

The Humbug Theatre production of A Christmas Carol

Study Guide for Teachers & Students

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Charles Dickens' Biography

Charles Dickens was born in 1812, in Portsmouth, England. He spent his formative years in London, and began his schooling at age nine. In 1824, his father, John, chronically incompetent in financial matters, was stripped of his house at the behest of anxious creditors. As was the custom, the entire Dickens family was banished to debtor's prison at Marshalsea until John Dickens' fiscal problems could be rectified. Young Charles was spared the indignity of prison, but was removed from school and forced into the role of family breadwinner as a menial worker in a shoe polish factory. A sensitive child gifted with an artist's imagination, Dickens spent an enormously painful period in the stultifying atmosphere of a mid-nineteenth century industrial warehouse, affixing labels to shoe polish canisters. The conditions of factory life were so traumatic that he was unable to talk about it for decades.

In 1827, a short apprenticeship as a legal clerk in London led him to a job as a court and Parliamentary reporter. Writing suited Dickens, and, in 1833, he published a series of well-received sketches of London life. His reputation as a fine writer and brilliant observer of the social scene was established, and he quickly capitalized on his good name with the publication of a comic novel called *The Pickwick Papers* (1836-1837).

Inspiration for A Christmas Carol

Dickens' cherished little Christmas story, the best loved and most read of all of his books, began life as the result of the author's desperate need of money. In the fall of 1843, Dickens and his wife Kate were expecting their fifth child. Requests for money from his family, a large mortgage on his Devonshire Terrace home, and lagging sales from the monthly installments of

Martin Chuzzlewit, had left Dickens seriously short of cash.

As the idea for the story took shape and the writing began in earnest, Dickens became engrossed in the book. He wrote that as the tale unfolded he 'wept and laughed, and wept again' and that he 'walked about the black streets of London fifteen or twenty miles many a night when all sober folks had gone to bed'. At odds with his publishers, Dickens paid for the production cost of the book himself and insisted on a lavish design that included a gold-stamped cover and four hand-colored etchings. He also set the price at 5 shillings so that the book would be affordable to nearly everyone.

The book was published during the week before Christmas 1843 and was an instant sensation but due to the high production costs, Dickens' earning from the sales were lower than expected. In addition to the disappointing profit from the book Dickens was enraged that the work was instantly the victim of pirated editions. Copyright laws in England were often loosely enforced and a complete lack of international copyright laws had been Dickens' theme during his trip to America the year before. He ended up spending more money fighting pirated editions of the book than he was making from the book itself.

Despite these early financial difficulties, Dickens' Christmas tale of human redemption has endured beyond even Dickens' own vivid imagination. It was a favorite during Dickens' public readings of his works, which he continued to do until his second stroke in 1870. His tomb in Westminster Abbey in London reads, "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."

Major Works by Charles Dickens

Sketches by Boz, Pickwick Papers, Oliver Twist, Nicholas Nickleby, The Old Curiosity Shop, Barnaby Rudge, The Life and Adventures of Martin Chuzzlewit, A Christmas Carol, Dombey and Son, David Copperfield, Bleak House, Hard Times, Little Dorrit, A Tale of Two Cities, Great Expectations, Our Mutual Friend, The Mystery of Edwin Drood

Main Characters

Ebenezer Scrooge - A money-lender who dislikes the Christmas Season

Jacob Marley - Business partner of Scrooge, died seven years ago on Christmas Eve

Bob Cratchit - Scrooge's poor clerk, who has a cheerful spirit

Fred - Scrooge's nephew

Fan - Scrooge's sister

Belle - Scrooge's former girlfriend

Ghost of Christmas Past - Shows Scrooge all the important Christmases of his life

Ghost of Christmas Present - Shows Scrooge how others celebrate the holiday

Ghost of Christmas Future - Shows Scrooge what is to come if he keeps his path

Plot Summary

Marley's Ghost

Ebenezer Scrooge is a businessman. Unfortunately that is all he cares about. He thinks Christmas is a “humbug” and that if the poor don't want to go to prison or to the workhouses, they had better die and decrease the surplus population.

