

# TEACHER NOTES

## Synopsis

In the year 1880, all alone and only twelve years of age; Martha Winstanley is sailing on the Samuel Plimsoll from England to Australia. Filled with foreboding and suffering a broken heart, Martha has left behind all those she loves, to obey her father's direction to go live with her childless Aunt.

During the arduous four-month journey; Martha makes new friends, overcomes dreadful seasickness, and avoids the disease killing other passengers. Facing her fear of the sea, Martha recounts in her journal the extraordinary events that surround her along the way.

## Author style

Martha's Journey is a narrative told in third person, interspersed with personal letters and personal journal entries in first person penned by Martha.

The writing style includes the 'old English' language that captures the period the novel is set in, also reflecting the 'working' class level of the Martha's family in society.

Through the inclusion of Martha's journal entries, the reader will be able to empathize with a broken-hearted young girl who is feeling lost and alone, facing her deepest fears. Martha's thoughts reflect on the annoying matters that test her patience whilst trapped on the ship with little freedom or space to call her

own. Throughout the duration of the novel, Martha's grows in maturity, with a sharper out-look and understanding of life and her capabilities grow as she manages with the adverse conditions and tragic events surrounding her.

## Interesting facts

For those who travelled to Australia in the nineteenth century, the journey was often long and dangerous. In calm weather a sailing ship might take as long as four months, while a well-run clipper ship with favourable winds could make the journey in a little over half this time. These ships represented the pinnacle of sailing ship technology. With their streamlined hulls and acres of sail designed to catch even the slightest breeze, clippers were built primarily for speed.



By 1850 it was possible to make the journey by auxiliary steamer, using a combination of steam and sail. However steam technology was still too inefficient to allow a ship to travel all the way to Australia under its own power. With the strong prevailing westerlies on the 'Great Circle' sailing route benefiting the

clippers, sail continued to dominate the trade until the end of the 1870s.

Life at sea was uncomfortable and often hazardous, particularly for passengers who travelled cheaply in 'steerage' (the lowest deck and below the water line). Storms were common in the Southern Ocean, but were not the only danger. Hygiene was poor at the best of times and even worse in bad weather. 'Batten-down the hatches' meant passengers on the lowest deck were confined without ventilation or light in conditions that were ideal for the spread of disease. The use of candles or oil lanterns was restricted and sometimes forbidden—cramped conditions with timber, straw mattresses, hemp (rope) and tar caulking, meant a fire could spread with terrifying speed. A disaster at sea or shipwreck on the coast left little hope for rescue—few sailors or passengers could swim, and there were rarely enough life-boats for the numbers on board.

Bedding which was usually made of straw, attracted fleas and cockroaches. People brought up their bedding in fine weather to shake it out and air it. However, in storms and bad weather, the bedding was often soaked through and this led to outbreaks of influenza and pneumonia. In the over crowded conditions in steerage, epidemics were common.

Most victims were babies and young children, who often died of complications and lack of medical care. Infected passengers often came on board, having passed undetected through pre-boarding medical checks. Tuberculosis, an infectious disease of the lungs, was one of the most dangerous diseases.

There are only four 19th Century barques in existence in the world capable of sailing.

The ***James Craig*** is the only one in the Southern Hemisphere and the only one which regularly carries the general public to sea. This ship is housed at the Sydney Maritime Museum. It has been fully restored from a rusted hull and is not a replica. *I spent time on the James Craig*, getting a feel for what it must have been like confined to a ship this size. Fortunately it was docked in port. However, that alone played havoc with my stomach from the wash of passing ferries. Martha Winstanley had guts of steel. Her Great-Great Granddaughter, however, is not made for sailing. I'd have been one of the bodies wrapped in calico and buried at sea- had I made this *journey*.

William Falconer's Dictionary of the Marine, defined "bark", as "a general name given to small ships: it is peculiarly appropriated by seamen to those which carry three masts without a mizzen topsail. Our northern mariners, who are trained in the coal-trade, apply this distinction to a broad-sterned ship, which carries no ornamental figure on the stem or prow.



