

# A CHRISTMAS CAROL

by Charles Dickens



## THE AUTHOR

Charles Dickens (1812-1870) was the second of eight children in a family plagued by debt. When he was twelve, his father was thrown into debtors' prison, and Charles was forced to quit school and work in a shoe-dye factory. These early experiences gave him a sympathy for the poor and downtrodden, along with an acute sense of social justice. At the age of fifteen, he became a clerk in a law firm, and later worked as a newspaper reporter. He published his first fiction in 1836 - a series of character sketches called *Sketches by Boz*. The work was well-received, but its reception was nothing compared to the international acclaim he received with the publication of *The Pickwick Papers* in the following year.

After this early blush of success, Dickens took on the job as editor of *Bentley's Miscellany*, a literary magazine in which a number of his early works were serialized, including *Oliver Twist* (1837-9) and *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838-9). He left to begin his own literary magazine, *Master Humphrey's Clock*, in 1840, and over the next ten years published many of his most famous novels in serial form, including *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840-1), *A Christmas Carol* (1844), and *David Copperfield* (1849-50), perhaps the most autobiographical of all his novels. Other works were serialized in *Household Words* between 1850 and 1859, including *Bleak House* (1852-3), which was then succeeded by *All the Year Round*, which he edited until his death in 1870, publishing such novels as *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), *Great Expectations* (1860-1), and *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-5). A workaholic to the end, Dickens died of a stroke in 1870 after having penned a chapter of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, his final (and unfinished) novel, the previous day.

As far as his personal life was concerned, Dickens was a tireless writer and speaker, but his own personal insecurities made him very difficult to live with. He married Catherine Hogarth in 1836 and, though they had ten children together, their relationship grew increasingly strained until they finally divorced in 1859. He traveled extensively, including making several trips to America (he never much liked the country or its people), and was frequently called upon to read from his own writings, drawing large and enthusiastic crowds. Dickens also spoke out on a variety of social issues, including American slavery and the lack of copyright laws that made it far too easy for unscrupulous people to steal his writings, as well as the abuses of industrial society that play such a prominent role in his novels.

In *A Christmas Carol*, Dickens drew on many aspects of his personal experience, including his father's time in a debtor's prison. Not only did he have a beloved sister named Fan, who had a crippled son who died in childhood, but he also had a brother named Fred. In the story, Dickens presents the view of Christmas typical of the Victorian age; it is a Christmas with Christian morals and values, but without Christ. For many Victorians, Christianity had become simply a part of English culture. Many of the trappings of the Christmas season that are so familiar to us today developed during this era. The heart-warming story is thus both a reminder of what should be the practical outworkings of Christian faith and a challenge to those who would seek to keep Christ at its center. After all, "God bless us, every one" cannot happen apart from the grace of God in Jesus Christ, no matter how much one cares for the poor of the land. Note that a "stave" is a musical staff; thus the chapter headings fit the title, presenting the story as a song.

## **PLOT SUMMARY**

The story begins with Ebenezer Scrooge, a miser, sitting in his counting house on Christmas Eve. He will not allow his clerk, Bob Cratchit, enough coal to keep himself warm. When his nephew comes to invite him to Christmas dinner, he tells him that Christmas is a humbug and drives him away. Later two businessmen come to the office and ask him for a donation for the poor, but Scrooge rudely rejects them. He very reluctantly gives Cratchit the whole day off on Christmas, then heads home, where he is visited by the ghost of his former partner, Jacob Marley. Marley appears with great chains weighing him down, which represent the works he had done during his lifetime. He tells Scrooge that his own chain is much longer and heavier, but that he may still entertain some hope for his future. That hope will be communicated by visits from three more ghosts.

