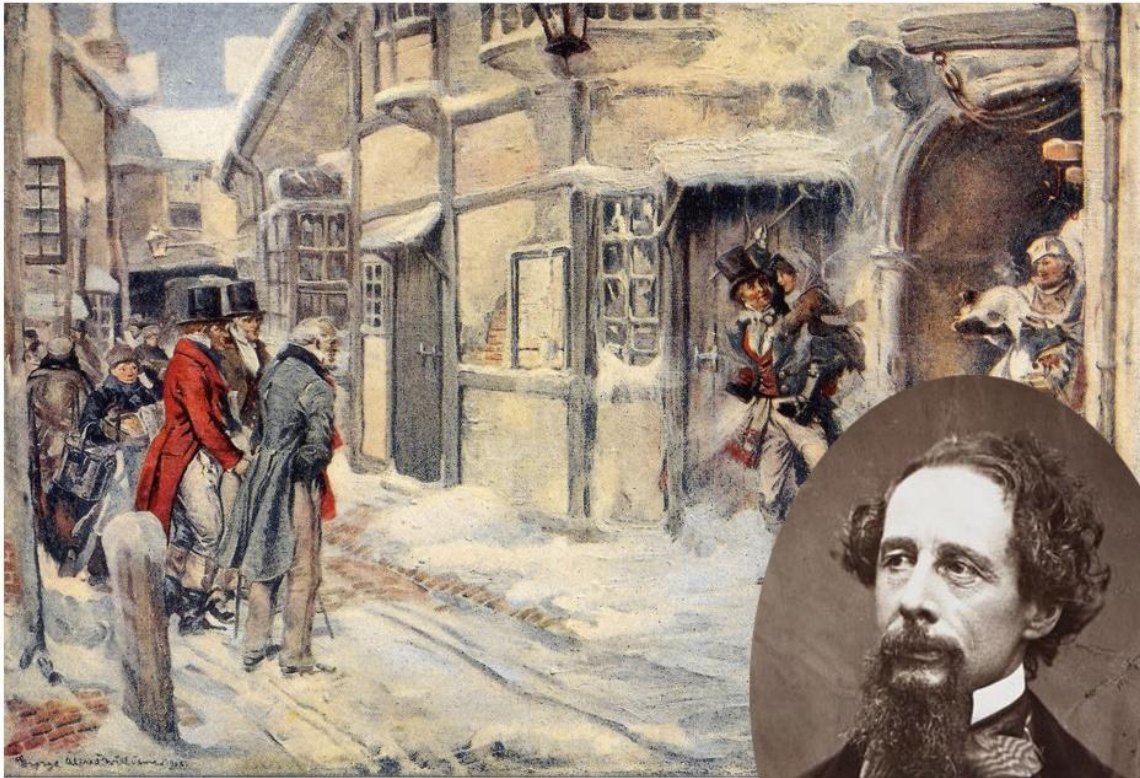


CHARLES DICKENS

A Christmas Carol

A reader's guide to the author and his work.



Literary Monographs

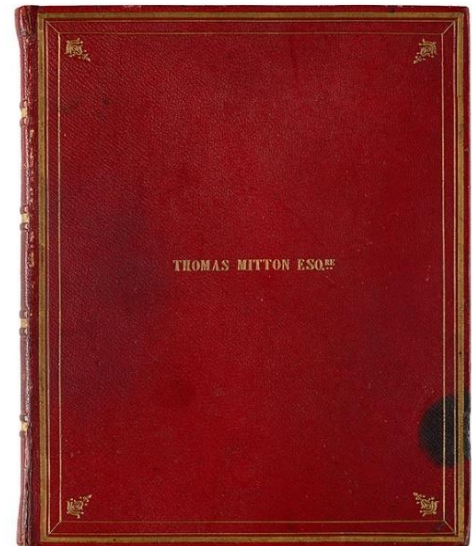
by

Susannah Fullerton

“he knew how to keep Christmas well”

Every Christmas the historic Morgan Library in New York, puts on display one of its greatest treasures – the original manuscript of *A Christmas Carol* which Dickens had bound in red morocco leather as a gift for his publisher. It was acquired by collector Pierpont Morgan in the 1890s. Each year the precious manuscript is opened at a different page, so that viewers can delight in a new scene. You can buy the Morgan’s own facsimile edition from the museum shop.

No other story captures the spirit of Christmas as powerfully as this one. Read the classic tale of Scrooge and the ghosts, enjoy my notes, links and questions, and have a very merry Christmas in the process.



Front cover of the leather-bound manuscript of A Christmas Carol signed, December 1843, held at the Morgan Library in New York

CHARLES DICKENS

“We have to go back to Shakespeare to find a writer who, through fiction, has so enriched the thought of the people. Admit all Dickens’s faults twice over, we still have one of the greatest writers of modern times.” – Jerome K. Jerome



Young Charles Dickens by Daniel Maclise, 1839

He was called ‘The Great Inimitable’, ‘Boz’, Mr Dickens and Charles – by whichever name you know him, he was one of the greatest writers of all time. He created the Dickensian world and peopled it with unforgettable characters. He entranced rich and poor, English and foreign, with his novels, and he brought about great social change through what he wrote.

But what about the Dickens the man? I am fascinated by his life and personality and love to read biographies of him. There are times I hate him – for example, in his unkind treatment of his poor wife.

At other times I love him. I admire the way he dragged himself up from a difficult childhood and used the experience to create children who suffer in his fiction. I hate the fact that he died before he turned sixty, leaving a novel that will forever be unfinished; but I rejoice that he lived as long as he did and made full use

of his time in giving us such masterpieces as *Bleak House*, *Great Expectations*, *David Copperfield* and, of course, *A Christmas Carol*.



John Dickens



Elizabeth Dickens

On 7 February 1812, a little boy was born in Portsmouth. That child, Charles John Huffam Dickens, would turn into a fighter against injustice and tyranny, a showman and actor, a husband and father, and one of the greatest novelists of all time.

His beginnings were not auspicious. He was born into the lower middle-class, son of John Dickens (a clerk in the Navy pay office) and his wife Elizabeth. Charles was the second of their seven children. His parents

were hopeless with money, a grandfather was forced to flee the country because of debt, and Dickens soon developed a strong desire to succeed and improve his social status.

The family moved often – to London when Charles was two, then to Chatham in Kent when he was five. His nurse Mary Weller told him ghost stories, and he often accompanied his father to public houses where they told stories and sang songs, so he early learned the power of a good story and the attraction of performance. He adored reading the works of Tobias Smollett, Laurence Sterne, Henry Fielding, and as an adult would look back on his childhood self “sitting on my bed, reading as if for life.” Eighteenth century fiction inspired the caricatured characters of his novels.

When Charles was ten, his family moved back to London. The beloved books had to be sold to pay debts (he vowed one day he would buy them all back – and he did!) and he was taken out of school.

John Dickens was arrested and taken to the Marshalsea Prison for debt. A few weeks before, just after his twelfth birthday, young Dickens had started work at Warren’s Blacking Factory. He had to put labels on shoe-blacking bottles – it was the most traumatic event of his life (“the secret agony of my soul”) and he felt shamed by it. The rest of the family moved into the prison with John Dickens (knowledge of daily life in that prison would later be brilliantly used in *Little Dorrit*), until finally a relative helped with the debts and they were all able to leave. The experience left Dickens with a determination never to be left without money, and with a sympathy for ill-treated children and the poor which comes through in all his novels. For the rest of his life he was unable to even walk past the site of the blacking factory.



Marshalsea prison, Southwark, London, 18th century

CHARLES DICKENS, *A Christmas Carol*



The earliest known portrait of Charles Dickens, aged 18. Charles Dickens Museum, London

Dickens continued his schooling, but at fifteen had to find employment. He was apprenticed to a law firm and hated it, but later used the experience to create a fabulous range of unpleasant lawyers in his writings. He then thought of becoming an actor (Dickens kept a life-long interest in the stage and actors, which comes through in *Nicholas Nickleby*) and finally learned shorthand and turned to journalism. He became a freelance reporter in Doctor's Commons (which granted marriage licenses to "love-sick couples and divorces from unfaithful ones"), and he educated himself in the reading room of the British Museum.

