The Story of A Christmas Carol

Ebenezer Scrooge is a miserly old curmudgeon who hates Christmas. He thinks of it as simply an excuse for lazy people to miss work and for idle people to expect handouts. He refuses to acknowledge all of the good cheer and charity the holiday season promotes, and he makes sure everyone knows of his contempt.

On the night before Christmas, Scrooge is visited by the ghost of his former business associate, Jacob Marley—a man who was every bit as greedy and cold as Scrooge. Marley warns Scrooge that on this night he will be visited by three spirits whose missions will be to present visions of Christmases past, present, and future. Marley further warns Scrooge that if he continues to live selfishly, he is condemned to spend eternity in the same nightmarish afterlife to which Marley himself is doomed. As Marley vanishes, the ghostly visitations begin.

The Ghost of Christmas Past, the Ghost of Christmas Present, and the Ghost of Christmas Yet-To-Come. They show Scrooge glimpses of his past life as a schoolboy, business apprentice, and young suitor. He is also shown the present happy home life of Bob Cratchit's family, as well as the bleak future awaiting them due to Scrooge's stinginess. Frightened by what he sees, Scrooge promises to change his ways.

When Scrooge awakens on Christmas morning, he is a completely new man. Realizing that he has wasted his life thus far, the old miser turns into the jolly, charitable person he promised the ghosts he would become. He rescues Tiny Tim and forevermore carries the spirit of Christmas in his heart all the year round.

The Characters

- Ebenezer Scrooge
- Jacob Marley
- The Ghost of Christmas Past
- The Ghost of Christmas Present
- The Ghost of Christmas Yet-To-Come
- Fred: Scrooge's nephew
- Bob Cratchit: Scrooge's former assistant
- Mrs. Cratchit: Bob's wife
- Martha: Scrooge's housekeeper
- Tiny Tim: Bob's son
- Fan: Scrooge's niece
- Mr. Fezziwig: A prosperous milliner
- Belle: The girl who broke Scrooge's heart
- Spick and Span: Scrooge's footmen
- The Narrator: The voice of the action of the story.
Charles Dickens

In October of 1843, when he started to write *A Christmas Carol*, Charles Dickens was threatened by his publishers that they would reduce his salary from 200 pounds to 150 pounds per month. His wife Catherine was expecting their fifth child.

Money had always been a worry for Dickens. He was born into a struggling lower-middle class family. When he was ten, Dickens’ father moved the family from Chatham to a smaller house in Camden Town, London. The four-room house at 16 Bayham Street is thought to be the model for the Cratchit’s house. The six Cratchit children correspond to the six Dickens children at that time, including Dickens’ youngest brother, a sickly boy known as “Tiny Fred”.

Even with the move to London, his family could not afford to send Dickens to school. When he was twelve, his father found work for him in a factory, and he boarded with another family. Soon afterward, his father was imprisoned for debt, and the whole family moved to the Marshalsea debtors’ prison except for Charles, who kept working. He felt abandoned and ashamed of this experience for the rest of his life, and although he fictionalized it in his novels, during his life he told the truth to only one person, his friend and biographer, John Forster.

As an adult, Dickens found work first in a law office, and then as a newspaper reporter, covering the proceedings of Parliament. While working as a reporter, Dickens began writing semi-fictional sketches for magazines, eventually publishing them as *Sketches by Boz*. His next work was *The Pickwick Papers*, which was published in a relatively new serial format. Each month, a twelve thousand word section of the book was sold at a shilling each. This made a long book affordable to many more people. After *Pickwick*, all of his subsequent books, until *A Christmas Carol*, were first sold in serial form.

Charles Dickens was an outgoing, playful man who loved games and parties. The act of writing *A Christmas Carol* affected him profoundly. During its composition, he wrote a friend that he “wept and laughed, and wept again, and excited himself in a most extraordinary manner in the composition; and thinking whereof he walked about the black streets of London, fifteen and twenty miles and many a night when all the sober folks had gone to bed.”

Shortly after the publication of *A Christmas Carol*, Dickens moved his family from their London home to settle briefly in Genoa, Italy, and later moved on to Switzerland and Paris. During these years away from London, his best known works included *Cricket on the Hearth*, *The Battle of Life*, and *David Copperfield*.

Once back in England, Dickens would spend his later years creating some of his most internationally acclaimed works. These include *Bleak House*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, and *Great Expectations*. In 1870, the first installment of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* was published, and the author made his last public appearance. He died in his home at Gad’s Hill Place on June 9, 1870.

“He was a sympathizer to the poor, the suffering, and the oppressed; and by his death, one of England’s greatest writers is lost to the world.”

