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A CHRISTMAS CAROL

The 2021 company of *A Christmas Carol*.
Photo by Adams VisCom

A CHRISTMAS CAROL SYNOPSIS

Adapted for the stage almost immediately after its publication—a performance in London is recorded in 1844—*A Christmas Carol* easily lends itself to drama because of its many vivid characters, moral plotline along with its striking use of fantastic elements.

A Christmas Carol begins on Christmas Eve when the miserly Scrooge is visited by the ghost of his former partner, Jacob Marley, who died seven years earlier. Marley warns Scrooge that he is to be visited by three spirits. Without their insight, Scrooge will be unable to avoid the endless wanderings Marley now endures. The trio consists of the Ghosts of Christmas Past, Christmas Present and Christmas Yet to Come. Escorted by each in turn, Scrooge is first transported to the scenes of his youth, then to the present family life of his nephew and his loyal clerk Bob Cratchit (whose household includes the crippled Tiny Tim) and finally to the ominous shape of things to come if he does not change his ways. Chastened by his experiences, Scrooge awakens on Christmas Day transformed and basking in the warm glow of his restored humanity.

CHARLES DICKENS 1812-1870

Charles Dickens is one of the most important figures in Victorian literature. His bustling presence as a popular novelist, magazine editor, journalist and social reformer dominates and helps to characterize this period of extremes. Few English novelists can compare to Dickens in the extravagant variety of his characters and narratives or the rich and powerful exploitation of all of the resources of language and symbol that he managed to achieve.

Dickens' own life provided source material for his fiction, especially the closely autobiographical *David Copperfield* (1849). David's struggle to rise from the boyhood misery in the infamous blacking warehouse to a position of wealth and renown as a novelist parallels the author's own experiences. After a few false starts in acting and parliamentary reporting, Dickens' career took off with the



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A CHRISTMAS CAROL

By **Charles Dickens**

Adapted by **Richard Hellesten**

Music by **David de Berry**

Directed by **Anthony Powell**

NOV 18 - DEC 24
WOLF THEATRE

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“For many Dickensians, the most unforgettable dimension of his legacy resides in the extraordinary characters that he created. They have become not only a part of our language but also our way of perceiving.”

publication of *Sketches by Boz* (1836). The subtitle of this volume proclaimed them “Illustrative of Everyday Life and Everyday People,” an apt description both of these stories and much of Dickens’ work. The *Sketches* were not, however, merely lively journalistic pieces about common events or familiar London characters; they were sparked by an uncommon insight into personality, close observation of social interaction and a verbal dexterity that would become known as “Dickensian.”

Success followed success for Dickens. *The Pickwick Papers* (1836) began the fashion for monthly serial publication. This format, though onerous for many slower-working novelists, was congenial to the energetic, exuberant creative temperament of Dickens. He always worked at dazzling speed, with intense concentration, seldom making serious artistic compromises. A phenomenal best seller, *Pickwick Papers* was eagerly passed from hand to hand, read aloud by parents to their families and by hired readers to illiterates in pubs. Dickens found himself in young manhood more than an established writer; he was an international celebrity.

Dickens’ literary work falls into three distinct periods. The first extends through *Oliver Twist* (1837), *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838), *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840), and *Barnaby Rudge* (1841). These brilliant early achievements are already marked by such recurrent features in Dickens’ art as the sympathetic treatment of thieves, prostitutes and other outcasts, indignation at all forms of hypocrisy, compassion for the afflicted and profound empathy with the feelings of sensitive, unprotected children. Satire, sentiment and sensation coexist harmoniously within a framework of bursting abundance, ranging through the whole of England from Fagin’s foul urban den in *Oliver Twist* to Squeer’s brutal boarding school in *Nicholas Nickleby*.

Dickens’ triumphant speaking tour of the United States inaugurated his middle period. He formed a poor opinion of the country, which he satirizes as boorish in the American section of *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843). In the same year that Dickens began the serialization of this uneven novel, he also published his first “Christmas book,” *A Christmas Carol*. This work, arguably the first product of Dickens’ maturity as an artist, is regarded by many as his

most representative and by some as his best. In his treatment of the unloved boy who becomes the loveless elderly miser Scrooge, he achieved perhaps the most memorable dramatization of the central Dickensian theme, which could be called “the death of the heart.” Dickens was fascinated by the forces in childhood and society that distort healthy human development. When Scrooge finally saves Tiny Tim, he also restores the innocent child within himself. This “resurrectionist” theme runs throughout all of Dickens’ later fiction, becoming perhaps most pervasive in *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859).

