

Chapter 8 Viewpoint Activity

Life in the Middle Ages differed for various classes of people. A great gulf separated peasants—the majority in medieval society—from knights and nobles (textbook pages 194–195). In these two excerpts, you get a glimpse of life from these two viewpoints: first, the luxury of a midwinter party held by rich young noblemen in Siena, Italy; second, peasant life as described in “Piers Plowman,” a famous poem written in Middle English. ♦ *As you read, look for the contrasting details in these two ways of life. Then, on a separate sheet of paper, answer the questions that follow.*

Two Views of Medieval Life**Folgore da San Geminiano: “January”**

For January I give you vests of skins,
And mighty fires in hall, and torches lit;
Chambers and happy beds with all things fit;
Smooth silken sheets, rough furry counterpanes;
And sweetmeats baked; and one that deftly spins
Warm arras[tapestry] and Douay cloth, and store
of it;
And on this merry manner still to twit
The wind, when most his mastery the wind wins.
Or issuing forth at seasons in the day,
Ye'll fling soft handfuls of the fair white snow
Among the damsels standing round, in play;
And when you all are tired and all aglow,
Indoors again the court shall hold its sway,
And the free Fellowship
continue so.

Sources: (1) *Poems and Translations, 1850–1870* by Dante Gabriel Rossetti (Oxford University Press, 1913); (2) *The Medieval Reader*, ed. Norman F. Cantor (HarperCollins, 1994).



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William Langland: “Piers Plowman”

The most needy are our neighbours, if we notice
right well,
As prisoners in pits and poor folk in cottages,
Charged with their children, and chief lord's rent,
What by spinning they save, they spend it in
house-hire,
Both in milk and in meal to make a mess of
porridge,
To cheer up their children who chafe for their
food,
And they themselves suffer surely much hunger
And woe in the winter, with waking at nights
And rising to rock an oft restless cradle. . . .
So 'tis pity to proclaim or in poetry to show
The woe of these women who work in such
cottages;
And of many other men who much woe suffer,
Crippled with hunger and with thirst, they keep
up appearances,
And are abashed for to beg. . . .
This I know full well, for the world has taught me,
How churls are afflicted who have many children,
And have no coin but their craft to clothe and to
keep them,
And full many to feed and few pence to do it.
With bread and penny-ale that is less than a
pittance,
Cold flesh and cold fish, instead of roast venison.

Questions to Discuss

1. What are some of the ways the aristocrats in the poem from Italy keep warm in winter?
2. How do the English peasants earn a little money? How do they have to spend it?
3. What other hardships do the English peasants face?
4. **Making Comparisons** Add the information from these poems to what you already know about medieval life. Then describe what you think would be a typical day for the people in each of these poems.