He also got to know London, walking its streets, observing its seething population – a knowledge that inspired so many city scenes in his book.

Maria Beadnell was a banker's daughter. Dickens took one look at her and fell in love ("All was over in a moment. I had fulfilled my destiny.") Much of the passion he felt for her is depicted in David's love for Dora in *David Copperfield*. For four years she blew hot one day and cold the next, before she broke it off and married a Mr Henry Winter instead.

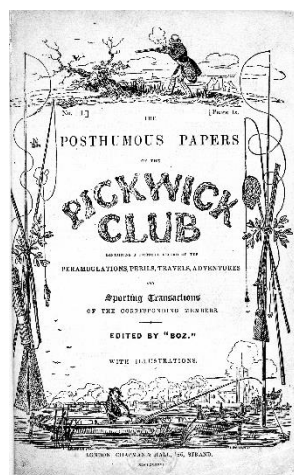


Maria Beadnell

Dickens never forgot his passion for her but was bitterly disappointed when he met her in later life. The poor woman, understandably nervous about meeting an old flame who had become so famous, did try to warn him by letter that she had changed – he refused to listen! When she arrived he soon found that she had grown fat and garrulous. His portrait of Flora Finching in *Little Dorrit* is his literary revenge on her. Dickens was good at harbouring grudges.



Illustration by George Cruikshank for Sketches by Boz, 1836.



Original cover of serial, The Pickwick Club, 1836.

His career was beginning to prosper. He had become a parliamentary reporter and was writing short sketches. His first short story was published in 1833 and he began a series of sketches under the pseudonym of 'Boz'. *Sketches by Boz* was published in 1836 and got him noticed in literary circles.

He then began the twenty monthly instalments of *The Pickwick Papers*. To begin with, sales were slow, but when he introduced a Cockney character called Sam Weller, whose job is to black the boots at an inn, the London reading

public was entranced to meet someone in a book who spoke just like them – sales took off like the proverbial rocket.

By the time that novel was published in book form, Dickens was famous around Britain. Readers could soon buy Pickwick canes, Pickwick cigar boxes, songbooks, china figurines etc. His illustrator, Hablot Knight Browne (known as 'Phiz') created memorable drawings, which helped fix the 'Dickensian' image in the minds of readers.

In 1836 Dickens married Catherine Hogarth, daughter of Scottish editor George Hogarth, and the couple settled into domestic life at Doughty Street in London (now the excellent Dickens museum). They had ten children (one of whom died young).

In the early years of their marriage, Catherine's sister Mary lived with them. She died suddenly in 1837 and her death was a huge shock to Dickens – I think he behaved very oddly indeed over this loss, even wanting to be buried in the same grave as Mary. Mary was seventeen, and an idealised version of her and all seventeen year old girls, would remain with him and inspire many (in my view overly-sentimental and virtuous) heroines in his novels. He was also left feeling that fraternal love was the greatest love of all.



Catherine Dickens by Samuel Lawrence (1838)

Over the next years Dickens became the greatest writer of his day. His creative energy was immense and novels poured out – *Oliver Twist*, *Nicholas Nickleby*, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, *Barnaby Rudge*, *Martin Chuzzlewit*, *Dombey and Son*, *David Copperfield*, *Bleak House*, *Hard Times*, *Little Dorrit*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Great Expectations*, *Our Mutual Friend* and (unfinished) *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. These are not short novels!

Picture to yourself Dickens seated at his desk, dipping his quill pen into the inkpot many millions of times, trying to meet the deadlines associated with publishing by instalment, anxious to hold the interest of his public from month to month, trying to keep track of the vast number of characters he had created.



Sketch of Dickens in 1842 during his first American tour.

And of course there were the Christmas stories, which helped shape the way we view Christmas – *A Christmas Carol*, *The Chimes*, *The Cricket on the Hearth*, *The Battle of Life* and *The Haunted Man*. There were travel books, plays and other short stories. He edited a weekly journal *Household Words*, started a newspaper, and gave immensely popular public readings from his books. These frequently involved travel and were exhausting for him (there was usually a doctor waiting in the wings to revive him when he finished his performance). One busy man!



Christmas was a very important festival for Dickens. He kept it religiously, particularly Twelfth Night, the feast of the Epiphany, the last night of Christmas. His son Charley recalled that his father “was always at his best at Christmas”. He was hospitable, gracious, entertaining and full of fun. Perhaps the day meant something special partly because it was on 25 December 1822 that his parents had moved from Chatham, where he’d enjoyed a happy childhood, to London, where everything started to go wrong for the family. Were the slightly fevered celebrations of his adult years a way of compensating for the unhappy festivities of his youth? After finishing *A Christmas Carol* the festivities were especially merry, with Dickens making milk punch, inviting all his friends, dancing, performing conjuring tricks, kissing everyone and really letting go of a year’s worth of tension.

Every year, the Dickens Museum in Doughty Street, London, puts up a Christmas tree and holds Christmas-related events in the house, in honour of Dickens’s own love of the festive season.

Dickens worked tirelessly for various charities. He had learned with *Oliver Twist* how fiction could bring about social change and, although asked to consider entering Parliament, remained convinced that he could do far more good through writing novels than he could as a politician. He supported many public causes, raised money and worked closely with philanthropist Angela Burdett Coutts on charitable schemes.

In 1856 he bought a house in Kent. As a boy he had walked with his father past Gad’s Hill Place and admired the house with its odd little cupola perched on top. His father had told him that if he worked hard and gained success, perhaps he could one day own such a house. Dickens, who never forgot anything that happened to him, made that dream a reality by buying exactly that house. He lived there more and more in his later years.



Gad's Hill Place

The house is now a school, though I believe there are plans to return Dickens’s study to its original state.



Ellen Ternan

In 1858 Dickens separated from his wife. He had met and fallen in love with a young actress, Ellen Ternan, and was very disillusioned with his marriage.

Dickens treated Catherine very unkindly – he brought in a carpenter to construct a dividing wall in the marital bedroom; he wrote a letter which was published in his own *Household Words*, accusing her of being a bad wife and mother, and of unsound mind; he sent her from their home to live on a small allowance, and virtually cut off her access to all but one of their children.

Poor Catherine remained dignified through it all. On her own death she left his love letters to the British Museum “so that the world will know he loved me once”. To me it seems he had a serious mid-life crisis and failed to see the situation from anyone’s point of view but his own. His relationship with Ellen was kept very secret – as the great exponent of ‘home and hearth’ in such works as *A Christmas Carol*, he could not afford to alienate a public that would be shocked by knowledge of a mistress. However, there is some evidence that he and Ellen had a child which died soon after birth (Claire Tomalin’s wonderful book *The Invisible Woman* is a real piece of detective work in finding out what went on in the relationship).



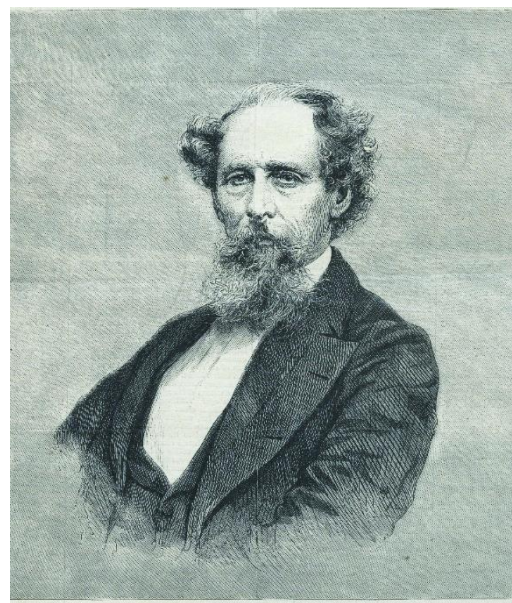
Dickens in New York,
circa 1867–1868

Dickens went on two tours to America. These were very successful, though he was angered that no copyright agreement was in place which would give him royalties for American editions of his books. Huge queues formed at his public readings in the USA and the UK (in New York more than 40,000 people came to hear him). Dickens put great energy into these performances – they damaged his health, but they brought him the public acclaim he loved and the money he needed to support his family. They also spread his writings to an ever wider audience.