At one o'clock the Ghost of Christmas Past appears to Scrooge and takes him to visit scenes of Christmases from his earlier days. They first visit the town where Scrooge grew up and find a young boy deserted by his friends with nothing but his books to cheer him. Years later, the same scene appears and Scrooge is again alone in the schoolhouse. His sister Fan runs in, embraces him, and tells him he is to come home. Scrooge remembers what a kindhearted girl Fan was, and recalls that she died young, leaving a single child - the nephew who had visited Scrooge in his office earlier in the day and invited him to dinner. Their third stop is at the establishment where Scrooge was apprenticed, owned by old Fezziwig. They witness a Christmas Eve party, full of dancing and merriment, and Scrooge remembers the joy that was given to many people by the expenditure of just a few pounds. This leads him to think of the way he treats his clerk, Bob Cratchit. The ghost then shows Scrooge the scene where the love of his youth, Belle, breaks off their relationship because gold had become his idol. Later, he sees Belle happy with a loving husband and many children and realizes they could have been his. The father brings home an armful of Christmas presents, at which the children are overjoyed. He and Belle then discuss poor, lonely Scrooge, who was seen sitting in his dimly-lit office. Scrooge then extinguishes the light of the ghost and finds himself back in his own bedroom.

Scrooge next meets the Ghost of Christmas Present, a jolly giant of a man who conducts him to scenes around the city. After walking through the snowy market district, they go to the home of Bob Cratchit, where they find a family exulting in the joy of Christmas and their love for one another despite their poor clothing and meager fare. Scrooge particularly notices the youngest child, Tiny Tim, who is lame and walks with a crutch. When told that the child will die if nothing

changes and reminded of his earlier callous words about the death of the poor, Scrooge is heartily ashamed of himself. When Cratchit offers a toast in honor of his employer, Mrs. Cratchit objects because Scrooge is such a stingy, unfeeling man, and Scrooge is able to see himself as others see him. The ghost then takes Scrooge on brief visits to bustling houses in town, a miner's hut, an isolated lighthouse, and a ship on the high seas, all of which are full of Christmas cheer. The next visit is to the home of Fred, Scrooge's nephew, where a Christmas party is underway. The guests hear of Scrooge's rude refusal of Fred's invitation and all agree that Scrooge hurts no one but himself by his churlish behavior. They play parlor games, and Scrooge enters into the fun despite the fact that they can neither see nor hear him. When he is the answer to a game of Twenty Questions, he hears another uncomplimentary description of himself. The ghost then whisks him off to visit many other homes, most of them steeped in poverty but filled with joy on this Christmas Day. Just before the ghost's departure, he opens his robe and shows Scrooge two deformed and starving children, whom he describes as Ignorance and Want, and warns Scrooge against ignoring their existence. When the ghost vanishes, Scrooge sees coming toward him a dark and frightful phantom.

The phantom is the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come. He first takes Scrooge to the Exchange, where businessmen of his acquaintance are discussing the recent death of someone whose passing they mourn not at all. Scrooge has no idea of whom they speak, and constantly looks around for his future self to gain some clue as to the path he ought to follow. He next is taken to a rundown shop in the worst part of town, where a charwoman, a laundress, and an undertaker's assistant enter to sell goods they have stolen from a recently-deceased man, including his bed curtains and blankets. Scrooge is then taken to a bedroom, where a corpse covered with a sheet lies on a bare bed. The ghost indicates that Scrooge should uncover the man's face, but he cannot. He is then taken to a home where a couple is deeply in debt. They learn that their creditor has died, and are relieved, convinced that whoever takes on the debts could never be as merciless as the dead man had been. The ghost then takes Scrooge to the home of Bob Cratchit, where the family speaks tenderly of the now-departed Tiny Tim. Finally, the ghost takes Scrooge to a dilapidated graveyard and points to a tombstone, which Scrooge is horrified to discover is his own. Scrooge begs to know if these shadows of the future may be changed by an amended life, and promises to do all he can to honor Christmas in his heart.

