

A Christmas Carol

Study Guide

INTRODUCTION

Charles Dickens (1812-1870) is considered by many to be the greatest English novelist of all time. In addition to the creation of remarkable, and often eccentric, characters, (who often have eccentric names to match) Dickens also sought to provide social commentary along with his memorable stories. His style is so distinctive that similar works are often described by the term “Dickensian.” In addition to being a writer, he was a court reporter, a magazine publisher, and an accomplished actor. At the end of his career, Dickens was very much in demand on the lecture circuit, and was acclaimed for his dramatic readings of his own work.

Dickens’ first novel, *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club* (1837), established his reputation as a skillful writer; it was followed closely by another popular work, *The Adventures of Oliver Twist* (1838). It was fashionable at the time to publish novels one chapter at a time (serial publication), a method that Dickens favored because it made his work affordable to the average citizen. Yet even after these and successive literary triumphs, the author found himself in need of money in the fall of 1843. With a baby on the way (his fifth), Dickens quickly penned a story with a Christmas theme to be published that December – the first of his works to be published “all at once”. Because he paid for the cost of publication himself, he was able to make the little book affordable to as many people as possible (it sold for about 1/6 of the price of a full-length novel).

A Christmas Carol was an instant success (although, ironically, Dickens did not make a fortune because of the high cost of the book’s production; however, its popularity did help future sales of his work). The time of its publication coincided with a revival of Christmas traditions in Victorian England, including the custom of decorating a Christmas tree (made popular again by Prince Albert), the singing of Christmas carols, and the introduction of the Christmas card (c. 1843)¹. The immense popularity of Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol* contributed to these holiday traditions and is part of the reason that the Victorian era is so closely associated with the Christmas holiday. After *A Christmas Carol*, fans demanded a new Christmas story each holiday season (see FOR FURTHER INFORMATION); but the original remained the most popular, and is easily the most widely read of Dickens’ works. In fact, its main character, Ebenezer Scrooge, is even immortalized in the English language – the term scrooge is now used to describe any miserly person. Most significantly, the moral message of *A Christmas Carol* – that the holiday season should be “a kind, forgiving, charitable time” – is still remembered in modern times.

THE PLAY

The best way to familiarize students with the story of *A Christmas Carol* is to read Dickens’ original story (or an abridged version for younger readers, of which there are many). The characters in our musical adaptation include the miserly Ebenezer Scrooge; his poor but happy employee, Bob Cratchit; Cratchit’s family, including the frail Tiny Tim; Ebenezer’s loyal nephew, Fred; and, Fan, Scrooge’s late sister (in flashback). The day before Christmas, Scrooge is as surly as on any other day of the year; refusing to see any significance to the holiday, he acts as he always does -- mistreating Bob Cratchit, his clerk, refusing to contribute to the local charity, and turning down his nephew’s invitation to celebrate Christmas with his family. Ebenezer insists that Christmas is nothing but “humbug” -- he’s even grateful that it only comes “but once a year.” It is only that night when he is visited by a succession of spirits – the ghost of Jacob Marley (his deceased partner) and the Ghosts of Christmases Past, Present, and Yet-to-Come -- that Scrooge learns the consequences of both his past and present actions and reconsiders his point of view. Grateful for a “second chance,” Scrooge vows to help his fellow man – including Bob Cratchit and his little son, Tiny Tim – and is reunited with his family, finally accepting his nephew’s offer to share his holiday celebration. Though it all may only have been a dream, Ebenezer Scrooge is a changed man.

BEFORE SEEING THE PERFORMANCE

1. Familiarize students with the country and customs of England (Great Britain). Where is it located? How long has the country been in existence? How is Great Britain different than the United States (language? customs?)? Have they ever heard someone speak with a “British accent”? The story was written in the 1840s and takes place in the large

¹David Perdue’s *Charles Dickens Page (Dickens and Christmas)*, see address at the end of this guide.

city of London. How was the country different at that time compared with the present day?

2. What do you associate with the holiday season (whatever holiday your family celebrates)? ("Peace on Earth, Good Will Toward Men?") What special things do you do? Do you eat special foods? Do you visit family? Does your school do something for the community, like collect toys, clothing, or canned goods? Why do you think that people do these kinds of things around this time of year? Watch for the ways that the characters in *A Christmas Carol* celebrate the holiday.
3. Review the brief **Vocabulary** list below. You may also wish to review Charles Dickens' original story, or an abridged version for younger readers, although it is not necessary in order to understand the play. (Although a film version, of which there are many (see "FOR FURTHER INFORMATION") would be interesting to compare to the play, we suggest that students view a film adaptation *after* seeing the play -- to avoid confusion and to preserve the element of surprise!)

