and knocked at the knocker and pulled at the bell, and when the Captain came to the door, said “Dear Captain Murderer, marry me next, for I have always loved you and was jealous of my sister.” The Captain took it as a compliment, and made a polite answer, and the marriage was quickly arranged. On the night before it, the bride again climbed to his window, and again saw him having his teeth filed sharp. At his sight she laughed such a terrible laugh in the chink of the shutter that the Captain’s blood curdled, and he said: “I hope nothing has disagreed with me!” At that, she laughed again, a still more terrible laugh, and the shutter was opened and search made, but she was nimbly gone, and there was no-one. Next day they went to church in a coach and twelve, and were married. And that day month, rolled the pie-crust out, and Captain Murderer cut her head off, and chopped her in pieces, and peppered her, and salted her, and put her in the pie, and sent it to the baker’s, and ate it all, and picked the bones.

But before she had began to roll out the paste she had taken a deadly poison of awful character, distilled from toads’ eyes and spiders’ knees; and Captain Murderer had hardly picked her last bone, when he began to swell, and to turn blue, and to be all over spots and screaming, until he reached from floor to ceiling and from wall to wall; and then, at one o’clock in the morning, he blew up with a loud explosion. At the sound of it, all the milk-white horses in the stables broke their halters and went mad, and then they galloped over everybody in Captain Murderer’s house (beginning with the family blacksmith who had filed his teeth) until the whole were dead, and then they galloped away.

**Context:**  This short story was published in the 1850s in the magazine Dickens himself produced called *All The Year Round.* Many of the stories focus on Dickens’ own early reading experiences, and in particular the memory of the stories told to him in childhood by the family’s nursemaid, Mercy. He describes how Mercy took great delight in frightening him when she told him the story of *Captain Murderer*:

*The young woman who brought me acquainted with* Captain Murderer *had a fiendish enjoyment of my terrors, and used to begin, I remember – as a sort of introductory overture – by clawing the air with both hands, and uttering a long low hollow groan.*

TEXT 3:

*From* **THE OSTLER**

*Wilkie Collins* (1855)

I find an old man, fast asleep, in one of the stalls of the stable. It is midday, and rather a strange time for an ostler to devote to sleep. Something curious, too, about the man’s face. The eyebrows painfully contracted; the mouth fast set, and drawn down at the corners; the hollow cheeks sadly, and, as I cannot help fancying, prematurely wrinkled; the scanty, grizzled hair, telling weakly its own tale of some past sorrow or suffering. How fast he draws his breath, too, for a man asleep! He is talking in his sleep.

“Wake up!” I hear him say, in a quick whisper through his fast-clenched teeth. “Wake up there! Murder! O Lord help me! Lord help me, alone in this place!”

He stops, and sighs again – moves one lean arm slowly, till it rests over his throat – shudders a little, and turns on his straw – the arm leaves his throat – the hand stretches itself out, and clutches at the side towards which he has turned, as if he fancies himself to be grasping at the edge of something. Is he waking? No – there is the whisper again; he is still talking in his sleep.

“Light grey eyes,” he says now, “and a droop in the left eyelid. Yes! Yes! – flaxen hair with a gold-yellow streak in it – all right, mother – fair, white arms with a down on them – little lady’s hand, with a reddish look under the finger-nails – and the knife – always the cursed knife – first on one side, then on the other. Aha! You she-devil, where’s the knife? Never mind, mother – too late now. I’ve promised to marry, and marry I must. Murder! Wake up there! For God’s sake, wake up!”

At the last words his voice rises, and grows so restless on a sudden, that I draw back quietly to the door. I see him shudder on the straw – his withered face grows distorted – he throws up both his hands with a quick, hysterical gasp; they strike against the bottom of the manger under which he lies; the blow awakens him; I have just time to slip through the door, before his eyes are fairly open and his senses are his own again.

What I have seen and heard has so startled and shocked me, that I feel my heart beating fast, as I softly and quickly retrace my steps across the inn-yard. The discomposure that is going on within me, apparently shows itself in my face; for, as I get back to the covered way leading to the Inn stairs, the landlord, who is just coming out of the house to ring some bell in the yard, stops astonished, and asks what is the matter with me? I tell him what I have seen.

