

Charles Dickens'
A Christmas Carol
A Study Guide

A Brief History of A Christmas Carol

A Christmas Carol is a novella by English author Charles Dickens (Feb. 7, 1812-June 9, 1870), first published on 19 December 1843. It met with instant success and critical acclaim.



Charles Dickens in 1842

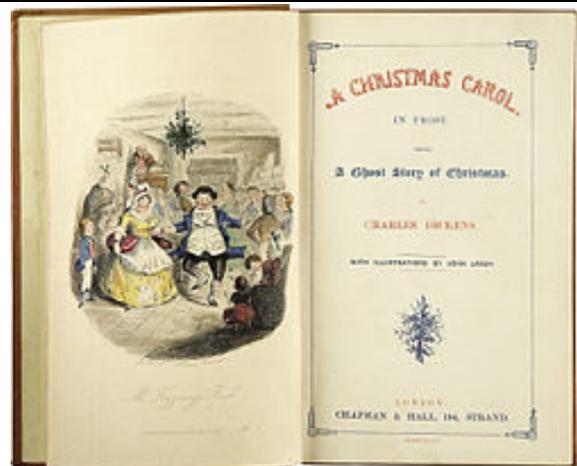
Dickens was deeply touched by the hard lives of poor children in the middle decades of the 19th century. In early 1843, he toured the Cornish tin mines where he saw children working in appalling conditions. The suffering he witnessed there was reinforced by a visit to the Field Lane Ragged School, one of several London schools set up for the education of the capital's half-starved, illiterate street children. Dickens realized that the most effective way to reach the broadest segment of the population with his social concerns about poverty and injustice was to write a deeply-felt Christmas narrative rather than polemic pamphlets and essays.

Dickens began to write *A Christmas Carol* in September 1843 and completed the book in six weeks, with the final pages written in the beginning of December and the book completed only two days before its scheduled release date of December 19th. Even though it was priced at five shillings (worth about 21 British pounds, or \$32 in today's money), the first run of 6,000 copies sold out by Christmas Eve and the book continued to sell well into the New Year. By May 1844, a seventh edition had sold out.

The book was written and published in early Victorian era Britain (so named because the country was ruled by Queen Victoria), at a time of nostalgic interest in its forgotten Christmas traditions, and at the time when new customs such as the Christmas tree and greeting cards were being introduced. Dickens' sources for the tale appear to be many and varied, but his major inspirations include the humiliating experiences of his childhood, his sympathy for the poor, and various Christmas stories and fairy tales.

Dickens wrote in the wake of British government changes to the welfare system known as the Poor Laws, changes that required, among other things, welfare applicants to work on treadmills (engines or pumps powered by humans walking in a wheel rather than machinery). He wanted people to consider the plight of those whom the Industrial Revolution had driven into poverty, and the obligation of society to provide for them humanely. Failure to do so, Dickens implies through the personification of Ignorance and Want as horrendous children, will result in an unnamed "Doom" for those who, like Scrooge, believe their wealth and status qualifies them to sit in judgment of the poor rather than to assist them.

The tale has been credited with restoring the holiday to one of merriment and festivity in Britain and America after a period of somberness. *A Christmas Carol* remains popular, has never been out of print, and has been adapted to film, stage, opera, and other media multiple times.



First Edition Frontispiece and Title Page (1843)

The Plot

Dickens divides the book into five chapters, which he labels "staves" – that is, song stanzas or verses, in keeping with the title of the book.

The tale begins on a "cold, bleak, biting" Christmas Eve in 1843 exactly seven years after the death of **Ebenezer Scrooge's** business partner, **Jacob Marley**. Scrooge has no place in his life for kindness, compassion, charity or benevolence. He hates Christmas, calling it "humbug." He refuses his nephew **Fred's** dinner invitation, and rudely turns away two gentlemen who seek a donation from him to provide a Christmas dinner for the poor. His only "Christmas gift" is to grudgingly allow his overworked, underpaid clerk **Bob Cratchit** to have Christmas Day off with pay, which Scrooge decries as "*a poor excuse for picking a man's pocket every twenty-fifth of December!*"

Returning home that evening, Marley's ghost visits Scrooge, warning Scrooge to change his ways lest he undergo the same miserable afterlife as Marley. Scrooge is then visited by three additional ghosts – each visit detailed in a separate stave – who accompany him to various scenes, designed to move him to reform from his parsimonious, odious ways.