Portraits and photographs show Dickens looking prematurely aged. He was a passenger on the train which crashed at Staplehurst in 1865. Ellen was with him, which made him keen to avoid appearing at the inquest, but he helped the wounded and used the event in a story, *The Signal-Man*.

On 8 June 1870, Dickens suffered a stroke. He died the next day, never having regained consciousness (the couch on which he died is now at his birthplace museum in Portsmouth).

He was only fifty-eight years old. He was buried in Westminster Abbey (against his wishes – he had wished to be buried at Rochester’s moated graveyard) and in his

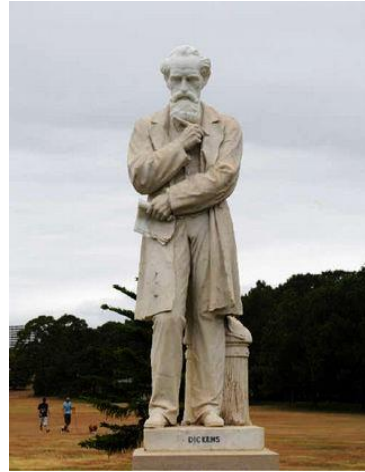


Engraving of an 1865 photograph by Mason & Co.

CHARLES DICKENS, *A Christmas Carol*



Statue in Clark Park, Philadelphia.



Statue in Centennial Park, Sydney

will insisted that no memorial be erected in his honour. There is, however, a statue of Dickens (with his character Little Nell) in Philadelphia, a statue of him in Sydney's Centennial Park (which has only recently re-appeared there) and on the bicentenary of his birth a statue of Dickens was erected in his birth city of Portsmouth.

He left an incredible legacy – a Dickensian world and characters who are known independently of the novels in which they appear (Scrooge, Mrs Gamp, Uriah Heep, Mr Pecksniff, Mr Gradgrind, The Artful Dodger, Mr Micawber, Wackford Squeers, Fagin, Miss Havisham, Little Nell, and so many more).

Dickens was brilliant at episodic writing, leaving his readers longing for the next instalment of the novel (the American readers of *The Old Curiosity Shop* waited fearfully at the docks for the ship bringing the instalment which would tell them if Little Nell lived or died). He was a superb social commentator and reformer – when he depicted schools for poor boys in Yorkshire in *Nicholas Nickleby* his novel resulted in all those cruel institutions being closed down. But above all, he was a writer who for generations has delighted readers with his Dickensian world, his insights into human nature, and his mastery of the English language.

Today Dickens societies around the world honour his life and works, he has appeared on bank notes and postage stamps, Dickens Festivals and conferences are held regularly (I recently attended the 112th International Dickens Fellowship Conference in Sydney), and his manuscripts are prized in libraries and museums.

“If Columbus found a new world, Dickens created one – and peopled it with men and women.”

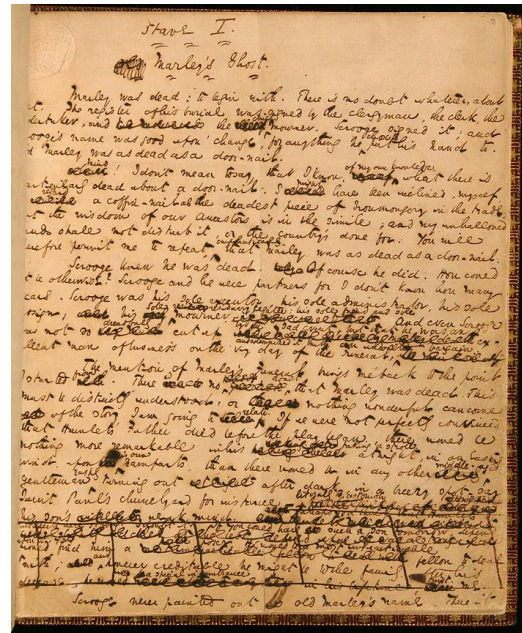
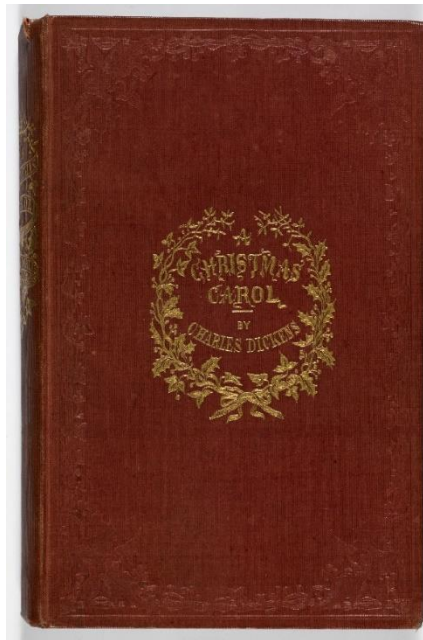
– Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch



Charles Dickens at his writing desk

A CHRISTMAS CAROL

One of the most compelling tales ever written, *A Christmas Carol* is a phenomenon. It is profound, archetypal, and it touches desires deep within us all for second chances and the opportunity to redeem past mistakes. It has a simple, linear plot, a fairly small cast of characters, and it is a tale designed not only to make us think and reflect, but to make us *feel*.



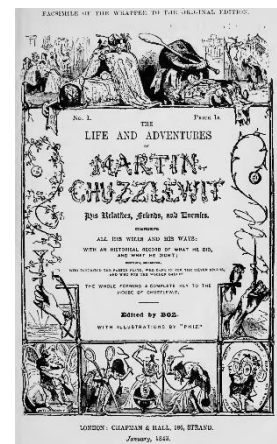
A Christmas Carol in prose. Being a Ghost-story of Christmas. With illustrations by John Leech. 1st Edition 1843, Cover and first manuscript page.

The story provides the catharsis of great tragedy without the horror and gloom of a tragic ending. We see Scrooge's ordeal, begin to identify with him (wouldn't we all love to see the future consequences of our actions, or be able to rectify past mistakes?). Like Scrooge, we feel cleansed and purified by what happens, we come to see that there could be reprieves. The tale reassures us that change is possible.

A Christmas Carol "seems to me a national benefit, and to every man and woman who reads it, a personal kindness." – William Makepeace Thackeray

Background to the Novel

Dickens wrote *A Christmas Carol* while working on *Martin Chuzzlewit*. This book was appearing in monthly instalments and sales were dropping off. Although its author had a high opinion of it, the story of Martin has remained one of his least popular works. So, during his "odd moments of leisure", he wrote a Christmas novella to help improve his financial situation.



CHARLES DICKENS, *A Christmas Carol*

Susannah Fullerton, OAM, FRNS. © November 2018
<https://susannahfullerton.com.au>

It took him a hectic six weeks and the story developed “a strange mastery” over him. As he wrote, he wept and laughed and was so excited by this new story that he kept writing through the night or would walk the streets thinking about its progress. There was some disagreement with his publishers, but Dickens believed so fervently in the power of his new work that he paid for the production of the book himself. Wanting to make it available to the masses, he lowered the cost to 5 shillings, which meant that he made almost no profit.

Sales were so spectacular that Dickens decided to write a Christmas book the following year – *The Chimes*, followed by *The Cricket on the Hearth* in 1845, *The Battle of Life* in 1846 and *The Haunted Man* in 1848. He’d have kept going with such works but in 1850 his publication *Household Words* was launched and he was busy working on the vast novel *Bleak House*. But his name will forever be associated with Christmas because of the first and most famous of his Christmas books.