“Aha!” says the landlord, with an air of relief. “I understand now. Poor old chap! He was only dreaming his old dream over again. There’s the queerest story – of a dreadful kind, too, mind you – connected with him and his dream, that ever was told.”

I entreat the landlord to tell me the story. After a little hesitation, he complies with my request.

TEXT 4:

*From* **THE STORY OF THE DREAM-WOMAN**

*Wilkie Collins (1859)*

I had not been settled much more than six weeks in my country practice, when I was sent for to a neighbouring town, to consult with the resident medical man there on a case of very dangerous illness.

My hors had come down with me at the end of a long ride the night before, and had hurt himself, luckily, much more than he had hurt his master. Being deprived of the animal’s services, I started for my destination by the coach (there were no railways at the time) , and I hoped to get back again, towards the afternoon, in the same way.

After the consultation was over, I went to the principal inn of the town to wait for the coach. When it came up it was full inside and out. There was no resource left me but to get home as cheaply as I could by hiring a gig. The price asked for this accommodation struck me as being so extortionate that I determined to look out for an inn of inferior pretensions, and to try if I could not make a better bargain with a less prosperous establishment.

I soon found a likely-looking house, dingy and quiet, with an old-fashioned sign, that had evidently not been repainted for many years past. The landlord, in this case, was not above making a small profit, and as soon as we came to terms he rang the yard-bell to order the gig.

“Has Robert not come back from that errand?” asked the landlord, appealing to the waiter who answered the bell.

“No, sir, he hasn’t.”

“Well, then, you must wake up Isaac.”

“Wake up Isaac?” I repeated; that sounds rather odd. Do your ostlers go to bed in the daytime?”

“This one does,” said the landlord, smiling to himself in a rather strange way.

“And dreams too,” added the waiter; “I shan’t forget the turn it gave me the first time I heard him.”

“Never you mind about that,” retorted the proprietor; ‘you go and rouse Isaac up. The gentleman’s waiting for his gig.”

The landlord’s manner and the waiter’s manner expressed a great deal more than they either of them said. I began to suspect that I might be on the trace of something professionally interesting to me as a medical man, and I thought I should like to look at the ostler before the waiter awakened him.

“Stop a minute,” I interposed; I have rather a fancy for seeing this man before you wake him up. I’m a doctor; and if this queer sleeping and dreaming of his comes from anything wrong in his brain, I may be able to tell you what to do with him.”

“I rather think you will find his complaint beyond all doctoring, sir,” said the landlord; ‘”but if you would like to see him, you’re welcome, I’m sure.”

He led the way across the yard and down a passage to the stables, opened one of the doors, and, waiting outside himself, told me to look in.

I found myself in a two-stall stable. In one of the stalls a horse was munching his corn; in the other an old man was lying asleep on his litter.

I stooped and looked at him attentively. It was a withered, woebegone face. The eyebrows painfully contracted; the mouth fast set, and drawn down at the corners. The hollow wrinkled cheeks, and the scanty grizzled hair, told their own tale of some past sorrow or suffering. He was drawing his breath convulsively when I first looked at him, and in a moment more he began to talk in his sleep.

“Wake up!” I heard him say, in a quick whisper, through his clenched teeth. “Wake up there! Murder!”

He moved one lean arm slowly till it rested over his throat, shuddered a little, and turned on his straw. Then the arm left his throat, the hand stretched itself out, and clutched at the side towards which he had turned, as if he fancied himself to be grasping at the edge of something. I saw his lips move, and bent lower over him. He was still talking in his sleep.

“light grey eyes,” he murmured, “and a droop in the left eyelid; flaxen hair, with a gold-yellow streak in it – allright, mother – fair white arms, with a down on them – little lady’s hand, with a reddish look under the finger-nails. The knife – always the cursed knife – first on one side, then on the other. Aha! You she-devil, where’s the knife?”

At the last word his voice rose, and he grew restless on a sudden. I saw him shudder on the straw; his withered face became distorted and he threw up both his hands with a quick hysterical gasp. They struck the bottom of the manger under which he lay, and the blow awakened him. I had just time to lip through the door and close it before his eyes were fairly open, and his senses his own again.

“Do you know anything about this man’s past life?” I said to the landlord.