A CHRISTMAS CAROL: Vocabulary

carol	a song associated with Christmas; from the medieval (14 th century) French word, <i>carole</i> , which originally meant a circle dance; the word could also have been derived from the Latin <i>choraula</i> (choral song).	mistletoe	a type of plant with green leaves and white berries; according to Christmas tradition, if you meet someone "under the mistletoe," you are obligated to KISS them!
crown*	British coin (no longer in use) = five shillings	shilling*	British unit of money (c. 1840 = 12 British pennies, or " pence ")
ha'penny*	British unit of money, = half a penny		
humbug	nonsense; especially something designed to be deceptive or misleading	workhouse	a place where poor people or those guilty of minor crimes (usually owing money) were sent and forced to work as their punishment

*NOTE REGARDING CURRENCY: Although it's hard to translate exchange rates from so long ago, to give students an idea of the worth of British currency c. 1840, bread or a drink cost about a penny, a full meal was 4 "pence" to sixpence, and a cheap room could be had for about sixpence -- *source: Educational Management Group*

POST-PERFORMANCE DISCUSSION

1. As soon as possible after seeing the play, talk about it with your class. Discuss the theatrical elements of the performance. How did the set design, costumes, music, etc., enhance the story? (Example: How did the music help to set the mood?) Who was their favorite character and why? Did they notice which actors played more than one part? How did the costumes help to make the actors look like different characters? What did the actors do (change their voices and accents, or move differently?) to make you think they were different people (or ghosts)? Can a volunteer from the class imitate their favorite character?
2. When the character of Scrooge first appeared, what did you think of him? Did your opinion change after the Ghost of Christmas Past took him to revisit his younger days? What kinds of things happened in Ebenezer's childhood that influenced his life as an adult (and his feelings about Christmas)? Why do some people become bitter when they are mistreated while others don't? Do you think that someone like Scrooge would always have the potential to change, or is it ever "too late" for someone to change their ways?
3. What kinds of things did the characters in *A Christmas Carol* do to celebrate the holiday? How did the celebrations of the different families differ? (For instance, Fezziwigs' lavish party and the Cratchits' modest feast.) Did the cost of the celebrations influence the enjoyment of the participants? What kinds of things did they do that didn't cost anything?
4. When the Ghost of Christmas Present takes Scrooge to see Bob Cratchit's home, he is surprised to learn that the Cratchits are happy even though they have very little money. What does Bob Cratchit mean when he says, "Not a penny in my pocket, but I'm wealthy as can be"? Why are the Cratchits so content with so little, while Scrooge is so miserable despite his wealth?

5. Why do you think that Scrooge resisted his nephew's invitation to join him for the holiday? What reminded him of the importance of family? (Seeing his sister in his past? Watching the Cratchits?) Why do you think that people like to be around their family members (and friends) for the holiday season? Who do you like to celebrate the holidays with, and why is it important for you to have those people with you?

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

Alternate Endings. Have students write their own version of *A Christmas Carol*, each starting at the same point in the story (such as when Scrooge meets the first ghost). Read essays aloud, comparing each student's conclusion to the story. (For example, if Scrooge chose not to change his ways, would it happen exactly as the Ghost showed?) Or, if they would prefer, have them write a modern adaptation of the story.

Christmas Celebrations. What kinds of things did the characters in the play do to celebrate the Christmas holiday? (*Older Students:* Research the Christmas traditions popular in England at the time of the story's publication - 1843.) Do they do any of the same things when they celebrate the holiday season at their house? (Dancing, singing, game playing, special foods, decorations, etc.) How is their celebration similar or different (especially if they celebrate a holiday other than Christmas)?

Christmas Carols. Find some Christmas carols that you might have heard on a London street in the 1840s (see some of the verses below to get you started). Divide the class into groups and have each learn a different song and present the "carols" at your holiday party.

WE WISH YOU A MERRY CHRISTMAS,
WE WISH YOU A MERRY CHRISTMAS,
WE WISH YOU A MERRY CHRISTMAS,
AND A HAPPY NEW YEAR!

DECK THE HALLS WITH BOUGHS OF HOLLY.
FA, LA, LA, LA, LA, LA, LA, LA, LA!
'TIS THE SEASON TO BE JOLLY,
FA, LA, LA, LA, LA, LA, LA, LA, LA!