The spirit departs and Scrooge finds himself in his bedroom once again. He is delighted to find his bed curtains intact, and rushes around the room, giddy with happiness. He hears church bells ringing and rushes to the window. He asks a passing boy what day it is, and finding that it is Christmas morning, rejoices that the spirits had done their work all in one night. He tells the boy to go to a local poultry shop and bring the huge turkey hanging in the window to him; he does so, and Scrooge orders the bird sent anonymously to Bob Cratchit and his family. He then gets dressed and goes out into the city, wishing a merry Christmas to everyone he meets, much to the surprise of those who know him. When he meets the businessmen who had asked him for a donation the day before, he pledges a handsome one. He then goes to the home of his nephew Fred and joins their Christmas party, having a wonderful time in the process. The next morning he arrives at the office early and waits to catch Bob Cratchit arriving late. He speaks harshly to him, but then smiles and tells him he is going to increase his salary and do everything he can to help his family. He changes his ways, and becomes a second father to Tiny Tim, who gets well and does not die.

## MAJOR CHARACTERS

- Ebenezer Scrooge - An old miser who is transformed by ghosts who visit him on Christmas Eve.
- Jacob Marley - Scrooge's dead partner, who is the first ghost to visit him.
- Ghost of Christmas Past - A childlike figure who helps Scrooge remember the joys of childhood Christmases and the things that led him down the path to his present sad condition.
- Fan - Scrooge's sister who died in childbirth, leaving only one son behind.
- Fezziwig - Scrooge was apprenticed in the warehouse of this kindly and cheerful man.
- Belle - Scrooge's love when he was a young man, she breaks their relationship when he becomes greedy for gold and marries another, living a full and happy life with many children.
- Ghost of Christmas Present - A jolly giant of a man who shows Scrooge scenes around the city of London taking place that very Christmas day.
- Bob Cratchit - Scrooge's clerk, a poor man with six children who is treated badly by his employer.
- Tiny Tim - Cratchit's youngest son, he is a cripple.
- Fred - Scrooge's nephew and Fan's son, a kindly man who annually invites Scrooge to Christmas dinner despite the old man's crotchety refusals.

## NOTABLE QUOTATIONS

“Old Marley was as dead as a doornail.” (Stave 1, p.1)

“Bah! Humbug!” (Scrooge, Stave 1, p.5)

“If I could work my will, every idiot who goes about with ‘Merry Christmas’ on his lips should be boiled with his own pudding, and buried with a stake of holly through his heart.” (Scrooge, Stave 1, p.6)

“If they would rather die, they had better do it and decrease the surplus population.” (Scrooge, Stave 1, p.10)

“It is required of every man that the spirit within him should walk abroad among his fellow men, and travel far and wide; and if that spirit does not go forth in life, it is condemned to do so

after death. It is doomed to wander through the world - oh, woe is me! - and witness what it cannot share, but might have shared on earth, and turned to happiness!" (Marley, Stave 1, p.21)

"I wear the chain I forged in life. I made it link by link, and yard by yard; I girded it on of my own free will, and of my own free will I wore it." (Marley, Stave 1, p.22)

"Business! Mankind was my business! The common welfare was my business; charity, mercy, forbearance, and benevolence were all my business. The dealings of my trade were but a drop of water in the comprehensive ocean of my business!" (Marley, Stave 1, p.23-24)

"Another idol has displaced me; and if it can cheer and comfort you in time to come, as I would have tried to do, I have no just cause to grieve." (Belle, Stave 2, p.47)

"He told me, coming home, that he hoped the people saw him in the church, because he was a cripple, and it might be pleasant to them to remember, upon Christmas Day, who made lame beggars walk and blind men see." (Bob Cratchit, Stave 3, p.67)

"God bless us, every one." (Tiny Tim, Stave 3, p.70)

"I see a vacant seat in the poor chimney corner, and a crutch without an owner, carefully preserved. If these shadows remain unaltered by the Future, the child will die." (Ghost of Christmas Present, Stave 3, p.70-71)

"This boy is Ignorance. This girl is Want. Beware of them both, and all of their degree, but most of all beware this boy, for on his brow, I see that written which is Doom, unless the writing be erased." (Ghost of Christmas Present, Stave 3, p.86)

"The case of this unhappy man might be my own. My life tends that way now." (Scrooge, Stave 4, p.100)