Of the numerous works closely following *A Christmas Carol, Dombey and Son* (1846) is the most impressive. This novel, with the masterful psychological plausibility of the “poor little rich girl” Florence, demonstrated Dickens’ ability to portray believable female characters as something other than grotesque and empty-headed ingénues. The serialization of *David Copperfield* (1849) ended this creative decade to great acclaim.

The next 20 years produced the amazing string of classics for which Dickens is perhaps chiefly known: *Bleak House* (1852), *Hard Times* (1854), *Little Dorrit* (1855), *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), *Great Expectations* (1861), *Our Mutual Friend* (1864), and *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870). These gripping later novels, all partially plotted within the new mystery genre, are distinguished by a deepening engagement with issues of social injustice, a more probing exploration of the enigma of differences among family members, and darker philosophical vision. Dickens had moved from the sunniness of Mr. Pickwick’s picnics to the chilling opium den fantasies of John Jasper.

Dickens died suddenly at his Gad’s Hill home in 1870, literally in mid-sentence, leaving the half-finished *Edwin Drood* an exciting puzzle to challenge his readers forevermore. His death at the peak of his powers made front-page news throughout the English-speaking world and for weeks mourners lined up to pay their final respects at Dickens’ grave in Westminster Abbey. For many Dickensians, the most unforgettable dimension of his legacy resides in the extraordinary characters that he created. They have become not only a part of our language but also our way of

perceiving. To say of a devious man that he is “a regular Uriah Heep,” for example, is to render a devastating caricature. The characters in Dickens’ novels form an indispensable element of our sensibility.

In addition to his literary achievements, Dickens’ tireless contributions to social reform helped to change the child labor laws and the educational system that he deplored in the form of Gradgrind’s “school of facts” in *Hard Times*. That children today are commonly regarded, in literature and

in life, as beings with imaginations and feelings to be carefully nurtured, is perhaps more to Dickens’s credit than it is to Freud’s. One could reasonably maintain that the period of “High Victorianism” ended with the death of Dickens in 1870, to be followed by an age of transition essentially pre-modern in nature. With his keen psychological examination of the divided aims of the human mind in the last novels, Dickens prefigured the introspective period in which we now live.

A DICKENSIAN TIMELINE

- **February 7, 1812**
Charles Dickens is born in Kent.
- **1823** The Dickens family moves to Cheapside, London; Charles is kept out of school to save money.
- **1824** Charles is sent to the boot-blackening factory. Two weeks later his father goes to debtor’s prison; the rest of the family, except Charles, follows soon after. Charles continues to work after his family leaves prison.
- **1824-25** Charles returns to school.
- **1827-30** Charles becomes an office boy in an attorney’s office, learns shorthand and eventually becomes a freelance reporter.
- **1830** He obtains a “reader’s ticket” to the British Museum; becomes a staff reporter for *The Mirror of Parliament*.
- **Ca. 1830** Begins seeing Maria Beadnell; her family does not approve and she strings him along until he finally breaks it off. She is said to be a model for *David Copperfield’s* Dora.
- **1833** Publishes his first London sketch in *Monthly Magazine*.
- **1836** *Sketches by Boz* published.
- **1836** Charles marries Catherine Hogarth.
- **1836-37** *The Pickwick Papers* and *Oliver Twist* appear in monthly installments simultaneously. With *Pickwick* finished and *Oliver Twist* half written, he begins *Nicholas Nickleby*.
- **1841** Publication of *The Old Curiosity Shop* in *Master Humphrey’s Clock* pushed that magazine’s sales to a 100,000 per week.
- **1842** First American tour.
- **1843** His first Christmas story, *A Christmas Carol*, sells 6,000 copies the first day.
- **1843-44** *Martin Chuzzlewit*
- **1843** Dickens begins his private theatrical productions; public readings of *A Christmas Carol*, *Cricket on the Hearth* and other works begin.
- **1849** *David Copperfield*
- **1852** *Bleak House*
- **1854** *Hard Times*
- **1857** *Little Dorrit*
- **1858** Catherine Hogarth Dickens moves out of the Dickens household, having withstood Charles’ flirtations with other women and neglect for many years.
- **1859** *A Tale of Two Cities*
- **1861** *Great Expectations*
- **1864-65** *Our Mutual Friend*
- **1867** Second American tour.
- **1860s** Public readings supplant writing new novels.
- **1868** His health becomes increasingly delicate. Doctors counsel him that he is risking paralysis and a stroke.
- **1869** He begins *Edwin Drood*.
- **March 15, 1870** Last public reading.
- **June 1870** He moves to the Kent countryside, where he dies, **June 9**, surrounded by his children.
- **June 14, 1870** Buried in Poet’s Corner, Westminster Abbey.