On Christmas Eve, Scrooge is visited at his home by the Ghost of his seven-years dead partner, Jacob Marley. Marley wears an enormous chain and tells Scrooge that his is longer and heavier by far. He tells Ebenezer that the only way to avoid his fate is by heeding the teachings of the three spirits that will haunt him.

The First of the Three Spirits

As the clock strikes one, the first ghost appears. He is the Ghost of Christmas Past and takes Ebenezer on a journey through time. They begin with the boarding school that Scrooge had been sent to as a child, and been left there for many of the Christmas holidays. Next they go to Mr. Fezziwig's. Scrooge had apprenticed there, and he saw the party that Fezziwig always threw on Christmas, spreading cheer and happiness.

Then they went to see the Christmas that Ebenezer broke off his engagement with Belle, because she was poor and he had just gotten a job with Jacob Marley. Scrooge is upset and wishes to see no more of the past. He has just enough time to realize that he is back in his own room before falling on the bed, unconscious.

The Second of the Three Spirits

He awakes as the clock strikes one, again. Scrooge sees nothing at first until a booming voice calls him into the next room. There he sees a giant reclining on a huge mound of delicious food. The Giant reveals himself as the Ghost of Christmas Present. Scrooge, still reeling from his encounter the night before with the Ghost of Christmas Past, goes with the giant without quibble.

They go out the window and stand on the street on Christmas morning. The Ghost takes Scrooge all over the city showing him how all the people of London celebrate this holiday. Then he takes him to the house of Scrooge's employee, Bob Cratchit. There Scrooge sees that even his sole employee—whom he only pays fifteen shillings a week, has a large family, and a lame son named Tiny Tim—still is full of cheer and takes immense joy in being with his family on this special day.

They stop again at the house of Scrooge's nephew, Fred. There is a party going on with food, friendship, and games. There was also Fred talking of how he pitied his Uncle's attitude of Christmas but loved him anyway. Scrooge, quite bewildered by all that he had seen, was conducted home by the Ghost where he met he last spirit.

The Last of the Spirits

The Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come was garbed in long black robe that hid its face and it spoke not a word. It merely pointed the way, and Scrooge followed. First they went down the street stopping to listen to knots of conversation about dead men, all with little or no emotion to them. Next they visited a pawnshop where two women were selling things taken from a dead man's house before the body was even cold.

Then to Bob Cratchit's house where Scrooge learns that Tiny Tim has died and the family is heart-broken. Scrooge asked the Ghost if there might be a way to prevent this death. The Ghost said nothing and led Scrooge from the room.

Scrooge asked if he might see himself in this future. The Ghost led him to a graveyard and pointed to a headstone. Scrooge looked at it and was shocked to find his own name upon it.

He fell to his knees by the spirit, proclaiming himself a changed man, that he would keep the Christmas Spirit in his heart and forever heed the lessons of the Ghosts of Past, Present, and Future. The spirit vanished.

The End of It

Scrooge awoke the next morning overjoyed by the fact that he did awake. He ran to the window and asked the passing boy what the day was. Christmas Day he was told. He hadn't missed it and was so happy he employed the boy to go to the poultry shop and buy the biggest turkey in the store and have it sent to Bob Cratchit's house. He dressed and went out. He surprised everyone by wishing them all a "Merry Christmas." Scrooge went to his Nephew's house and Fred welcomed him in joyfully and a wonderful time was had by all.

The next day, Scrooge got to work early. He caught Bob Cratchit coming in late and just as Bob thought he was going to get fired, Scrooge raised his salary and promised to help Cratchit and his struggling family.

From that day on, Scrooge was a changed man. He cared for people and it was said that he knew how to keep Christmas well if any man alive possessed the knowledge.

Meeting Standards in Speaking and Writing

Discussion Questions

- 1) Why did Scrooge hate Christmas?
- 2) Why didn't the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come speak?
- 3) What made Scrooge change?
- 4) Why did Marley send the three other Ghosts to Scrooge?
- 5) What made the Cratchit's family happier than Scrooge?