– Written on the tomb of Charles Dickens in Westminster Abbey, 1870
19th Century Timeline

1815 War of 1812 ends.
1825 Construction begins on railroads in England.
1835 Dickens goes to work for The Morning Chronicle as a reporter.
1836 Texas wins independence from Mexico.
1837 Dickens publishes Pickwick Papers.
1838 Dickens publishes Oliver Twist.
1838 Samuel Morse devises the Morse Code.
1839 Dickens writes Nicholas Nickleby.
1840 Queen Victoria marries her cousin Prince Albert.
1842 Dickens travels to America to campaign for the abolition of slavery.
1843 Dickens publishes A Christmas Carol.
1844 Potato famine begins in Ireland.
1845 The planet Neptune discovered by German astronomer Johann Gottfried Galle.
1846 United States victorious in Mexican War.
1849 Edgar Allan Poe, the American poet, critic and short story writer dies.
1849 Dickens publishes David Copperfield.
1855 British convicts no longer transported to Australia.
1859 Charles Dickens publishes A Tale of Two Cities.
1859 Charles Darwin publishes Origin of Species - first edition sells out in one day amid raging controversy.
1860 Charles Dickens publishes Great Expectations.
1861 Civil War breaks out between the Northern States and the Confederate South. Abraham Lincoln elected President of the United States.
1863 Slavery abolished in America.
1865 Civil War ends when General Lee of the Confederate Army surrenders to General Grant of the North. President Abraham Lincoln is assassinated.
1869 Suez Canal opens, connecting the Mediterranean and the Gulf of Suez, opening up trade to the Middle East.
1870 June 9, Charles Dickens dies at age 58, leaving his novel The Mystery of Edwin Drood unfinished.
Charles Dickens composed A Christmas Carol at a time when the disparity of life in Victorian England was being felt by all. The Reform Bill of 1832 sought to bring a greater sense of democracy to England by extending the vote to all men owning property worth ten pounds or more in annual rent and by reducing the power of upper-class landowners. Unfortunately, considerable hardship, injustice and unrest continued for the working and lower classes. The problems of homelessness and economic injustice addressed by Dickens in A Christmas Carol were beginning to be the focus of much political discussion during the mid-19th century. By using the personal story of the Cratchit family as the pivotal part of Scrooge's enlightenment and reversal of character, Dickens gave his readers a chance to see themselves in the people presented to Scrooge by the Spirit of Christmas Present. He used the plight of the Cratchits to demonstrate that even in the face of overwhelming want and poverty, the holiday season can inspire good will and generosity toward one's neighbors. The inscription on Dickens's tombstone in Poet's Corner, Westminster Abbey reads: "He was a sympathiser to the poor, the suffering, and the oppressed; and by his death, one of England's greatest writers is lost to the world."

**Industrial London**

London was one of the first large industrial cities, and it quickly became so polluted and unhealthy that disease spread rampant. The Thames River was one of the major water sources for drinking, washing and cooking. It was not only polluted by all of the ship traffic, but it also had over two hundred open sewers that ran straight into it at various points up and down London’s shores. The streets were also dirty, filled with horse dung from the thousands of horse drawn vehicles. In fact, some streets were so dirty that many children took work as “crossing sweepers”, sweeping a path in front of people as they crossed the street. By the time A Christmas Carol was written, the Industrial Age had an overall atmosphere of indifference to its fellow man, with people of all ages working under terrible conditions and living in extreme poverty.

**London’s Youth**

Many of London’s youth were poor, even homeless. Most spent their days earning money for their families, instead of going to school. Because of the poor living conditions and lack of proper nourishment, there were thousands of children, like Tiny Tim, who were sickly or had ailments and died young. In 1839, nearly half of the funerals were for children under the age of 10. At age 12, young Dickens was forced to start working in a factory. Themes that he experienced first hand, such as the mistreatment of children and child labor, are common topics addressed in much of his writing. Many children grew up without education and virtually no chance to escape the cycle of poverty. Dickens felt that this cycle of poverty could be broken through education and became interested in the Ragged Schools in London. Ragged Schools were for poor children in the cities who could not afford the tuition of the more common private schools. These schools were not well attended, however,

**DID YOU KNOW?**

When Dickens wrote A Christmas Carol in 1843, English Christmas traditions had been in decline for centuries. Stores and factories remained open on December 25th and many people were forced to work on Christmas Day.

**CHILDREN IN THE PLAY**

Watch for how many times young people are part of the story.
- What roles do they have in the play?
- How do the children interact with Scrooge?
- What is Scrooge like as a child?
- Why are Want and Ignorance children?
Glossary