**Suggested topics for Activity/Research/Discussion**

## **Article I. Life in Victorian England**

How different were the social classes? Lifestyles and living conditions of the gentry. How did the wealthy people live? Did they have servants? What sort of houses did they live in?

### **Lifestyles and living conditions of the poor**

What type of housing did the working class people live in? What types of work did the lower classes do? What type of housing did they live in?

### **Health and medicine**

Was illness and disease a problem? Cholera Typhus Consumption

What types of medicines/hospitals/treatment were available? Did people die from simple illnesses? Did people live a long life? Why was child mortality so high?

### **Working conditions**

What was a Workhouse? What types of work did children do?

- Factories - Coalmines, - Farms, - Workhouse, - Chimney sweeps

Were they paid well? What were the working conditions like for children aged older than 10?

### **Children at play**

What games did children play? What types of toys did they have? What sorts of nursery Rhymes were popular in this era? Did the wealthy children have

different toys/games to the poorer children?

## **Education**

What types of school did the wealthy children attend? What was available to children who were from poor families?

- i) Elementary Education (School Attendance)
- ii) Act 1870 Education Act

## **Some interesting Links**

v <http://www.workhouses.org.uk> v <http://www.raggedschoolmuseum.org.uk> v  
<http://www.hitchinbritishschool.org.uk> v  
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/victorians/standard/play/learning>

## **Article II. Sailing Ships**

What distinction was there between accommodations available to passengers on a sailing ship?

### **Travel conditions in steerage quarters**

- What was it like in steerage? - Did these passengers enjoy comfortable surroundings? - How many passengers shared the steerage section on a ship? - Was it clean? - What would it have been like traveling in steerage for 4 months?

### **Travel conditions in first class**

- What was the difference between first class and steerage passengers? - How different was the accommodation? - Was the food different? - Did they share the ship sections with steerage passengers?

## **Food**

- What sort of meals did the passengers eat? - Was it fresh? - Did they have problems with rats and keeping food safe? - Did they have fresh water? - What utensils did they have to provide?

## **Sanitary conditions**

- What sort of toilet facilities did the passengers have? - Did they have provision for showers? - Did they have running water?

## **Bedding**

- How many people/children shared a bunk? - What sort of privacy did they have between bunks? - What type of stuffing did the mattresses have? - Were they clean? - Did they have to provide their own sheets/blankets etc.?

## **Dividing sections of steerage quarters (married/single men/single women)**

- Why were there different sections within the ship? - Were there rules within these sections? - Why?

## **Death and disease**

- - What types of medicine/treatments were available for the sick?
- - Was disease a problem on ships?
- - Was sea-sickness and illness an issue?
- - Cholera
- - Typhus
- - Consumption
- - Lice

- - Burial- How were the dead buried?
- - Who were more likely to die at sea?
- - Why was child mortality so high?

### **Life at sea**

- What sort of things did the passengers do to entertain themselves during the journey? - Were storms common? - What type of special events did the passengers and crew celebrate? - Was the risk of fire an issue?
- Why did so many passengers write journals?

### **Links:**

<http://www.teara.govt.nz/en/history-of-immigration/9/4> <http://new-brunswick.net/marcopolo/historic.html>  
<http://www.theshipslist.com/pictures/index.htm#vessels>

### **Article III. Write a poem or story**

Imagine you are at sea on a sailing ship. You may choose to be a passenger or a crewmember. Imagine there is a very bad storm happening and the sea is pounding across the ship's deck. How do you feel? What are you doing? What is happening on the ship? What is happening below deck? Write an account of your experience. Maybe you might like to write it as a poem, or a journal entry or as a letter to a family member.

### **Article IV. Fun Facts**

- Children were scared of getting sick, and scared too of some of the 'cures'. For



whooping cough, one cure was to swallow a spider in butter!

- Victorian children were usually dressed like miniature adults. Boy babies often wore skirts - later a boy might wear a sailor suit.
- Some poor children wore second-hand boots or shoes, nicknamed 'translators'.
- One Victorian slang word for 'children' was 'chavy'.
- For parties, lots of little Victorian girls wore red cloaks - perhaps because Little Red Riding Hood was a favourite