1. Read a portion of *A Christmas Carol* aloud or select a scene and stage it for performance. What aspects of the text make it particularly satisfying as spoken language? What aspects of

the text seem appropriate as theatrical performance? Compare and contrast your interpretation of the scene with the performance of the same scene on the Shakespeare Festival's stage.

2. How might *A Christmas Carol* written today differ from Dickens' classic tale? What elements might stay the same? Try your hand at writing a contemporary Christmas Carol which reflects the world as you see it today. Classes may work as groups and then share the scenes.

3. Read aloud the following description of Scrooge. "She was a tight-fisted hand at the grindstone, was Scrooge! A squeezing, wrenching, grasping scraping, clutching, covetous old sinner! Hard and sharp as flint, from which no steel had ever struck out a generous fire; secret, and self-contained, and solitary as an oyster." (Act I, Stave 2) Paraphrase the description. Next, consider the figures of speech, word pictures and rhythm. Imitate this quotation as you write a description of another character from the story or someone with whom you are familiar.

4. First, write down or discuss in a group what you know about Dickens' Christmas Carol before you see the play. What versions have you read or seen? What has been your impression of the story as you have seen it in the past? Then, share your expectations of seeing the play at the Shakespeare Festival. Finally, describe your experience of seeing the play. Compare and contrast your theater experience at the Shakespeare Festival with your previous encounters with the story. What distinguishes the experience of live theater from the experience of watching the same story told as a film in a movie theater? From watching the film on television? From reading the story in a book?

The Victorian Primer

This alphabetical list of Scroogish advice first appeared in the satirical London periodical, *Punch*, April 1859. You can use this list to explore the character of Scrooge. Read Scrooge's advice (aloud as a class, each taking a turn, in the manner of the old miser perhaps). Divide into groups and each take a portion of the alphabet and rework this primer to reflect the changes in Scrooge after he has learned to "honor Christmas in my heart." Then read your new Primer aloud (in the manner of the "new" Scrooge perhaps). For example: "Act like a child. Bring presents. Conceal your generosity." (and so forth)

Or, in the vein of satirical humor, select a figure from contemporary that brings to mind the old miser life (such as Mr. Burns from *The Simpsons*) and create an alphabet that would shine a light on their particular brand of Scroogishness. Or, try to construct one that expresses your own holiday philosophy. Send it out with your good wishes in your holiday greetings.

Avoid Clergymen. Borrow money. Conceal your covetousness. Distrust the distressed. Emulate the opulent. Favour fashionable frivolity. Give nothing rashly. Help successful humbug. Invite invitations. Judge poverty with severity. Kick those who are down. Lend to the rich. Make mercenary marriages. Never know the needy. Order what you please. Pay what you must. Quiz the quite helpless. Ruin rich relations. Seldom believe anything. Tell only others' secrets. Undermine antagonists. Vilify the unpopular. Watch women warily. Xtol elegant xtravagance. Yield your convictions readily. Zeal is very ridiculous. Meeting Standards in Speaking

Plan a Victorian Christmas party complete with food, games, songs, dances and costumes.

Throw the party with as much detail (or imaginative facsimile) as you can assemble. Each partygoer should come as a character from the play, from another of Dickens' tales or from Victorian history. Meet and mingle in character as you enjoy the party.

Select a favorite holiday poem or story. Adapt it into a reader's theater performance or short scene. Stage your piece and share it with an audience of family, friends and/or classmates. What elements of language, imagery, character, plot, etc. make a piece of literature effective as a performance piece? How does a work of narrative fiction differ from and how is it similar to a work of drama? Is some literature more easily adapted for the stage? Why? What are the rewards and what are the challenges of adapting and performing literature?

Victorian London was the largest, most spectacular city in the world. While Britain was experiencing the Industrial Revolution, its capital was both reaping the benefits and suffering the consequences. In 1800 the population of London was around a million souls. That number would swell to 4.5 million by 1880. While fashionable areas like Regent and Oxford streets were growing in the west, new docks supporting the city's place as the world's trade center were being built in the east. Perhaps the biggest impact on the growth of London was the coming of the railroad in the 1830s, which displaced thousands and accelerated the expansion of the city.