FROM DARKNESS INTO LIGHT

“At a time when the old holiday festivities were on the decline, he reconstructed a model for the season that embraced sparkling merriment, warm open-heartedness, hospitality, bright fires, glowing faces, radiant spirits, flickering laughter and dazzling generosity.”

Once upon a time Charles Dickens wrote a ghost story of Christmas. His intent was to utterly transform the lives of those who read it. This conjuration of ghosts was animated by a passionate concern for the gloomy condition of contemporary society. England was in a state of economic depression. The Industrial Revolution had already begun to generate an atmosphere of indifference to human well being. Social injustice was epidemic. Children labored under appalling conditions and, for the most part, the masses lived lives of grinding poverty.

Instead of merely writing a pamphlet, which was to be entitled *An Appeal to the People of England on Behalf of the Poor Man's Child*, Dickens launched upon a work which he believed would be much more powerful. “By the end of the year,” he said, “you will certainly feel that a sledgehammer has come down with 20 times the force—20 times the force I could exert by following my first idea!” He was already thinking about *A Christmas Carol*.

We cannot gauge to what degree the book eased the ills of early Victorian society. We do know, however, that Charles Dickens resurrected Christmas. At a time when the old holiday festivities

were on the decline, he reconstructed a model for the season that embraced sparkling merriment, warm open-heartedness, hospitality, bright fires, glowing faces, radiant spirits, flickering laughter and dazzling generosity. His “sledgehammer” blow was more like a warm breath thawing a frozen heart. By rekindling an almost extinguished flame, his name was forevermore made synonymous with Christmas. With the writing of *A Christmas Carol*, the vision that man's estate could be “a warm and glowing celebration of sympathy and love” came closer to becoming more than a dream.

Dickens believed that the diseases of society could only be cured by a profound revolution within the individual human spirit. So, Ebenezer Scrooge came to be. He epitomized the “utilitarian man” of the age, a man whose existence was impelled solely by the accumulation of wealth. He embodied the mercenary indifference of the prosperous classes who believed that their responsibilities toward their fellow man were completed once they had paid their taxes. In the redemption of the seemingly irredeemable, Scrooge signifies the possibility of redemption for all of us.

HOW DICKENS SAVED CHRISTMAS

Charles Dickens probably had more influence on the way that Christians celebrate Christmas today than any single individual in human history except Jesus Christ.

At the time Dickens wrote *A Christmas Carol* (1843), the observance of the holiday was in decline in many areas. Earlier in the century, the practice of singing Christmas carols had dwindled and the Industrial Revolution allowed workers little time “for fripperies like celebration of a Medieval, Christian and pagan festival in the middle of winter,” writes Richard Blystone.

When Dickens wrote *A Christmas Carol*, he was concerned at the way Victorian society was dealing with the problem of the poor. “Thousands of children lived in unimaginable poverty, filth and disease.

In 1839 it was estimated that nearly half of all the funerals in London were for children under the age of ten.”² Dickens introduces these children in the story through the allegorical twins, Ignorance and Want. The Ghost of Christmas Present shows them, wretched and primitive in appearance, with the 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.”³

Dickens was a major social critic of his time, though the reforms he advocated didn't really come to fruition until after World War II, says Blystone. But the idea of generosity at Christmas is the one that comes forth from this story. In a way, the secular view of Christmas and its

“Anticipate charity by preventing poverty.”

—Maimonides.
Charity's Eight Degrees.

dwindling religious impact in the minds of many, harkens back to *A Christmas Carol*. There was not much religion in it, but a great deal of feasting and celebration—and a cracking good ghost story.