A Victorian Christmas

Before Queen Victoria came to the throne in 1837, Christmas in Britain was a very low-key affair. Jane Austen wrote letters on 25 December without making any mention of Christmas festivities. Some religious leaders were dubious about the pagan origins of the festival. The day was barely celebrated, but that changed rapidly throughout the 19thC.

Prince Albert introduced aspects of a German Christmas into England – the 1848 *Illustrated London News* had a drawing of the royals celebrating around a Christmas tree and soon homes around the country displayed decorated trees in their parlours. In 1843 a man named Henry Cole commissioned an illustration for a card celebrating Christmas – this showed a family seated around a festive table. The card cost a shilling, which was pricey, so children were encouraged to make their own. By 1880 11.5 million cards were being produced commercially. In 1848 the first Christmas cracker was created and gift-giving on the day became more and more important. Georgian Christmasses saw beef or goose on the table, but turkey came to the fore in Victorian times. Scrooge’s turkey is so fat “it could never have stood upright” – a seriously top-heavy bird.

More and more people had moved to cities – this cut them off from their roots and old ways of celebrating, and often left them isolated from their families. So the novella’s stress on family



The very first Christmas card

celebrations appealed hugely to readers, as did the way it mingled rural traditions with an urban lifestyle.

Dickens did not actually ‘invent’ Christmas as we know it today, but he certainly helped to popularise it. He revived a sense of nostalgia and tradition, stressed that money is not vital, but warmth of heart is, and that Christmas will be better if one looks outwards instead of inwards.

Themes

MONEY: Dickens knew a great deal about money, and the lack of it. His grandfather embezzled funds and had to flee the country, his father spent time in prison for debt, his children cost him large sums as he settled them in careers or sent funds out to two of them in Australia. He made a great deal of money from his books and his public readings, but there were huge drains on those finances from wife, ten children, servants and improvident parents. He once commented sardonically that the only thing he'd ever been bequeathed were relations!



English ten-pound banknote featuring Dickens

He knew it was important to pay attention to his money, to never get into debt like his father, and to put money into property and sound investments. He fought hard to be paid his just desserts from pirated editions of his novels and in the process helped bring about change in copyright laws. When he died Charles Dickens was worth £93,000. He owned a fine house, dressed well, ate and drank well, and supported

many other people. It is appropriate that an author so deeply interested in the subject of money should have for many years featured on the English ten-pound banknote.

However, the message of *A Christmas Carol* is that regard for money must be kept in proportion. Dickens does not present money as something automatically negative. It is not wealth that makes one corrupt, but rather one's attitude to one's wealth.

Scrooge counts his money, economises in every way, refuses to give any of it away, and is warped by his riches. By the end of the story, he has realised that spending can be fun. He sends off for a huge turkey, and gives the boy who fetches it half-a-crown, he bumps into the charitable gentleman who has asked him for donations and gives him so large a sum that the gentleman quite loses his breath (Scrooge tells him that a "great many back-payments are included in it"), and he gives Bob Cratchit a pay rise. He heaps coal on the fire, symbolically showing that money is no longer cold and destructive, but can bring warmth and joy to both the giver and receiver.



George C. Scott as Ebenezer Scrooge.
1984 CBS TV movie adaptation

"His wealth is of no use to him. He don't do any good with it."



SELFISHNESS: *A Christmas Carol* is a parable on the sin of selfishness. Dickens was, at the time of writing it, working on *Martin Chuzzlewit*, a story about greed and selfishness and in many ways he created in his Christmas story a brilliantly condensed version of the same theme. Scrooge must learn to repent his own selfishness and reach out to others with love and with charity.

His selfishness is symbolic of the same selfishness in the wealthy classes. So long as they lived in their warm, grand homes, most cared little what happened to society's underclass. The rich lived very comfortably during the Victorian era – their nice homes in Mayfair and Westminster were far enough removed from the slums of Seven Dials and the East End to make forgetting those less fortunate an easy business.

“It's not my business’, Scrooge returned. ‘It's enough for a man to understand his own business, and not to interfere with other people's. Mine occupies me constantly.’”

RELIGION: Dickens stressed the holy significance of Christmas and his story is a powerful sermon: “Christmas comes but once a year – which is unhappily too true, for when it begins to stay with us the whole year round we shall make the earth a very different place.” His tale urges the reader to remember the principles and truths of Christianity, to look inside themselves and decide whether they are leading the right sort of life.

Dickens was born an Anglican but during his life often attended the Unitarian Church and mixed with Unitarians (Elizabeth Gaskell and Beatrix Potter were both Unitarians). The Unitarians believed in practical good works – it was no good just talking about God and listening to sermons every Sunday, you had to go out and involve yourself in active charity. They also believed in the importance of fiction (at a time when many moralists disapproved of made-up stories), so Dickens learned from them the power a well-told story could have.

The title of the story evokes religion – a carol is of course a piece of music sung in church. Dickens



Marley's Ghost by Fred Barnard, 1878

also uses the word ‘stave’ to name the chapters of the book. A stave is a set of musical lines holding together one part of the music. The implication is that the church is responsible for holding together the various segments of society.

Purgatory is the home of Jacob Marley's ghost – it is the waiting room between heaven and hell. It is a place of chains and misery, where Marley is unable to move forward or even to properly repent. In life, he failed “to know that any Christian spirit working kindly in its little sphere, whatever it may be, will find its mortal life too short for its vast means of usefulness.” He pays the price by spending seven restless, tormented years in Purgatory.

The effect on readers was as religious as Dickens had hoped. Each year he read the story aloud to various groups, and his public readings of the *Carol* were almost like prayer meetings in the fervent responses they evoked in listeners. People called out ‘Hallelujahs’ in their excitement, while Dickens felt there was almost a mystical communion between himself and those in the audience. In 1906 the Queen of Norway wept over the book and was inspired by Tiny Tim’s plight to send gifts to poor children. Each gift had a card with the words, ‘With Tiny Tim’s love’. I wonder what small Norwegians made of that? However, that was exactly the response that Dickens had been hoping to achieve.

“But soon the steeples called good people all, to church and chapel, and away they came, flocking through the streets in their best clothes, and with their gayest faces.”

POVERTY: In the summer of 1843 Charles Dickens visited a ‘ragged school’ in Field Lane, one of the worst alleys in a slum district of London (where he had set his novel *Oliver Twist*). He wrote of the experience: “I have very seldom, in all the strange and dreadful things I have seen in London and elsewhere, seen anything so shocking as the dire neglect of soul and body exhibited in these children!” A few weeks later he gave an address at the Manchester Athenaeum about the ignorance of the poor and the duties of employers. The neglect of children was very much in his mind when he sat down to write *A Christmas Carol*.

The ghosts in the tale take Scrooge to see some of London’s poorest inhabitants. There are young children, “yellow, meagre, ragged, scowling, wolfish”, there are streets “foul and narrow”, peopled by the “half-naked, drunken, slipshod, ugly” and full of “cesspools” and human misery. He sees a family ruined by debt and poverty, and others being forced into crime in order to survive.



*Scrooge and Bob Cratchit drink a “smoking bishop”,
by John Leech. 1843.*

The poor in England are usually cold. Dickens makes important use of the symbol of fires and warmth, as a contrast to the cold frost of the streets where many are forced to live. Fires draw families together, heat rooms and provide cheery comfort. As most of us who have sat before a fire and watched its embers glow will know, fires also promote serious reflection, something that Dickens wanted to encourage. Scrooge controls the coal box at the beginning, giving Bob so little heat he attempts to warm himself at a candle. At the end he is seen at the fireside of his nephew Fred, the fog has dissipated and there is bright sunlight, and Scrooge is calling for “smoking bishop”, a type of hot punch, to share with his employee. He also passes control of the coal box over to Bob. Cold moves to warmth once Scrooge undergoes his transformation and one feels that

the cold suffered by the poor will to some extent be changed into warmth.