The price of this explosive growth and domination of world trade was untold squalor and filth. In his excellent biography, Dickens, Peter Ackroyd notes "If a late twentieth-century person were suddenly to find himself in a tavern or house of the period, he would be literally sick - sick with the smells, sick with the food, sick with the atmosphere around him".

Imagine yourself in the London of the early 19th century. The homes of the upper and middle class exist in close proximity to areas of unbelievable poverty and filth. Rich and poor alike are thrown together in the crowded city streets. Street sweepers attempt to keep the streets clean of manure, the result of thousands of horse-drawn vehicles. The city's thousands of chimney pots are belching coal smoke, resulting in soot which seems to settle everywhere. In many parts of the city raw sewage flows in gutters that empty into the Thames. Street vendors hawking their wares add to the cacophony of street noises. Pickpockets, prostitutes, drunks, beggars, and vagabonds of every description add to the colorful multitude.

Inside the problem is not much better. Personal cleanliness is not a big priority, nor is clean laundry. In close, crowded rooms the smell of unwashed bodies is stifling. It is unbearably hot by the fire, numbingly cold away from it.

At night the major streets are lit with feeble gas lamps. Side and secondary streets may not be lit at all and link bearers are hired to guide the traveler to his destination. Inside, a candle or oil lamp struggles against the darkness and blacken the ceilings.

In *Little Dorrit* Dickens describes a London rain storm: "In the country, the rain would have developed a thousand fresh scents, and every drop would have had its bright association with some beautiful form of growth or life. In the city, it developed only foul stale smells, and was a sickly, lukewarm, dirt-stained, wretched addition to the gutters."

Until the second half of the 19th century London residents were still drinking water from the very same portions of the Thames that the open sewers were discharging into. Several

outbreaks of Cholera in the mid 19th century, along with The Great Stink of 1858, when the stench of the Thames caused Parliament to recess, brought a cry for action. The link between drinking water tainted with sewage and the incidence of disease slowly dawned on the Victorians. Dr John Snow proved that all victims in a Soho area cholera outbreak drew water from the same Broad Street pump.

Sir Joseph Bazalgette, chief engineer of the new Metropolitan Board of Works (1855), put into effect a plan, completed in 1875, which finally provided adequate sewers to serve the city. In addition, laws were put in effect which prevented companies supplying drinking water from drawing water from the most heavily tainted parts of the Thames and required them to provide some type of filtration.

After the Stage Carriages Act of 1832 the hackney cab was gradually replaced by the omnibus as a means of moving about the city. By 1900 3000 horse-drawn buses were carrying 500 million passengers a year. A traffic count in Cheapside and London Bridge in 1850 showed a thousand vehicles an hour passing through these areas during the day. All of this added up to an incredible amount of manure, which had to be removed from the streets.

The Metropolitan Police, London's first police force, was created by Home Secretary Sir Robert Peel (hence the name Peelers and, eventually, Bobbies) in 1829 with headquarters in what would become known as Scotland Yard. The old London watch system, in effect since Elizabethan times, was eventually abolished.

The Victorian answer to dealing with the poor and indigent was the New Poor Law, enacted in 1834. Previously it had been the burden of the parishes to take care of the poor. The new law required parishes to band together and create regional workhouses where aid could be applied for. The workhouse was little more than a prison for the poor. Civil liberties were denied, families were separated, and human dignity was destroyed. The true poor often went to great lengths to avoid this relief.

Dickens, because of the childhood trauma caused by his father's imprisonment for debt and his consignment to the blacking factory to help support his family, was a true champion to the poor. He repeatedly pointed out the atrocities of the system through his novels.

With the turn of the century and Queen Victoria's death in 1901 the Victorian period came to a close. Many of the ills of the 19th century were remedied through education, technology and social reform... and by the social consciousness raised by the immensely popular novels of Dickens.

Victorian Currency

Bob Cratchit made 15 shillings a week.