“Yes, sir, I know pretty well all about it,” was the answer, ‘and an uncommon queer story it is. Most people don’t believe it. It’s true, though, for all that. Why, just look at him,” continued the landlord, opening the stable door again. “Poor devil! He’s so worn out with his restless nights that h’s dropped back into his sleep already.”

“Don’t wake him,” I said; I’m in no hurry for the gig. Wait till the other man comes back from his errand; and, in the meantime; suppose I have some lunch and a bottle of sherry, and suppose you come and help me to get through it?”

The heart of mine host, as I had anticipated, warmed to me over his wine. He soon became communicative on the subject of the man asleep in the stable, and little by little I drew the whole story out of him. Extravagant and incredible as the vents must appear to everybody, they are related here just as I heard them and just as they happened.

**Context:** Wilkie Collins wrote *The Ostler* in 1855 for the Christmas edition of *Household Words,* a magazine which was edited by Charles Dickens. He re-wrote the story in 1859 and it was renamed *The Story of the Dream Woman.*  It was published in a collection of his stories called *The Queen of Hearts.* He seems to have been very attached to the story because in 1873 he revived it to include in a reading tour he did in America. Finally, he expanded this reading-version for publication in 1874 with the title *The Dream Woman,* by which point it had grown from the original 9,000 to more than 27,000 words.

TEXT 5:

**THE SUPERSTITIOUS MAN’S STORY**

*Thomas Hardy*  (1891)

William Privett, as you may know, was a curious, silent man; you could tell when he came near ‘ee; and if he was in the house or anywhere behind your back without your seeing him, there seemed to be something clammy in the air, as if a cellar door was opened close by your elbow. Well, one Sunday, at a time that William was in good health to all appearance, the bell that was ringing for church went very heavy all of a sudden; the sexton, who told me o’t, said he’d not known the bell go so heavy in his hands for years – it was just as if the gudgeons wanted oiling. That was on Sunday, as I say. During the week after, it chanced that William’s wife was staying up late one night to finish her ironing, she doing the washing for Mr. and Mrs. Hardcome. Her husband had just finished his supper and gone to bed as usual some hour or two before. While she ironed she heard him coming down the stairs; he stopped to put on his boots at the stair-foot, where he always left them, and then came on into the living-room where she was ironing, passing through it towards the door, this being the only way from the staircase to the outside of the house. No word was said on either side, William not being a man given to much speaking, and his wife being occupied by her work. He went out and closed the door behind him. As her husband had now and then gone out at night in this way before when unwell, or unable to sleep for want of a pipe, she took no particular notice, and continued at her ironing. This she finished shortly after, and as he had not come in she waited awhile for him, putting away the irons and things, and preparing the table for his breakfast in the morning. Still he did not return; but supposing him not far off; and wanting to get to bed herself, tired as she was, she left the door unbarred and went to the stairs, after writing on the back of the door in chalk: *Mind and do the door*  (because he was a forgetful man).

To her great surprise, and I might say alarm, on reaching the foot of the stairs his boots were standing there as they always stood when he had gone to rest; going up to their chamber she found him in bed sleeping as sound as a rock. How he could have got back again without her seeing or hearing him was beyond her comprehension. It could only have been by passing behind her very quietly while she was bumping with the iron. But this notion did not satisfy her: it was surely impossible she could not have seen him come in through a room so small. She could not unravel the mystery, and felt very queer and uncomfortable about it. However, she would not disturb him and question him then, and went to bed herself.

He rose and left for his work very early the next morning, before she was awake, and she waited his return to breakfast with much anxiety for an explanation, for thinking over the matter by daylight made it seem only more startling. When he came in to the meal he said, before she could put her question, “What’s the meaning of them words chalked on the door?”

She told him, and asked him about going out the night before. William declared that he had never left the bedroom after entering it, having in fact undressed, lain down, and fallen asleep directly, never once waking till the clock struck five, and rose up to go to his labour.

Betty Privett was as certain in her own mind that he did go out as she was of her own existence, and was little less certain that he did not return. She felt too disturbed to argue with him, as though she must have been mistaken. When she was walking down Longpuddle Street later in the day she met Jim Weedle’s daughter Nancy, and said, “Well, Nancy, you do look sleepy today!”

“Yes, Mrs. Privett,” says Nancy. “Now don’t tell anybody, but I don’t mind letting you know what the reason o’t. Last night, being Midsummer Eve, some of us went to church porch, and didn’t get home till near one.”