The first of the spirits, **The Ghost of Christmas Past**, takes Scrooge to Christmas scenes of his boyhood and youth, which stir the old miser's gentle and tender side by reminding him of a time when he was more innocent. We meet **Old Fezziwig**, Scrooge's former employer, and Scrooge's lost love, **Belle**. They also show what made Scrooge the miser that he is, and why he dislikes Christmas.

The second spirit, **The Ghost of Christmas Present**, takes Scrooge to several differing scenes - a joy-filled market of people buying the makings of Christmas dinner, the celebration of Christmas in a miner's cottage, and a lighthouse. A major part of this stave is taken up with two family feasts. The first takes place in the home of Scrooge's impoverished clerk Bob Cratchit, where we meet his youngest son, **Tiny Tim**, who is seriously ill but cannot receive treatment due to Scrooge's unwillingness to pay Cratchit a decent wage. The Ghost then takes Scrooge to the party to which he had been invited by his nephew Fred. Finally, The

Ghost reveals two meager children, Ignorance and Want, and gives him a dire warning.



"This boy is Ignorance. This girl is Want. Beware 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."

The third spirit, **The Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come**, harrows Scrooge with bleak visions of the future if he does not learn and act upon what he has witnessed including Tiny Tim's death. A group of businessmen discuss how someone has passed away. Scrooge overhears their plans to attend his funeral...only if lunch is provided. (We later learn that the man who died is Scrooge himself.) Scrooge's charwoman **Mrs. Dilber** had stolen some of Scrooge's belongings and sold them to the rascally **Old Joe**. Scrooge's own neglected and untended grave is then revealed, prompting the miser to vow that he will change his ways in hopes of changing these "shadows of what may be."

In the fifth and final stave, Scrooge awakens on Christmas morning with joy and love in his heart. He then spends the day with his nephew's family after anonymously sending a massive turkey to the Cratchit home for Christmas dinner. Scrooge has become a different man overnight and now treats his fellow men with kindness, generosity and compassion, gaining a reputation as a man who embodies the spirit of Christmas. The story closes with the narrator confirming the validity, completeness and permanence of Scrooge's transformation.

The Story's Legacy

While the phrases “Merry Christmas” and “Bah! Humbug!” have entered our collective Christmas consciousness because of the book, Ruth Glancy¹ argues the book's singular achievement is the powerful influence it has exerted upon its readers. In the spring of 1844, *The Gentleman's Magazine* attributed a sudden burst of charitable giving in Britain to Dickens's novella. In 1874, Robert Louis Stevenson, after reading Dickens's Christmas books, vowed to give generously. In America, a Mr. Fairbanks attended a reading on Christmas Eve in Boston in 1867, and was so moved he closed his factory on Christmas Day and sent every employee a turkey.² In the early years of the 20th century, the Queen of Norway sent gifts to London's crippled children signed "With Tiny Tim's Love"³

The novella also had the intended effect of raising awareness about the ill effects of the industrial revolution on the poor in general, and most particularly on children. This awareness prompted changes in the poor laws and child labor laws in both Britain and America.

Many of our observances of Christmas, such as family gatherings, seasonal food and drink, dancing, games, and a festive generosity of spirit, are largely the result of a mid-Victorian revival of the holiday spearheaded by *A Christmas Carol*.