NAME	AMOUNT	APPEARANCE
Farthing	1/4 of a penny	copper
ha'penny	1/2 of a penny	copper
Pence	penny	silver
Shilling	12 pence (also known as a "bob")	silver
Half-a-crown	2 1/2 shillings or 30 pence	silver
Crown	5 shillings or 60 pence	silver
Pound	20 shillings or 240 pence	gold (or notes)
Guinea	21 shillings	gold (or notes)

A Victorian Christmas

Charles Dickens has probably had more influence on the way that we celebrate Christmas today than any single individual in human history except one. At the beginning of the Victorian period the celebration of Christmas was in decline. The medieval Christmas traditions, which combined the celebration of the birth of Christ with the ancient Roman festival of Saturnalia, a pagan celebration for the Roman god of agriculture, and the Germanic winter festival of Yule, had come under intense scrutiny by the Puritans under Oliver Cromwell. The Industrial Revolution, in full swing in Dickens' time, also allowed workers little time for the celebration of Christmas.

The romantic revival of Christmas traditions that occurred in Victorian times had other contributors: Prince Albert brought the German custom of decorating the Christmas tree to England, the singing of Christmas carols, which had all but disappeared at the turn of the century began to thrive again, and the first Christmas card appeared in the 1840's. But it was the Christmas stories of Dickens, particularly his 1843 masterpiece *A Christmas Carol* that rekindled the joy

Christmas Greetings from Charles Dickens

The following is from Charles Dickens' *Sketches by Boz*, published in 1836: "There are people who will tell you that Christmas is not to them what it used to be: that each succeeding Christmas has found some cherished hope, or happy prospect, of the year before, dimmed or passed away. Never heed such dismal reminiscences but draw your chair nearer the blazing fire. Fill the glass and send round the song, and if your room be smaller than it was a dozen years ago, or if your glass be filled with reeking punch, instead of sparkling wine, put a good face on the matter, and empty it offhand, and fill another, and toll off the old ditty you used to sing, and thank God it's no worse. Reflect on your present blessings (of which every man has

plenty) not on your past misfortunes, of which all men have some. Fill your glass again, and with a merry face and contented heart. Our life on It, but your Christmas shall be merry, and your New Year a happy one!

There seems a magic in the very name of Christmas. Petty jealousies and discords are forgotten; social feelings are awakened in bosoms to which they have long been strangers; father and son, or brother and sister, who have met and passed with averted gaze, or a look of cold recognition, for months before, proffer and return the cordial embrace, and bury their past animosities in their present happiness. Kindly hearts that have yearned towards each other, but have been withheld by false notions of pride and self-dignity, are again reunited, and all is kindness and benevolence! Would that Christmas lasted the whole year through (as it ought), and that the prejudices and passions which deform our better nature, were never called into action among those whom they should ever be strangers!"

In The Classroom

Read and reflect upon the above excerpt from *Sketches by Boz*. Think about your own Christmas (or any holiday) pasts. Describe in detail both your best and worst Christmases ever. Pay specific detail to what caused the feelings you experienced.

Games for a Victorian Christmas

Charles Dickens writes in *A Christmas Carol*, "But they didn't devote the whole evening to music. After a while they played at forfeits; for it is good to be children sometimes, and never better than at Christmas, when its mighty Founder was a child himself." Along with music and dancing, parlor games entertained friends and family, young and old together, at holiday gatherings in Victorian England. Here are the rules to a few favorites.

Forfeits

Players in a game of forfeits surrender a personal belonging to a "judge." In order to get their belongings back, each player must perform a task or forfeit. Forfeits may also be demanded in other parlor games if, for instance, a player loses a game or answers a question incorrectly. Some of these forfeits have included:* Kneel to the prettiest, bow to the wittiest, and kiss the one you love the best.* Go to the four corners of the room. Sigh in one, cry in one, sing in one, dance in one.* Spell E-b-e-n-e-z-e-r S-c-r-o-o-g-e.* Make three people laugh.*
Recite a poem.

Blindman's Buff

One player is blindfolded. The others spin him or her around, and then they scatter throughout the room. The blindfolded player tries to catch and identify someone. If the blindman guesses correctly, the player who is caught becomes the next blindman. As the blindfolded player tries to catch other players, they often tease him or her by tapping or tickling them.

The Minister's Cat

Each player describes the Minister's Cat using an adjective that starts, in the first round, with the letter A, in the second round with the letter B, and so on. "The Minister's Cat is an Angry Cat." "The Minister's Cat is an Anxious Cat."