CHRISTMAS IS COMING, THE GOOSE IS GETTING FAT.
WON'T YOU PLEASE PUT A PENNY IN THE OLD MAN'S HAT?
IF YOU HAVEN'T GOT A PENNY, A HA'PENNY WILL DO.
IF YOU HAVEN'T GOT A HA'PENNY, THEN GOD BLESS YOU.

Charles Dickens' Christmas Stories. Write an essay or prepare an oral report comparing *A Christmas Carol* to another of Dickens' Christmas stories, such as *The Chimes* (see *FOR FURTHER INFORMATION*). What themes do the stories have in common? How are they different? How are the main characters similar (or different)? Which story do you prefer and why?

Social Class in Literature. Read another story which describes people of different social classes, (such as Mark Twain's *The Prince and the Pauper*, Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*, or Dickens' own *Oliver Twist*). How does each author describe the "upper" and "lower" classes? How do the "poorer" characters in each of the stories manage to survive? What point do you think the author was trying to make? Report your findings to the class.

Imitation -- the Sincerest Form of Flattery. Write an essay comparing a film version of *A Christmas Carol* to the original story (and/or to the musical that you've just seen). Which did you prefer and why? Why do you think that Dickens' story is so often imitated? (Scrooge's tale has even been acted out by Mickey Mouse and the Muppets!)

Traveling Through Time. The idea of a character going back to the past and forward to the future was quite an innovative plot device in the 1840s! Can you think of any other stories that use similar themes? (The films *Back to the Future* and *It's a Wonderful Life* are good examples.) Write an essay or present an oral report comparing the modern story to Dickens' original.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

Selected Works by Charles Dickens

The Christmas Books, Volume I: A Christmas Carol and The Chimes. Edited by Michael Slater, Penguin Classics, 1971.

The Christmas Books, Volume II: The Cricket on the Hearth, The Battle of Life, The Haunted Man.. Edited by Michael Slater, Penguin Classics, 1971.

The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club (1837)

(Dickens' first published novel; noted here for the two chapters with Christmas themes - Chapter XXVIII, A Good-Humoured Christmas Chapter, and Chapter XXIX, The Story of the Goblins Who Stole a Sexton, a precursor to Scrooge's Ghosts.)

For Teachers and Older Students

Davis, Paul. The Lives and Times of Ebenezer Scrooge. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990.

Hawes, Donald. Who's Who in Dickens. New York: Routledge, 1998. *An encyclopedia of Dickens' many characters.*

Charles Dickens-A Tale of Ambition and Genius. (VHS Video) A biography of Dickens from the acclaimed A & E Biography® television series (available in bookstores).

For Younger Students:

Blishen, Edward. Stand Up Mr. Dickens: A Dickens Anthology. Jill Bennett, illustrator. New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1996. *(Contains excerpts from Dickens' greatest works, including **A Christmas Carol**, and describes the way the author read them in front of lecture audiences. Great for reading aloud.)*

Dickens, Charles. Eyewitness Classics: A Christmas Carol. Adapted by Shona McKellar and illustrated by Andrew Wheatcroft. London: DK Publishing, 1997. *(Recommended for ages 9-12).*

Dickens, Mary Angela. Children's Stories from Dickens. Derrydale Press, 1998. *(Stories of children from Dickens' works written by the author's granddaughter, including Tiny Tim, David Copperfield, and Oliver Twist.)*

Film/Audio versions (available on video/cassettes or CD)

Charles Dickens' A Christmas Carol. Simon & Schuster audio, 1994. *(An audio recording of Patrick Stewart's acclaimed one-man version of the classic tale.)*

A Christmas Carol. Directed by Edwin L. Marin, 1938. *(Starring Reginald Owen as Scrooge.)*

Scrooge. Directed by Brian Desmond Hurst, 1951. *(Starring Alastair Sim.)*

A Christmas Carol. TV version directed by Clive Donner, 1984. *(Starring George C. Scott.)*

THE WORLD WIDE WEB

David Perdue's Charles Dickens Page. <http://www.fidnet.com/~dap1955/dickens/index.html>

In addition to a complete bibliography of Dickens' works, this site offers a special section on "Dickens and Christmas." Follow the many links to other Dickens websites for more information.

Victoriana: A Victorian Christmas. <http://www.victoriana.com/christmas/default.htm>

*Contains a wealth of information on Christmas celebrations in Victorian England, including plum pudding recipes and the first Christmas card, printed in 1843 (the same year that **A Christmas Carol** was published).*