Dickens greatly raised awareness of the plight of the poor. When she heard of his death, Queen Victoria wrote in her journal: “He is a very great loss. He had a large loving mind and the strongest sympathy for the poorer classes.”

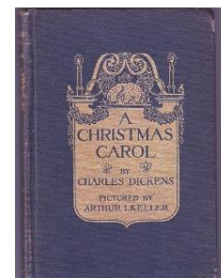
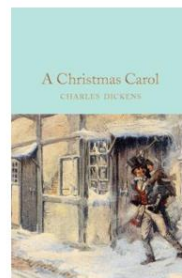
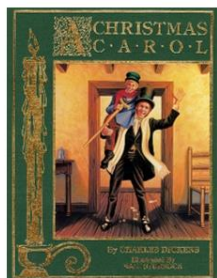
When Scrooge is asked to give money to those in need, he suggests putting them in the union workhouse. However, most poor people were desperate to avoid such institutions. The workhouse system came into official existence in 1834, so it was a fairly new idea at the time Dickens wrote *A Christmas Carol*.



Before that time, relief of the poor was a parish obligation in whatever workhouses the parish could create and maintain. Poor rates were levied, a local overseer appointed, and it was felt that the poor were therefore adequately provided for. But it was a system intended for the occasional unfortunate case, not for the thousands who were forced off the land, or who lost breadwinners during the dreadful cholera outbreaks that swept through England in the early 19thC, or who were injured at work and could no longer find employment.

An 1834 New Poor Law Act drew workhouses into a union system. However, those in charge did not want the workhouse to be such an attractive place that the poor lost any incentive to work. The answer was to make the buildings as grim as possible, a last resort for the desperate. Food was meagre and poor quality (remember *Oliver Twist* famously asking for more). No tobacco was allowed, nor were razors or alcohol. Anyone entering the workhouse gave up their own clothes and wore the workhouse uniform, children were separated from parents and husbands from wives, you had to stay inside the workhouse walls, even on Sundays (a chaplain came in to conduct a service), and you were set to hard and boring work such as breaking stones. Scrooge was like many of his era who could easily dismiss the poor to “the union workhouse” without any real idea of the misery endured in such places.

“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 which is Doom, unless the writing be erased.”



Setting

A Christmas Carol is an urban story, set in London. We see the moneylender's counting-house, with no warmth and fog "pouring in at every chink and keyhole". It has a "dismal little cell" where Bob works. We see the streets outside, with labourers repairing gas-pipes, shops decorated with holly, Scrooge's rooms "in a lowering pile of building up a yard" with its large knocker and dark rooms. We see the Cratchit's home in Camden Town (where Dickens himself had lived as a boy), Fred's home with games and merriment, the warehouse owned by Mr Fezziwig where Scrooge was once apprenticed, and the streets where poor children try to find shelter. Dickens makes his London come alive so vividly for the reader.

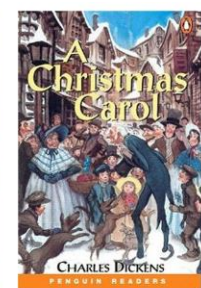
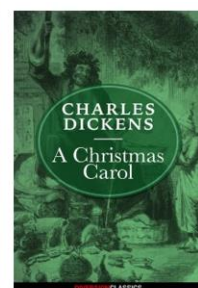
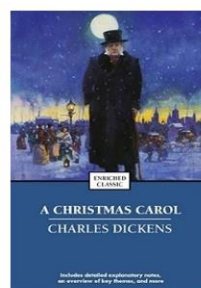
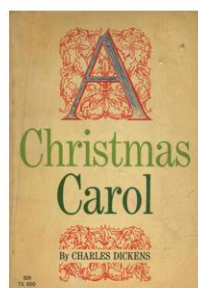
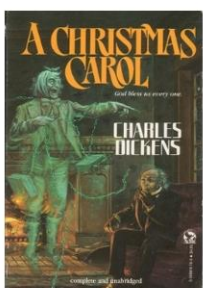


An illustration depicting Scrooge's money lending premises and Victorian London.

But the story also takes us out of London, since that is where Scrooge's life began. We visit "a little market town ... with its bridge, its church, and winding river", where farmers drive carts and there are "broad fields". At the schoolhouse fowls cluck in the yard. By using both rural and urban settings, Dickens knew that an even larger readership would relate to his novella.

Dickens knew London incredibly well. It was said he could often direct the drivers of hansom cabs because he knew the city layout better than they did. As a child he roamed London, he knew its street calls, its dens and alleys, its grander quarters, its river. Again and again in his novels he uses London as a setting and he does it memorably in *A Christmas Carol*.

"The Lord Mayor, in the stronghold of the mighty Mansion House, gave orders to his fifty cooks and butlers to keep Christmas as a Lord Mayor's household should; and even the little tailor, whom he had fined five shillings on the previous Monday for being drunk and bloodthirsty in the streets, stirred up tomorrow's pudding in his garret, while his lean wife and the baby sallied out to buy the beef."



Style

Dickens knew how to use symbolism. Just think of the fog in *Bleak House* (in my view the greatest of his works) and the way that fog in the streets symbolises the foggy mess of the law. He does the same in *A Christmas Carol*. Fires, doors, chains, graves, money, cold, food and light and dark are all used by him symbolically to great effect.

The story is narrated in the third person, but Dickens does occasionally bring himself as author into the narrative. For example, when Scrooge is taken to the home of the girl he once loved, we hear Dickens himself on the subject of the brood of children around their mother: “What would I not have given to be one of them! Though I never could have been so rude, no, no! I wouldn’t for the wealth of all the world have crushed that braided hair, and torn it down; and for the precious little shoe, I wouldn’t have plucked it off, God bless my soul! to save my life. As to measuring her waist in sport, as they did, bold young brood, I couldn’t have done it; I should have expected my arm to have grown round it for a punishment, and never come straight again.” Such authorial intrusions do, in my view, strike a slightly odd note in the text.

And as is to be expected from such a magician with words, we do get some fabulous phrases. I love the moments when Scrooge finally laughs: “Really, for a man who had been out of practice for so many years, it was a splendid laugh, a most illustrious laugh. The father of a long, long line of brilliant laughs.” And I love the young Cratchits being “steeped in sage and onion to the eyebrows” at the Christmas feast. And his description of the pudding as being “like a speckled cannon-ball, so hard and firm, blazing in half of half-a-quartern of ignited brandy”. Dickens makes us see his scenes so vividly with just a few well-chosen words.

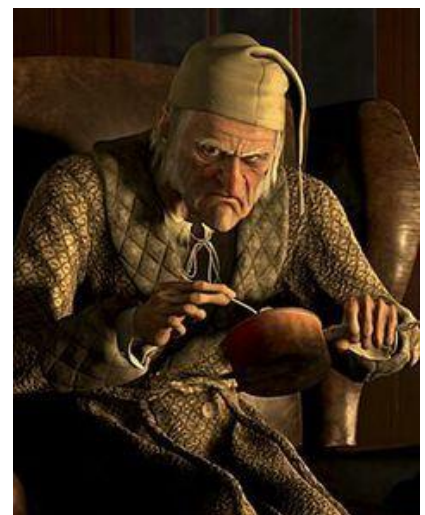


*Alistair Sim as Ebenezer Scrooge, 1951
Renown Pictures Corporation movie
adaptation*

Characters

EBENEZER SCROOGE: If you look up the word ‘scrooge’ in the dictionary, you will see it defined as ‘a miser’. It is not often a fictional character’s name becomes a dictionary definition, and this is a testament to the power of Dickens’s imagination. The name Ebenezer is a Hebrew one meaning ‘stone of help’, while the surname brings connotations of ‘squeeze’ or ‘scrounge’.