Yes and No

A game like Twenty Questions. One player thinks of a person, place, or thing. The others try to guess what he is thinking of by asking questions which must be answered Yes or No. When someone guesses correctly, it is his turn to think of a person, place or thing.

La-Di-Da

To begin, each player takes a walnut in his right hand. Everyone joins in the rhythmic incantation, "La-Di-Da." FIRST PART: On the words "La" and "Di," the players merely thump the walnut on the table in front of them. On the word "Da," however, each player passes the nut to the person on his right. SECOND PART: Each player takes the nut, which as been passed, in his right hand. Everyone repeats the first part, passing the nut to the right and letting go of it on "Da." THIRD PART: This gets more difficult now! The rhythmic incantation becomes "La-Di-Da-Di-Da-Di-Da." Each player takes the nut which has been passed to him in his right hand. The nut is thumped to the right on "La," then over to the left on "Di"; back to the right on "Da" (don't let it go this time); to the left on "Di," to the right on "Da" (don't let go yet), to the left on "Di," to the right again on the final "Da" and this time the nut is passed to the right and let go of as before. Repeat the whole thing from beginning and go on through the sequence without stopping, making the tempo faster and faster. If played properly, there should be a constant movement of nuts around the players in a counter-clockwise direction, with each strike of the table in absolute time, and a fluidity of movement, which will be a joy to behold. (In reality, there will be nuts flying all over the place. One player will inevitably end up with a huge collection, and the game will end in chaos, which is more fun, really!) from *Christmas with Dickens* by Cedric Charles Dickens, 1991

Snapdragon

Snapdragon was a popular, but seemingly dangerous, Christmas Eve game during the 18th century. Here is a description written in 1880: "A quantity of raisins are deposited in a large dish or bowl, and brandy or some other spirit is poured over the fruit and ignited. The bystanders now endeavour to grasp a raisin by plunging their hands through the flames, and as this is somewhat of an arduous feat, requiring both courage and rapidity of action, a considerable amount of merriment is evoked by the expense of the unsuccessful competitors. Whilst the sport of Snapdragon is going on, it is usual to extinguish all the lights the room, so that the lurid glare from the flaming spirits may exercise to the full its weird like effect."

Onlookers accompanied the game with this song: Here he comes with flaming bowl, Don't he mean to take his tool, Snip! Snap! Dragon! Take care you don't take too much, Be not greedy in your clutch, Snip! Snap! Dragon! With his blue and lapping tongue Many of you will be stung, Snip! Snap! Dragon! For he snaps at all that comes Snatching at this feast of plums, Snip! Snap! Dragon! But Old Christmas makes him come, Though he looks so fee! fa! fum! Snip! Snap! Dragon! Don't 'ye fear him, be but bold-Out he goes, his flames are cold. Snip! Snap! Dragon!

What was wrong with Tiny Tim?

In the December 1992 issue of the American Journal of Diseases of Children Dr. Donald Lewis, an assistant professor of pediatrics and neurology at the Medical College of Hampton Roads in Norfolk, Virginia, theorized that Tiny Tim, Bob Cratchit's ailing son in Charles Dickens' classic *A Christmas Carol*, suffered from a kidney disease that made his blood too acidic. Dr. Lewis studied the symptoms of Tim's disease in the original manuscript of the 1843 classic. The disease, distal renal tubular acidosis (type I), was not recognized until the early 20th century but therapies to treat its symptoms were available in Dickens' time. Dr. Lewis explained that Tim's case, left untreated due to the poverty of the Cratchit household, would produce the symptoms alluded to in the novel. According to the *Ghost of Christmas Present*, Tim was supposed to die within a year. The fact that he did not die, due to Scrooge's newfound generosity, means that the disease was treatable with proper medical care. Dr. Lewis consulted medical textbooks of the mid 1800's and found that Tim's symptoms would have been treated with alkaline solutions which would counteract the excess acid in his blood and recovery would be rapid. While other possibilities exist, Dr. Lewis feels that the treatable kidney disorder best fits "the hopeful spirit of the story."