Stephen Nissenbaum in his book, *The Battle for Christmas*, argues that Dickens was responsible for another facet of holiday gift giving and charity. In the story Scrooge has little contact with the poor except for his relationship with Bob Cratchit. Cratchit is his clerk, not a laborer in a factory. He may be poor but he is literate; his appearance is clean, though he lacks an overcoat. Except for his eldest daughter, his family does not work outside the home. He does his job well and seemingly is not in danger of losing his position unlike many workers in the Industrial Revolution. But it is the way that Scrooge treats Cratchit and his ignorance of the clerk’s family life that illustrates the disparity among the social classes.

However, in his experiences with the Spirits, Scrooge sees the wretchedness of the Victorian age as well as the paucity of his own life and emotions. These scenes produce a profound change in him. After that night his activities and relationships are softened by family values; he recognizes his obligation to treat people more humanely. Indications of this change are sending the Cratchits a Christmas turkey, but he does not deliver

it in person. He also makes a financial pledge to help the poor when he sees the gentlemen who approached him earlier, but he does not visit the impoverished. What does Scrooge do on Christmas day? He takes dinner with his family—his nephew, Fred and Fred’s young wife.

Thus, Scrooge’s conversion allows us to see the distinction made between different kinds of Christmas obligations. To members of his family he owes face-to-face participation; to the known poor he deals with daily he sends a present. But his debt to the unknown poor, the faceless sufferers of the industrial society, can be paid by a donation to a charitable agency. “If the reborn Scrooge were approached on the street,” says Nissenbaum. “He could now respond with a clear conscience by saying, in effect, ‘I gave at the office.’ ”⁴ Thus, by the 1840’s, Christmas giving was beginning to be divided into two different activities: gifts for family and friends became “presents” while gifts given to the needy were “charity”. The presents were usually luxury items of a frivolous nature given in person, while gifts to the unknown poor were necessities purchased and distributed by third parties—charitable organizations. Without recognizing it, perhaps Dickens helped establish our gift-giving priorities.

“Christmas won’t be Christmas without any presents.”

–Louisa May Alcott.
Little Women (1868)

NOTES ON A CHRISTMAS CAROL

Dickens called his little Christmas book a carol after the songs and ballads celebrating the holiday for the birth of Christ. He carried the pretense further by calling the chapters “staves.” “Stave” is an archaic form of the word “staff,” a stanza of a poem or song.

Despite the lyrical title, the good-spirited story was written in a dismal, disappointing time for Dickens. At the end of 1843, the writer faced the possibility of decline in popularity and income. His newest novel, *Martin Chuzzlewit*, had not been well received; his wife Kate was expecting their fifth child; his family pressed him for funds, and his own extravagances in keeping a large house on Devonshire Terrace, London all factored in

depleting his earnings. In the midst of his personal travails, he was plagued by the problem of child labor, so he decided to write a short pamphlet called *An Appeal to the People of England on Behalf of the Poor Man’s Child*.¹ The pamphlet was never written, but Dickens’ sympathies for the poor garnered him an invitation from the Atheneum, a charitable institution for the Manchester working class, to speak at a fund-raising event in October, 1843. The audience’s enthusiastic response and their “bright eyes and beaming faces—inspired a desire to try to capture the warm feelings of the people at large.”² The inspiration was so strong that on his return to London, Dickens immediately became engrossed in writing his story. He

“I have endeavoured in this Ghostly little book to raise the Ghost of an Idea.”

– from Charles Dickens’ preface to the original edition.

would walk the streets of London late at night alternately weeping and laughing as the story developed.

At odds with his publishers, Dickens paid for the publishing costs of the book himself and insisted on the lavish design that included a gold-stamped cover and four hand-colored etchings. He also priced the book at five schillings so it would be affordable to nearly everyone. Published a week before Christmas 1843, the book was an instant sensation; however, due to the high production costs, Dickens' profits from the work were less than expected. In addition, the work was the victim of pirated editions because of the lack of international copyright laws. Nevertheless, Dickens fought these fraudulent publications while popularizing the work himself by reading it aloud in his public tours.