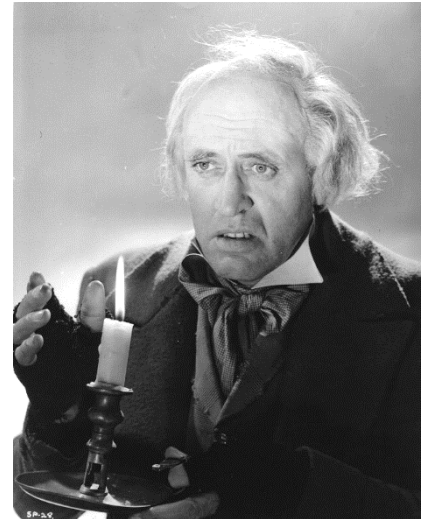
When we first meet Scrooge it is clear he cares only about money and that he is an unfeeling, angry man. Dickens makes repeated references to cold when referring to Scrooge, eg. there is “frosty



*Ebenezer Scrooge voiced by Jim Carrey,
2009 Disney Pictures animated adaptation*

rime on his head". We sense his frozen state in contrast to the fires and warmth of the Christmas season. It's as if he is a corpse at the beginning, with his skeletal appearance and his ability to survive on very little food. Dickens offers various reasons for his miserliness – he is a representative of his age and embodies the policies that Dickens hated of economic rationalism; he has forgotten the lessons of childhood; and the last is psychological. Misers wish to control and they fear and mistrust the world, barricading themselves in counting rooms and measuring everything in terms of profit and loss.

Scrooge works as a moneylender, so he does not actually make anything useful or add to his society in a productive way. He hoards and collects, complains about those who spend or live on credit, and doubts any sort of goodness or kindness. His famous hashtag of "Bah! Humbug!" says it all. It is part of his reformation that he must learn to spend – buy a turkey, hire a cab, give money to the poor. It emerges that his past has not been easy and he is trying to forget a traumatic childhood, desperate to force out any hint of emotion from his thoughts and concentrate on facts, statistics and the accumulation of wealth.



Alistair Sim as Ebenezer Scrooge, 1951
Renown Pictures Corporation movie
adaptation

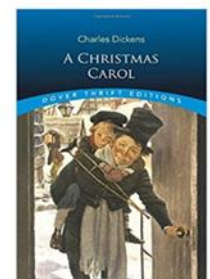
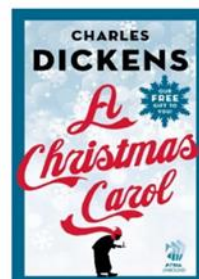
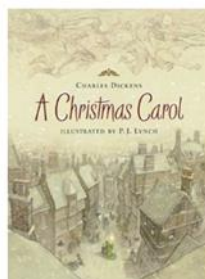
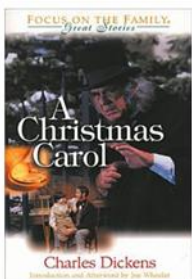
But as each ghost visits and teaches him lessons, we see Scrooge change and grow more sympathetic. His rites of passage are marked by many references to doors, thresholds, doorways and passages – he has to move through various entrances to go back to his past, and to see the



George C. Scott as Ebenezer Scrooge,
1984 CBS TV movie adaptation

present and the future. Dickens did not like slow development of character. He preferred his transformations to be rapid and melodramatic. This is what we see with Scrooge's change of heart – it is sudden and complete.

Scrooge is a remarkable achievement by his creator. He begins as one of literature's great villains and ends by being one of the great heroes. There are various theories as to the model for the character, and possibly Dickens drew bits from various people he knew to create Scrooge – John Elwes, a noted English miser, political economist Thomas Malthus, a Dutch miser Gabriel de Graaf, or Jemmy Wood, Britain's first millionaire who was famed for his stinginess.



CHARLES DICKENS, *A Christmas Carol*

Scrooge has been psychoanalysed and is considered to be anally-retentive with antisocial and narcissistic tendencies, a lack of empathic capacity and egocentric perception. Probably he is slightly obsessive-compulsive as well. To some his change of heart is not convincing. Karl Menninger wrote in his book *A Psychiatrist's World*: "I could never see why people were so happy about Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* because I never had any confidence that Scrooge was going to be any different next day."

"Oh! But he was a tight-fisted hand at the grind-stone, Scrooge! a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, old sinner! Hard and sharp as flint, from which no steel had ever struck our generous fire; secret, and self-contained, and solitary as an oyster."

BOB AND MRS CRATCHIT: Robert (Bob) Cratchit is Mr Scrooge's loyal clerk, who is over-worked and underpaid – he earns three pence per hour and works a sixty-hour week. Poor, respectable, good-hearted, upright, sober, deeply religious and responsible, Bob comes awfully close to being unbelievable in his patient goodness. He hardly says a harsh word about his cruel boss, or the hand fate has dealt him, and he forgives Scrooge very rapidly and easily. Of course, his role in the story is to act as a symbol of forgiveness.



Bob and Mrs Cratchit with family, by E.A. Abbey. American Household Edition (1876), fifth illustration for A Christmas Carol, "Stave Three: The Second of the Three Spirits."

He is a loving father, trying to find better situations for his older children and caring protectively for his youngest, the disabled Tiny Tim. We see Bob going through the Christmas markets of London to buy the festive dinner and thinking constantly of his family.

His wife is not given a first name, though she has been named Emily in some adaptations. Her gown is "twice-turned", but she tries her best to make herself look festive with cheap ribbons. We see her mainly in her role as provider – she brings in the pudding and cooks the Christmas meal. We see her less as a wife and mother, though Bob states she is a good wife. The main parental anguish we are shown is Bob's rather than his wife's.

Their children are Martha, Belinda, Peter, an unnamed son and an unnamed daughter, and Tim. If Bob is only about thirty years old, the couple must have married very young.

"His tea was ready for him on the hob, and they all tried who should help him to it most. Then the two young Cratchits got upon his knees and laid, each child a little cheek, against his face."

TINY TIM: Tiny Tim is young Timothy Cratchit. He is a cripple and needs a crutch to walk and has “his limbs supported by an iron frame”. We are also told that his hand is “withered”. He is a thoughtful, religious child, uncomplaining and he likes to be carried upon his father’s shoulder. Early drafts show he was at first named ‘Little Fred’, and another name considered by the author was ‘Tiny Mick’. Dickens’s sister Fanny had a crippled son, and he is thought to have drawn inspiration from his nephew Henry.

Tim’s role in the story is a minor but important one. He acts as a symbol of the choices made by a protagonist – if Scrooge does not reform, Tim will die; but money from Scrooge could keep him alive. He is also a symbol of poverty. His crippled state is a burden on his family – he must be carried around, he cannot go out and work like other boys, and iron frames are not handed out for free.



Harrison Wright as Tiny Tim and Bobby Smith as Bob Cratchit. 2014-2015 Broadway stage adaptation by Michael Wilson.

But what is actually wrong with Tiny Tim? In 1992 in the *American Journal of Diseases of Children*, an article by paediatrician Dr Donald Lewis speculated that Tim was suffering from a kidney disease which made his blood too acidic. The disease, called distal renal tubular acidosis (type 1) was only recognised in the 20thC. Tim’s case, arising from the family’s poverty, would have produced the various symptoms listed in the novel. The Ghost of Christmas Present informs us that Tim will die within a year. But Tim does not die because of Scrooge’s reformation and generosity, so clearly he gets proper medical care. According to the 19thC text-books that Dr Lewis consulted, he’d have been treated with alkaline solutions to counteract the excess acid in his blood. Another possible diagnosis is rickets, the disease of the poor, caused by Vitamin D deficiency. It too could have been treated by proper medical care.



Tiny Tim as depicted by Royal Doulton

In some ways Dickens cheats regarding Tiny Tim. He gives us all the pathos of his death – we see his grieving parents, the hearth empty of his childish presence, and see how he is missed by all who knew him. Religious lessons are drawn from his death: “Spirit of Tiny Tim, thy childish essence was from God!” The Victorians, and Dickens, loved weeping over the deaths of children in literature, and needed some assurance that the children they themselves had quite probably lost, were now in Heaven. The death of Little Nell is the most famous example, but Smike’s death in *Nicholas Nickleby*, and the death of the crossing-sweeper Jo in *Bleak House* are some examples of young characters sanctified by death in his fiction.