Adaptations

The novella was adapted for the stage almost immediately. Three productions opened on 5 February 1844 with one by Edward Stirling sanctioned by Dickens and running for more than forty nights.⁴ By the close of February 1844, eight rival *Carol* theatrical productions were playing in London.⁵

The story has been adapted to other media including film, opera, ballet, a Broadway musical (1979's *Comin' Uptown*, which featured an all African-American cast), a BBC mime production starring Marcel Marceau, and Benjamin Britten's 1947 chamber orchestra composition *Men of Goodwill: Variations on 'A Christmas Carol'*.⁶

There have been more stage adaptations than could be recounted here. In Atlanta, there has been a staging of *A Christmas Carol* at The Alliance Theatre since 1990. The story-tellers' version at The Shakespeare Tavern has been running since 2003. Numerous other theatres have offered adaptations and parodies over the years.



A scene from The Shakespeare Tavern's production of A Christmas Carol.

Notable film versions (all but the first available on video) include:

- *Scrooge; or, Marley's Ghost* (1901), a short British film that is the earliest surviving screen adaptation
- *A Christmas Carol* (1938) starring Reginald Owen
- *Leyenda de Navidad* (1947), a Spanish adaptation starring Jesús Tordesillas
- *Scrooge* (1951), retitled *A Christmas Carol* in the U.S., starring Alastair Sim. According to A.O.Scott of *The New York Times*, this is the best film ever made of Dickens' classic.⁷
- *Scrooged* (1970), a musical film adaptation starring Albert Finney
- *Mickey's Christmas Carol* (1983), a Disney animated short film with Scrooge McDuck playing the lead and Mickey Mouse as Bob Cratchit
- *Scrooged* (1988) a modernized adaptation starring Bill Murray
- *The Muppet Christmas Carol* (1992) with Michael Caine as Scrooge and Kermit the Frog as Cratchit
- *A Christmas Carol* (2009), a performance capture film released in 3D, starring Jim Carrey as Scrooge and all three ghosts

There have been numerous television adaptations since 1944 including those starring George C. Scott (1984), Patrick Stewart (1999) and a musical version with Kelsey Grammer (2004).

Who Am I?

(Match the description with the character.)



Marley's Ghost (Original illustration – 1843)

1. Ebenezer Scrooge (at the beginning)
 2. Jacob Marley's Ghost
 3. Bob Cratchit
 4. Tiny Tim
 5. Fred (Scrooge's nephew)
 6. Fred's Wife
 7. The Ghost of Christmas Past
 8. The Ghost of Christmas Present
 9. The Ghost of Christmas Future
 10. Fezziwig
 11. Old Joe
 12. Ebenezer Scrooge (at the end)
- A. "It was **shrouded** in a deep black garment, which concealed its head, its face, its form, and left nothing of it visible save one outstretched hand."
- B. "...a jolly Giant, glorious to see: who bore a glowing torch, in shape not unlike Plenty's horn, and held it up, high up, to shed its light on Scrooge, as he came peeping round the door."
- C. "a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, **covetous**, old sinner"
- D. "...a grey-haired rascal, nearly seventy years of age; who...smoked his pipe in all the luxury of calm retirement"
- E. "...it was always said of him, that he knew how to keep Christmas well, if any man alive possessed the knowledge."
- F. His face "...had a dismal light about it, like a bad lobster in a dark cellar"

- G. "an old gentleman in a Welch wig, sitting behind such a high desk, that if he had been two inches taller he must have knocked his head against the ceiling"
- H. "But the strangest thing about it was, that from the crown of its head there sprung a bright clear jet of light...which was doubtless the occasion of its using, in its duller moments, a great **extinguisher** for a cap, which it now held under its arm."
- I. "There's another fellow...fifteen shillings a week, and a wife and family, talking about a merry Christmas."
- J. "As good as gold, and better. 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."
- K. "She was very pretty: exceedingly pretty. With a dimpled, surprised-looking, capital face; a ripe little mouth, that seemed made to be kissed -- as no doubt it was..."
- L. "If you should happen, by any unlikely chance, to know a man more blest in a laugh than [he], all I can say is, I should like to know him too. Introduce him to me, and I'll **cultivate** his **acquaintance**."



In 1853, Charles Dickens gave his first public reading with the performance an immense success. Thereafter, he read the tale in an abbreviated version 127 times, until 1870 (the year of his death) when it provided the material for his farewell performance.