"I know, my dears, that when we recollect how patient and how mild he was, although he was a little, little child, we shall not quarrel easily among ourselves, and forget poor Tiny Tim in doing it." (Bob Cratchit, Stave 4, p.107-108)

"I will honor Christmas in my heart and try to keep it all the year. I will live in the Past, Present, and the Future. The Spirits of all three shall strive within me. I will not shut out the lessons that they teach. Oh, tell me I may sponge away the writing on this stone!" (Scrooge, Stave 4, p.110)

"Scrooge was better than his word. He did it all, and infinitely more; and to Tiny Tim, who did *not* die, he was a second father. He became as good a friend, as good a master, and as good a man as the good old city knew, or any other good old city, town, or borough in the good old world." (Stave 5, p.121)

"It was always said of him that he knew how to keep Christmas well, if any man alive possessed the knowledge." (Stave 5, p.122)

## ESSAY QUESTIONS

Discuss the following in a five-paragraph essay:

1. The destructive power of wealth is a major theme in both *A Christmas Carol* and *Our Mutual Friend* by Charles Dickens. Assess the treatment of this theme in both stories in the light of Scripture. Is Dickens' view of wealth consistent with the teachings of the Bible? Be sure to consider reasons as well as outcomes, issues of the heart as well as matters of behavior.
2. Some of the incidents in Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* present a critique of the English Poor Laws. How does Dickens communicate his critique? Why does he object to the law? How would he have the law be changed? Support your arguments with details from the novel.
3. In Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, Tiny Tim is a central character that the author uses to generate an emotional response in the reader. The possibility of his death, in particular, stirs up the reader's feelings as the novel draws to its close. Is Dickens being fair here, or is he manipulating the feelings of his readers in order to drive home his social criticism? Can Scrooge's response to the spirits of Christmas really determine if Tiny Tim lives or dies?
4. Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* is perhaps the most popular Christmas story ever written. Analyze the spirit of Christmas promoted in the novel. To what extent is his view of Christmas a Christian one? To what extent does it turn the reader's attention *away from* the true meaning of Christmas?
5. Given that Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* does not present a Christian view of the holiday surrounding the birth of Christ, does the novel promote principles that Christians can nevertheless support? What lessons taught by the novel are coherent with a Christian view of Christmas, and why? Be sure to cite specifics.
6. Discuss the views of individual and social salvation found in Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. Evaluate these ideas using Scripture. Be sure to include specific quotations, both from the novel and from the Bible.
7. Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* is often considered an allegory. An allegory is a story where the main characters represent character traits and are not intended to be understood as real people. Choose three significant characters in the novel and discuss the character traits they are intended to represent, being sure to illustrate those character traits with specific incidents and quotations from the story.

8. Discuss the theme of sin and redemption as it is played out in Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. In describing the nature of Scrooge's sin and the manner of his redemption, evaluate Dickens' view of these important biblical concepts from the standpoint of Scripture.
9. Economist Thomas Malthus argued that population, which grows geometrically, would always outpace food supply, which increases according to an arithmetic progression, thus making poverty unavoidable in any society. In Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, Dickens puts some of Malthus' arguments into Scrooge's mouth in the first chapter. Jesus also said, "The poor you will always have with you" (Matthew 26:11). How does Jesus' view of poverty differ from that of Malthus? Does Dickens' critique oppose the one as much as it opposes the other?
10. When Charles Dickens wrote *A Christmas Carol* in 1843, Adam Smith's *the Wealth of Nations* (1776), the seminal work defending capitalism, was well-known, but neither Karl Marx's *Communist Manifesto* (1848) nor Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859) had yet appeared. While Dickens clearly criticizes capitalism, to what extent does his famous Christmas story incorporate in seminal form some of the ideas that were later to appear in the other two books? Be specific.
11. Some critics of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* have argued that the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come is the most Christian of the three ghosts because of its reminder of ultimate judgment and at least the hint of heaven or hell after death. Do you agree? Analyze the messages of the three ghosts on the basis of biblical teachings.
12. Discuss the structure of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. The plot is simple and linear, but the symmetry of the novella is rather complex. Show how Dickens uses symmetry in the structure of the story to bring out the themes he seeks to communicate.
13. In Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, the author in a small way presents a program for the transformation of society. How does he think English society can be made kinder and gentler? Will his method work? Why or why not? Be sure to incorporate details from the novel as well as biblical passages and principles in your analysis.
14. Discuss the significance of the scenes that take place in the Cratchit home in Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. Be sure to analyze the social, economic, and moral components of these scenes in connection with the overall message of the story.
15. Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* has had a significant impact on the way the holiday is viewed today. Would you argue that its impact has been positive or negative? Why? Use specifics from the book and from contemporary Christmas observances to support your analysis.