The prototype for Scrooge may be found in Dickens' earlier writing. In the story "The Goblins Who Stole a Sexton," one of the characters is a bad-tempered gravedigger, Gabriel Grub. On Christmas Eve he can think of nothing better to do than drink beer and dig a grave until he is spirited away by a band of goblins who take him to a cavern where he views panoramas of both rich and poor celebrating Christmas. Through this supernatural medium, Gabriel Grub, like Ebenezer Scrooge, is converted to a new reformed life. Dickens probably derived his miser's name from the colloquial word "scrooge" which means to crowd or squeeze. In Scrooge's case, he is described as a "squeezing, grasping, scraping, clutching covetous old sinner."³ Jacob Marley got his surname from Dr. Miles Marley who practiced in Cork Street. He met Dickens at a party, and, knowing that the novelist was interested in unusual names, mentioned that he thought his own name quite remarkable.

Dickens reportedly replied: "Your name will be a household word before the year is out."⁴ The Cratchit family name likely came from "cratch," an archaic English word for crèche, the manger where Jesus was laid. The name also suggests the scratching of the clerk's pen. Tiny Tim was named "Little Fred" in the first edition, but Dickens' visit to Manchester in 1843 provided another inspiration. His sister Fanny had an invalid son, Harry Burnett, whom Dickens immortalized as both Tiny Tim and the lost boy Paul Dombey in *Dombey and Son*. As for Tiny Tim's illness, it is likely he suffered from distal renal tubular acidosis (type I), a kidney disease that made his blood too acidic, writes Dr. Donald Lewis in the *American Journal of Diseases of Children* (1992). Therapies such as alkaline solutions were available to treat this condition in 1843, but the Cratchits couldn't afford them and the symptoms grew worse. Untreated, Tiny Tim would have died within a year, but Scrooge's newfound generosity provided the funds for the doctors.

Dickens drew heavily on his own experiences to develop the plot. Left alone at school, the young Scrooge takes comfort in the same books loved by the young Dickens. The Cratchits' humble but exuberant Christmas dinner recalls Dickens' own celebrations as a child in Camden Town. The author also knew the sorrow of the death of a child, since the young boy experienced the tragedy of losing a brother and sister in infancy. Dickens' preoccupation with children and a specific child is an accusation at a society ignoring a terrible responsibility. *A Christmas Carol* may be seen as a "serio-comic parable of social redemption. Scrooge is the symbol of the pursuit of material gain and indifference to human welfare and his conversion is a symbol of that change of heart in society on which Dickens had set his own heart."⁵

"Scrooge is the symbol of the pursuit of material gain and indifference to human welfare and his conversion is a symbol of that change of heart in society on which Dickens had set his own heart."⁵

CHRISTMAS CAROLS IN THE VICTORIAN AGE

In England, caroling has always been an indispensable and joyous part of the Christmas holiday. Many of the earliest carols sung were preserved in a diary or "commonplace book" that was kept by Richard Hill, a grocer's apprentice,

between 1500 and 1536. Hill was interested in numerous subjects and carols were one of them. In 1850 his book was discovered wedged behind an old bookcase. Thanks to this piece of good fortune and Richard Hill's curiosity, we

have the earliest of all surviving English secular carols, “The Boar’s Head Carol”. The lyrics are:

“The boar’s head in hand bear I,
Bedecked with bays and rosemary;
And I pray you my masters merry be;
Quot estis in convivio. (Everyone who is at this feast.) *Caput apri defero, reddens laudes Domino* (The boar’s head I bring, Giving praise to the Lord.) (*International Christmas*, Bryn Mawr, PA: Theodore Presser Co., 1966, p. 35.)

“Here we come
a-wassailing
among the
leaves so green
It’s here
we come
a’wandering so
fair to be seen;
Love and joy
come to you,
and to you your
wassail too...”

–
Anonymous, 19th
Century England.

British caroling was inextricably linked with wassailing. The word dates back to the 5th century and the Saxon toast “waes hal” meaning “Your health.” A common recipe for the drink includes brown ale, brown sugar, cinnamon sticks, nutmeg, ginger, lemon slices, roasted apples and one bottle of Madeira or sherry. As caroling groups went from house to house singing, they would receive cups of steaming hot wassail and food, in keeping with the custom that none who knocked on the door would be turned away.

By the Victorian age, caroling was a dying tradition. Oliver Cromwell and the Puritan regime (1649-1658) had banned Christmas carols and other observances of the holiday; the custom never returned in full vitality. In the 17th and 18th centuries, British printers tried to revive interest by circulating songs on cheap, oversized pieces of paper

called “broadsides”, selling them for a penny. However, by 1830 caroling had degenerated into a sort of advanced begging technique employed by the poor.