But Tiny Tim does NOT die, and so we have all the pathos of imagining it, and then the joy and relief that it does not actually happen. Tiny Tim is given the final words of the story, “God bless Us, Every One!”

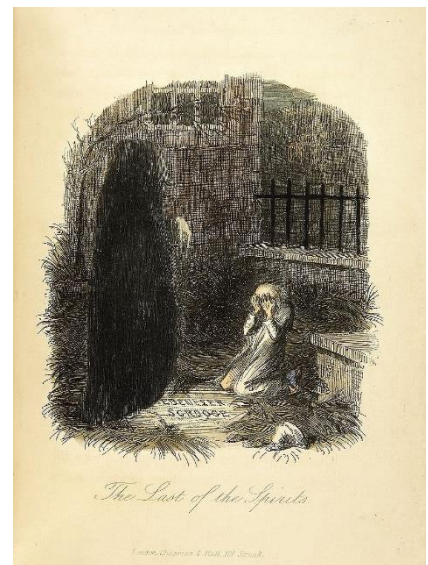
“we recollect how patient and how mild he was; although he was a little, little child”

THE THREE GHOSTS: Scrooge is visited by three ghosts who each have something different to teach him.

The Ghost of Christmas Past stirs his memory, taking him back into his past. From him Scrooge learns the importance of memory, the need to retain aspects of childhood, and the need for compassion. He makes Scrooge sympathise with his young self, and he makes the reader sympathise with Scrooge. We also feel Scrooge's loneliness, regret his wasted opportunity to marry Belle, share his sorrow over his sister Fan's death, and his ache of nostalgia for what might have been: "He was conscious of a thousand thoughts, hopes, and joys, and cares, long, long forgotten!" We also see the fun of Mr Fezziwig's ball, and Scrooge sees the employer he himself might have been. The tale is a parable of the generations – all children will grow up and we must make sure they do so properly and with love.

The Ghost of Christmas Present comes next, wearing a fur-lined green robe and a holly wreath and looking very like Father Christmas. He carries a scabbard with no sword inside it, an emblem of peace on earth. This spirit teaches Scrooge about tenderness and widens his horizons. He learns that Tiny Tim will die without medical help, and he sees that Bob and Fred have homes and lives of their own quite separate from their connection with him. The Ghost finally leaves Scrooge with his own cruel words about workhouses ringing in his ears.

The third phantom is the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come and he is the most terrifying of the spirits, muffled in a black cloak and with one gaunt hand protruding. He never speaks, communicating by pointing and shows Scrooge the Cratchit family mourning their son. He also shows Scrooge his own funeral, with his corpse aiding the poor through his stolen possessions more than he ever did in life. Scrooge is used in death as he used others in life, and the picture is a cruel one. He sees his isolation from his community and the fact that nobody cares about his death.



"The Ghost of Christmas Past", "The Ghost of Christmas Present" and "The Ghost of Christmas Yet To Come" illustrations from the original edition, by John Leech. 1843.



Frank Finlay as Jacob Marley, 1984 TV Movie adaptation

JACOB MARLEY: He is the one we hear about in the opening line through an emphatic statement about his death. It is strongly stressed that he is dead – “dead as a doornail”, as Dickens insists. He’s been dead for seven years. Scrooge was the only person to attend his funeral and “was not so dreadfully cut up by the sad event, but that he was an excellent man of business on the very day of the funeral, and solemnised it with an undoubted bargain.” Yet this dead Jacob Marley arrives in Scrooge’s room, clanking chains, dragging cashboxes, and with a

kerchief tied round his jaw to prevent it flapping open. Scrooge tries to rationalise Marley’s appearance – his tummy is upset, or the spectre is some undigested matter, he suspects. But when he is convinced that it is really the ghost of his former partner before him, he falls to his knees. Marley tells Scrooge that “mankind is my business” and tries to reclaim his partner by warning him to listen to the ghosts who will soon come and visit him.

“His body was transparent; so that Scrooge, observing him, and looking through his waistcoat, could see the two buttons on his coat behind. Scrooge had often heard it said that Marley had no bowels, but he had never believed it until now.”

OTHER CHARACTERS: The story has a varied mixture of characters in its pages. Fred, Scrooge’s nephew, is a romantic and cheerful young man who calls on his miserable uncle to wish him joy of the season because Christmas is a “kind, forgiving, charitable, pleasant time”. Scrooge disapproves of Fred because he fell in love and married a very pretty wife.

Mr Fezziwig is another slight but memorable character. He has a “comfortable, oily, rich, fat, jovial voice”, and he wears a Welsh wig (which was a simple head-hugging woollen cap adorned with a



Ian McNeice and Annette Badland as Mr & Mrs Fezziwig, 1999, TV Movie adaptation

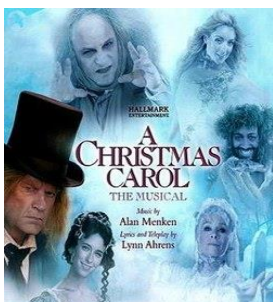
row of curls at the nape of the neck which protected your neck from cold draughts). He exuberantly dances the Sir Roger de Coverley with his wife (“In came Mrs Fezziwig, one vast substantial smile”), and has three daughters who are “beaming and lovable”. He feeds his guests lavishly, shakes their hands when they depart, and is a beneficent employer. The little scene at his house is a charming set-piece within the novella.

Scrooge's sister Little Fan, his past girlfriend Belle and her family, his debtors in their hovels, the pair of criminals named Joe and Mrs Dilber, and the starving children are other vividly depicted characters in the story. Dickens has peopled his tale with the rich and poor, the kind and the hardened, the lovable and the awful. What a splendid and memorable mix!

Film Versions



Dickens's beloved Christmas story was an early favourite with film directors. The very first film version was made in 1901, and was called *Scrooge, or, Marley's Ghost*. It was silent and was directed by Walter R. Booth. There's a lost 1908 version with Thomas Ricketts as Scrooge, an 11-minute 1910 silent version with Marc McDermott in the role, and a 1913 film called *Scrooge* with Sir Seymour Hicks in the title role. In 1914 Charles Rock acted Scrooge, while in 1916 Rupert Julian acted in the first feature-length version which was called *The Right to be Happy*. A 1923 production had Russell Thorndike as Scrooge, a short 1928 version had Bransby Williams, and in 1935 Sir Seymour Hicks again took the part in *Scrooge*. A 1938 film starred Reginald Owen as Scrooge and Gene and Kathleen Lockhart as the Cratchits, while the 1951 film with Alistair Sim as Scrooge and Mervyn Johns and Hermione Baddeley as the Cratchits was acclaimed as one of the best ever.



Scrooge the musical with Albert Finney came out in 1970, while in 1983 the Disney *Mickey's Christmas Carol* featured Scrooge McDuck as Scrooge. The 1992 musical *Muppet Christmas Carol* included the voice of Michael Caine for Scrooge, and there were more animated productions in 1994 and 1997. The 2001 *Christmas Carol: The Movie* was also animated, and in 2006 there was a computer animated film version with anthropomorphic animals in the main parts. In 2009 there was a 'performance capture' version with Jim Carrey as Scrooge and all three ghosts.

And we can expect another version before too long, written by Tom Stoppard. The 2017 movie *The Man Who Invented Christmas* with Dan Stevens is about Dickens' struggles to write the book – I enjoyed it.