16. Discuss the theme of regret as it appears in Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. Look specifically at what Scrooge says he regrets in his travels with each of the ghosts. How do these regrets make explicit the lessons that Dickens is trying to teach through his short novel?
17. Discuss the theme of family as it appears in Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. How does Dickens use the idea of family to promote his lessons about Christmas and what is really important? Be sure to consider pictures from the past, present, and future as Dickens paints them in the novel.
18. In Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, discuss the gradual nature of the change undergone by the main character. While the drastic change at the end of the book is visible to all those around Scrooge, in reality he changes slowly as the book progresses. Outline the steps through which he goes in his transformation, and explain what Dickens was trying to communicate through the process he presents. In what ways does his process of change represent the reversal of the changes that had led him to his miserly ways in the first place?
19. In Robert Burns' poem *To a Louse*, he pens the lines, "O wad some Power the giftie gie us / To see oursels as ithers see us!" In Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, Ebenezer Scrooge is given such a gift - he gets to see himself as others see him. How does he benefit from it? Do you believe such a gift would always be beneficial? Why or why not?
20. Charles Dickens, the author of *A Christmas Carol*, was an active supporter of Ragged Schools - institutions for poor children who often had no other access to a basic education. The fact that the emaciated child under the robes of the Ghost of Christmas Present on whom Dickens places the greatest emphasis is Ignorance is therefore no surprise. In what aspects of the popular Christmas tale does Dickens show the consequences of ignorance? How does he show that it, more than anything else, is a threat to the stability, and even the existence, of English society?
21. In Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, Scrooge's first visit in the hands of the Ghost of Christmas Past is to his old schoolroom. Scrooge sees a lonely little boy reading a book and remembers his favorite stories, among which was Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, a book that was also a favorite of Dickens. Compare the protagonists of the two stories. In what ways is Scrooge like the shipwrecked sailor? What is Dickens trying to say through this comparison?
22. Analyze the author's use of contrasts in Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. The balance of the story involves the use of many contrasting extremes. Choose three of them and discuss how these contrasts help Dickens to communicate the major themes of the novel.

23. In commenting upon Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, George Orwell said, "There is no clear sign that he wants the existing order to be overthrown, or believes that it would make very much difference if it were overthrown. For in reality his target is not so much society as 'human nature.'" Do you agree or disagree with Orwell's assessment? Support your answer with specific details and quotations from the novel.
24. Charles Dickens, in his style of writing, is in some ways a Romantic and some ways a Realist. Which of these attributes is more prevalent in *A Christmas Carol*? Why do you think so? What characteristics of the movement you have chosen mark the book as belonging to that school of writing? Be sure to cite specifics.
25. In its origin in the fourth century, Christmas was intended as a way to distract Christians from the libertine practices of the Roman Saturnalia. Some critics have suggested that Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, which, unknown to most people today, shaped Christmas celebrations more than it reflected them, has played a significant role in moving Christians back to the Saturnalia again. To what extent do you believe this criticism to be legitimate? Support your conclusion with details from the novel.
26. Some scholars have argued that the Ghost of Christmas Present in Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* is the first appearance of Father Christmas, or Santa Claus, in England. To what extent does the ghost fit the stereotype? In what ways is he like Father Christmas, and in what ways is he different? Consider appearance, words, and behavior in your assessment of Dickens' contribution to this central piece of English folklore.