Vocabulary

In the text of this study guide, numerous words are underlined. These are words that may or may not be familiar to you. See how many of them you already know. See if you can find out what the others mean by how they're used in the sentence or by looking them up in a dictionary. The words are:

acclaim	acquaintance	adaptations
anonymously	appalling	attributed
benevolence	bleak	charwoman
compassion	covetous	cultivate
embodies	exerted	festive
extinguisher	festivity	grudgingly
harrow	horrendous	humbug
humanely	humiliating	illiterate
impoverished	massive	meager
miser	nostalgic	notable
novella	obligation	observances
odious	parodies	parsimonious
permanence	polemic	personification
rascally	reputation	sanctioned
shrouded	singular	somberness
spearheaded	transformation	validity

A Christmas Carol Games

There are a few games mentioned in *A Christmas Carol*. Along with music and dancing, parlor games were very popular entertainments at Victorian gatherings. Here are the rules for the games mentioned in the story. Perhaps you'd like to try your hand at playing them!

Forfeits: This game was popular for centuries. Each player puts in a piece of clothing, jewelry or some personal belonging into a pile on the floor. These are the "forfeits." One person is chosen to be the judge, and another holds up the forfeits over the judge's head. (The judge is in front of the pile and cannot see what is being held overhead.) As each item is held over the judge's head, the rest say, "Heavy hangs over thy head. What shall the owner do to redeem the forfeit?" Then the judge (without looking up) commands the owner to do some act or stunt in order to get back that property such as kneeling to the prettiest, bowing to the wittiest, kissing the one you love best, making at least three people laugh or reciting a poem.

Blindman's Buff (sometimes called Blindman's Bluff): One player is blindfolded. The others spin the blindfolded player 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.

Yes or No: A game like 20 Questions. One player thinks of a person, place or thing. The others try to guess what he or she is thinking by asking questions that can only be answered by "yes" or "no." When someone guesses correctly, it is his turn to think of a person, place or thing.

A Christmas Carol Word Search

See if you can find these words in the grid below:

Bah	Bed curtains
Bob Cratchit	Christmas
Carol	Coin
Dickens	Ebenezer Scrooge
Ghost	Grave
Humbug	Ignorance
Jacob Marley	Knocker
Little Fan	Meat
Money	Mrs Dilber
Needy	Nephew
Old Fezziwig	Past
Present	Tiny Tim
Want	Yet to Come

E A N E P H E W B C Y E N O M
 E B E D C U R T A I N S T D R
 F O E G L I T T L E F A N H S
 N B D N M L N K J I J M E O D
 O C Y M E A T P S E A L S L I
 T R S I W Z R N M Q C S E D L
 P A S T X Y E O Y Z O I R F B
 U T V Y W K C R T X B R P E E
 S C T N C O Z W S V M C R Z R
 R H U I T Q E L O C A H E Z O
 K I D T X C V O H L R K K I N
 A T E O B M A R G I L O C W M
 L Y I G N O R A N C E C O I N
 Q H U M B U G C L J Y G N G P
 X B S E B A H Y Z Z E D K H E

Notes

¹Glancy, Ruth F. (1985), *Dickens' Christmas Books, Christmas Stories, and Other Short Fiction*, Michigan: Garland, pp 12-13.

²Dickens, Charles; Douglas-Fairhurst, Robert (ed.) (2006), *A Christmas Carol and other Christmas Books*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 20.

³Dickens, Charles; Glancy, Ruth (1998) [1988], *Christmas Books*, Oxford World Classics, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 13.

⁴Standiford, Les (2008), *The Man Who Invented Christmas: How Charles Dickens's A Christmas Carol Rescued His Career and Revived Our Holiday Spirits*, New York: Crown, p. 168.

⁵Douglas-Fairhurst, p. 20.

⁶Douglas-Fairhurst, p. 8.

⁷*The New York Times*.

<http://video.nytimes.com/video/2008/12/15/movies/1194835382819/critics-picks-a-christmas-carol.html>