- Ali Baba – in the Arabian Knights, a poor woodcutter who gains entrance to the treasure cave of the forty thieves by saying the magic words, “Open Sesame!”
- apprentice – a person bound by legal agreement to work for another in return for instruction in a trade, art, or business
- assign – to set aside or appoint for a particular purpose. Scrooge was Marley’s “sole assign”, meaning the only person named in Marley’s will to inherit his part of the business
- bedlam – a notorious madhouse in London that no longer exists, but has become the term used when referring to any place of noise and confusion.
- benevolence – a tendency to perform charitable acts; good will
- Camden Town – a town of London, England comprising government divisions
- colliery – a coal mine
- Counting House – an office in which a business conducts operations such as accounting and correspondence
- cravat – a necktie or a scarf worn as a necktie
- desert moor – a broad tract of open land, often high but poorly drained, covered with shrubs
- diphtheria – a contagious disease causing high fever and difficulty in breathing.
- dowry – money or property brought by a bride to her husband upon marriage
- forebearance – the act of a creditor who refrains from enforcing a debt when it falls due
- gainsay – to declare false or contradict
- gruel – a thin, watery porridge
- gumption – boldness or enterprise
- half-crown – the sum of two shillings and sixpence
- heed – to listen and consider
- homage – public honor or respect paid to a person or idea
- humbug – nonsense, rubbish
- morose – gloomy, ill-humored
- odious – offensive
- pallor – extreme or unnatural paleness
- Parliament – the legislative body of the United Kingdom, made up of the House of Lords and the House of Commons
- poulterer – a poultry dealer
- pounds – the basic monetary unit of the United Kingdom
- scarlet fever – an acute contagious disease occurring particularly among children and characterized by scarlet skin and high fever
- shilling – a coin equal to 1/20 of an English Pound
- sixpence – a coin worth six pennies
- smallpox – by chills, high fever and headaches with subsequent eruptions of pimples
- Smoking Bishop – a Christmas punch made of red wine, oranges, and spices
- Specter – a ghost; phantom; apparition
- Typhoid – a disease transmitted by contaminated food or water and characterized by red rash, fever and bronchitis
- Union Workhouse – a former public institution in Britain where the poor were fed and forced to work

“For so many folks, this is a ritual that kicks off their holiday season. Having done the show a number of times, I am amazed how many families have made coming to the production a family tradition that has been carried down through generations. People remember seeing it when they were children, and today they are bringing their own kids. You feel such great joy as Dec 25th approaches!”

What do you think A Christmas Carol gives to the community?

“Bob Hess, who plays Bob Cratchit says:

“I will honor Christmas in my heart, and try to keep it all year.”

-Charles Dickens
Lesson Plan Ideas

Celebration Tableaus
Ask your students to recall the different styles of Christmas celebrations they saw in *A Christmas Carol*. Have them discuss the difference between Nephew Fred’s gathering, Fezziwig’s party and the Cratchit’s celebration. Break the students up into groups and have each group create tableaus for each of the different celebrations. Every group member should take on a character that was or could be at that celebration. Create tableaus without talking. After they have created the three different images, ask them to stay in their groups and share some of the ways their families celebrate the holidays.

Traditions in your Community
What types of holidays are celebrated by other families in your community?
- Ask friends or neighbors what holidays they recognize during the winter months. Find out what they do in their homes to celebrate.
- Look in the “events” section of a local paper to find ads for celebrations. What can you find out about these other winter holidays?
- Determine how people throughout your community incorporate the idea of giving into their holiday traditions and gatherings.

Transformation
The themes of regeneration and rebirth are conveyed dramatically through Scrooge’s transformation. In what ways are these themes universally true? Think about a time in your life when you needed to change the way you were behaving. How did you feel before, during, and after the incident? How did you change and what did you learn about yourself in the process?

Spirits on Stage
In our staged production, some of the ghosts are quite different than in the traditional tale. Create your own designs of Scrooge’s visitors.

How would you create these spirits for the stage? What can you do with lighting and sound to create dramatic spirits for the stage?
Sketch your ideas for bringing the spirits to life on stage. (Include designs for all three: Christmas Past, Christmas Present, and Christmas Yet to Come.)

Study Questions
1. Who are the two allegorical characters in *A Christmas Carol* and how are they representative of the Victorian era?
2. How are the lives of the Cratchit and Dickens families similar?
3. When did Charles Dickens begin his own career as a writer and for whom did he work? What effect did his early life have on his writing?
4. How did *A Christmas Carol* contribute to the celebration of the Christmas holiday?
5. What was Scrooge’s relationship with Jacob Marley and why is Marley’s presence significant throughout the entire play?
6. What is the pivotal point in the play and how does the suspense shift at this point?
Some reminders to the students...

* In live theater, unlike movies and television, the actors can hear and see you. If you talk or whisper during the play, you disturb not only the other audience members, but also the performers onstage, thus diminishing the performance and, ultimately, your enjoyment of it. This doesn’t mean you have to remain silent. Actors want you to respond with laughter and applause, but such responses should always be genuine and appropriate to the moment. Such inconsiderate behavior as shouting, catcalling, or sustained whispering can ruin the concentration of actors and other audience members. Additionally, throwing paper or objects of any kind towards the stage is not only rude, it is extremely dangerous to the performers. In the event of any student misbehavior, the school will be contacted and the lead teacher and principal will be informed.

* Intermissions are meant to be enjoyed by everyone. Use your time wisely and do not congregate at and around the concession stand. Have respect for your fellow playgoers by not talking too loud or showing off. Food and drink are strictly forbidden in the theater.

* We want you to enjoy your visit to Dallas Theater Center and we rely on you to exercise your common sense and mature judgment. Thank you for being a valuable member of our audience!