“Did ye?” says Mrs. Privett. “Old Midsummer yesterday was it? Faith, I didn’t think whe’r ‘twas Midsummer or Michaelmas; I’d too much work to do.”

“Yes. And we were frightened enough, I tell ‘ee, by what we saw.”

“What did ye see?”

“Well,” says Nancy, backwardly – “we needn’t tell what we saw or who we saw.”

“You saw my husband,” says Betty Privett, in a quiet way.

“Well, since you put it so,” says Nancy, hanging fire, “we- thought we did see him; but it was darkish, and we was frightened, and of course it might not have been he.”

“Nancy, you needn’t mind letting it out, though ‘tis kept back in kindness. And he didn’t come out of church again: I know it as well as you.”

Nancy didn’t answer yes or no to that, and no more was said. But three days after, William Privett was mowing with John Chiles in Mr. Hardcome’s meadow, and in the heat of the day they sat down to eat their bit o’ nunch under a tree, and empty their flagon. Afterwards both of ‘em fell asleep as the sat. John Chiles was the first to wake, and as he looked towards his fellow-mower he saw one of those great white miller’s souls as we call ‘em – that is to say, miller-moth – come from William’s open mouth while he slept, and fly straight away. John thought it odd enough, as William had worked in a mill for several years when he was a boy. He then looked at the sun, and found by the place o’t that they had slept a long while, and as William did not wake, John called to him and said it was high time to begin work again. He took no notice, and then John went up to him and shook him, and found he was dead.

Now on that very day old Philip Hookhorn was down at Longpuddle Spring dipping up a pitcher of water; and as he turned away, who should he see coming down to the spring on the other side but William, looking very pale and odd. This surprised Philip Hookhorn very much, for years before that time William’s little son – his only child – had been drowned in that spring while at play there, and this had so preyed upon William’s mind that he’d never been near the spring afterwards, and had been known to go half a mile out of his way to avoid the place. On inquiry, it was found that William in body could not have stood by the spring, being in the mead two miles off; and it also came out that the time at which he was seen at the spring was the very time he died.

**Teaching suggestions:**

**Performing the text:** Students work in groups to prepare a performance of the text which captures the nature of the story. Performances could be rehearsed readings or a looser dramatization.

The extract from *A Tale Of Two Cities* provides a good basis for a radio adaptation for three voices: Lucie, the old man and the third reading the remaining prose. You might direct them to pay particular attention to the punctuation and think how this suggests ways to read the piece.

The Victorians were great fans of melodrama - texts with sensational plot lines, designed to appeal to the audiences’ emotions. Characters were often very simple stereotypes. *Captain Murderer* is a good example of a melodramatic villain. Mercy’s way of opening her reading of the story could certainly be described as melodramatic. Students may like to think about bringing out this feature of that particular story in their performance.

Hardy’s *The Superstitious Man’s Story* is very consciously presented as if it is an anecdote being spoken by a narrator. Students could consider what it is on the text which creates the sense of a speaking voice, and a listening audience. When preparing a reading aloud, how would they characterize the speaker?

**Transforming the text:** Choose a short section of any of the stories and design a storyboard showing how they would film it. This would also provide an opportunity to do some work on the way moving image texts are constructed if you haven’t done this in other KS3 schemes of work. A well-tried example is the way in which David Lean transforms the opening of *Great Expectations* in his 1946 film version.But any well-edited sequence will serve to show how shots are often very short and build up into tense sequences.

**Working with punctuation**

Conventions of punctuation have changed over time. In particular, the writers in this collection often use many more semi-colons than would be the case now.

Working in pairs, students could look at the statements below and investigate whether they think they apply to any sections of text you identify.

1. All the sentences are long and complicated
2. The sentences are mainly simple ones, with just one clause.
3. The sentences often involve two or three part, joined with ‘and’ or ‘but’ (compound sentences)
4. Minor sentences (sentence fragments) are used for dramatic effect.
5. A lot of detailed description is packed into the longer sentences
6. Simple actions are expressed in simple sentences.
7. At tense moments the sentences become shorter and simpler
8. Several sentences of the same length build tension
9. There are several types of sentences, for example exclamations, questions, statements, commands.