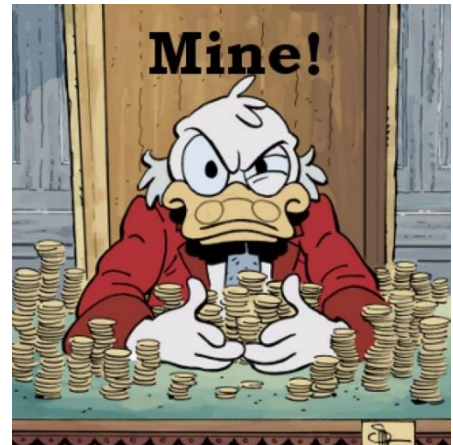
There have been dozens of TV versions as well – too numerous to list here. Scrooge has been played by Cyril Ritchard, Basil Rathbone, Marcel Marceau, Albert Finney (one of the youngest Scrooges ever), Sir Michael Hordern, George C. Scott, Bugs Bunny, Brer Rabbit, Oscar the Grouch, a Smurf, and Fred Flintstone.

Over the decades there have been dozens of theatrical adaptations, many radio versions, and some opera versions of the story (the most recent had a libretto by Simon Callow, acclaimed Dickensian actor).



There have been graphic novel versions, parodies (such as *Blackadder's Christmas Carol*), comic strips and hundreds of derivative works (sequels, prequels, continuations, Dr Who / Batman / Klingon / Barbie / Looney Tunes, etc).

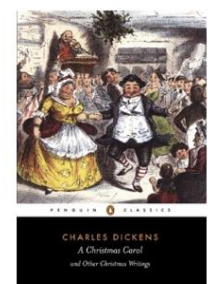
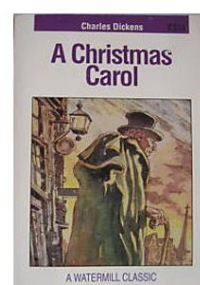
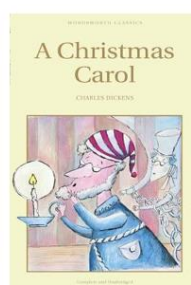
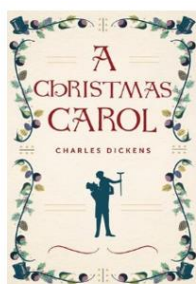
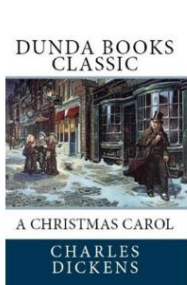
Not bad for one little Christmas story!



Scrooge McDuck was created in 1947 by Carl Barks for The Walt Disney Company

Discussion Questions

- 1) The threatened fate of Tiny Tim deeply moved Victorian readers. Is the religiosity connected with this character too much for the modern reader?
- 2) How long does the action of the story actually take?
- 3) Dickens had complex relationships with women and in his fiction tends to make them either superhumanly virtuous, or grotesque. Is that the case with this novella? Discuss the role of women in *A Christmas Carol*.
- 4) Ghost stories are usually scary. How did you react to the three phantoms who visit Scrooge?
- 5) Discuss the role of food in this story. How vital a role does food play in our own celebrations of Christmas?
- 6) How can you account for the extraordinary and enduring popularity of this book?
- 7) Is the ending of the story convincing?
- 8) Have you seen any film or theatrical version of *A Christmas Carol*? If so, did they do a good job of depicting the essence of the book?



Suggested Reading

Charles Dickens: A Life by Claire Tomalin

The Invisible Woman: The Story of Nelly Ternan and Charles Dickens by Claire Tomalin

Dickens by Peter Ackroyd

Charles Dickens by Michael Slater

What Jane Austen Ate and Charles Dickens Knew by Daniel Pool

The New South Wales Dickens Society (whose patron is Miriam Margoyles) can be contacted on dickenssocietynsw@yahoo.com.au The society has an excellent programme of meetings and special events each year.

Dickens created other memorable misers in Arthur Grime in *Nicholas Nickleby* and Anthony Chuzzlewit in *Martin Chuzzlewit*. Shakespeare gave us Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* and Ben Jonson gave us Volpone in the play of that name. Some excellent novels about misers include *Eugénie Grandet* by Honoré de Balzac, *Riceman Steps* by Arnold Bennett, and *Silas Marner* by George Eliot. *Kidnapped* by Robert Louis Stevenson has a wonderful portrait of the cold-porridge-eating miser Uncle Ebenezer Balfour (clearly named after Scrooge).

Links for further reading, videos, and more about Charles Dickens & *A Christmas Carol*:

<https://susannahfullerton.com.au/book-of-the-month/>

Copyright © November 2019, Susannah Fullerton, OAM, FRSN, Sydney.

Images obtained from these sites. All other images are Susannah Fullerton's or freely available in the public domain.

Front cover of the manuscript (pg. 2) <https://www.themorgan.org/collection/Charles-Dickens-at-200>

Charles Dickens, aged 18. Charles Dickens Museum, London (pg. 4) <https://dickensmuseum.com/>

Gad's Hill Place (pg. 6) <https://www.charlesdickensinfo.com/life/bonfire-gads-hill-place/>

Ellen Ternan (pg. 7) <https://spartacus-educational.com/PRternan.htm>

Engraving of an 1865 photograph (pg. 7) <https://libwww.freelibrary.org/digital/item/39800>

Harrison Wright and Bobby Smith. 2014-2015 Broadway stage adaptation. (pg. 19)

<https://www.broadwayworld.com/washington-dc/article/Photo-Flash-First-Look-at-Fords-Theatres-A-CHRISTMAS-CAROL-20141128>

Tiny Tim by Royal Doulton (pg. 19) <https://www.rubylane.com/item/203690-2444/Royal-Doulton-Tiny-Tim-Dickens-Figurine>

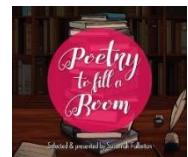
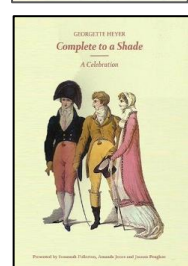
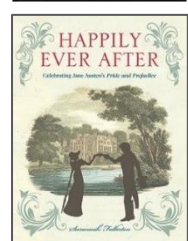
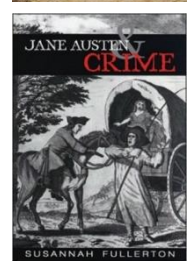
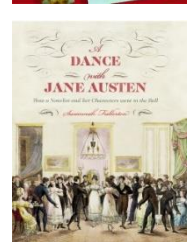
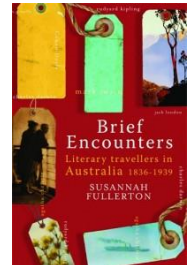
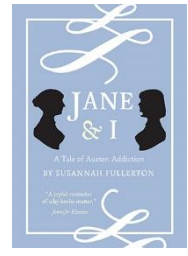
A Christmas Carol at imdb fan sites (pg. 11, 16, 17, 21, 22) <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0087056/>

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0216621/>, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0044008/>

Susannah Fullerton's publications, website, newsletter and social media by Cheryl Hill.

"Putting the technology you need in place to help make your business great online."

<https://computermentor.com.au>



Susannah Fullerton, OAM, FRSN is Sydney's best-known literary lecturer. She gives talks on famous writers and their novels, poems and plays. An accomplished author herself, Susannah's books, literary snapshots and monthly newsletter are a testament to her great literary knowledge.

Visit Susannah's website to purchase her books and publications, or sign up for her highly popular free monthly newsletter, **Notes from a Book Addict**.

Susannah's books and spoken word CDs are available to purchase from her website.

<https://susannahfullerton.com.au>

Jane & I: A Tale of Austen Addiction

Brief Encounters: Literary Travellers in Australia 1836-1939

A Dance with Jane Austen

Jane Austen and Crime

Happily Ever After: Celebrating Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice

Georgette Heyer: Complete to a Shade

Finding Katherine Mansfield – Audio CD

Poetry to Fill a Room – Audio CD

"Thanks, Susannah, for your lovely newsletter, it just gets better and better each time! I've read it all and clicked on every link. I recommend it to all my literature-crazy friends and look forward to the next and the next and the next."

Marisa C.