By 1833 “God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen” was known in the cities as “the” carol. William Sandys began in that year to compile his volume of *Ancient and Modern Carols*, but he had to travel to the midlands and farther north to collect any vestige of Christmas songs. However, the Victorians rediscovered the joy of these unique songs aided by Dickens’ story and a Victorian collection, *Christmas Carols Old and New*, published in 1871.

In this adaptation of *A Christmas Carol*, several Victorian carols are included. “God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen” is one, but others are less well known. “The Advent Carol” by Rowland H. Prichard is a lovely piece scored for string orchestras and bells. The “Londoners’ Carol” is also known as “Now Thrice Welcome Christmas”, but its composer and lyricist are unknown. It was first found in *Poor Robin’s Almanac* for 1695. In Edith Rickert’s *Ancient English Christmas Carols: 1400-1700*, it is known as “A Christmas Song.” Finally, Dickens himself wrote the lyrics to “The Hearty, the True and the Bold” which is found in Chapter 28 of *The Pickwick Papers*.

These carols conjure up Dickens’ world of goodhearted fellowship, crackling fires and the spirit of goodwill.

DICKENS AND CHRISTMAS

There is a famous story that soon after Dickens’ death, a simple London girl was heard to say, “Dickens dead? Then will Father Christmas die too?” For by that time *A Christmas Carol* had already become the recognized modern classic of the holiday season, and Dickens was revered as a literary Father Christmas to millions of children. Interrupting work on *Martin Chuzzlewit* in 1843, he had turned out the complete *Carol* in less than six weeks. This feverish speed was clearly matched by inspiration, for *Carol* is one of the most cohesive and sustained efforts in the Dickensian canon.

With the original edition of 6,000 copies sold out its first day and tremendous

demand sparked for not only new editions but new stories, Dickens turned out dozens of short holiday tales and four longer works in the following years: *The Chimes* (1845), *The Cricket on the Hearth* (1846), *The Battle of Life* (1846) and *The Haunted Man* (1848). Dickens took more time with these and in fact had slowed production on the *Carol* to ensure high quality production and illustration. But he could not maintain the flash of genius that had created the original story and the judgment of critic Philip Hobsawm is probably correct: “Collectively, the Christmas books amount to a brilliantly whimsical parable, an incipient social satire, two sentimental love stories and,

finally, an imperfectly allegorist piece of autobiography. As literature, only *A Christmas Carol* can be said to have lasting merit.”

That one small book, however, is justly praised by another critic as “the one great Christmas myth of modern literature.” Its reading is a ritual in many homes and it has inspired plays, films, and radio dramas. And it has become a cherished classic because Dickens imbued it with his own deeply felt love for the holiday season. With its Christmas trees and feasts, toasts and presents, mingling of material bounty with spiritual exultation, *A Christmas Carol* helped to codify the tradition of holiday ritual, which in Dickens’ own youth was still struggling to emerge.

Dickens felt that the spirit of Christmas should be kept alive year-round and he once spoke of his “Carol philosophy” as the basis of a large projected book. This was never written, and is probably no great loss. For Dickens had already done his job of making Christmas the supreme holiday of the secular if not the religious calendar. Partly this was because he had created words and images, which brought together and balanced the respective treasures of Christmas, material and spiritual.

The spiritual “message” of the book is most clearly stated by the ghost of old Marley to Scrooge, when he laments that money-grubbing was a false vocation: “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!”

On the other hand is the typically Dickensian emphasis upon the material delight of things, especially food. Images of food, lovingly described, are common to his books. One of the best occurs in the *Carol*, introduced by a ripe evocation of atmosphere:

“The walls and ceilings were so hung with living green, that it looked a perfect grove.... The crisp leaves of holly, mistletoe and ivy reflected back the light, as if so many little mirrors had been scattered there; and such a mighty blaze was roaring up the chimney as the dull petrification of a hearth has never known in Scrooge’s time, or Marley’s Heaped upon the floor to form a kind of throne, were turkeys, geese, game, poultry, prawns, great joints of meat, suckling-pigs, long wreaths of sausages, mince-pies, plum-puddings, barrels of oysters, red-hot chestnuts, cherry-cheeked apples, juicy oranges, luscious pears, immense twelfth-cakes, and seething bowls of punch, that made the chamber dim with their delicious steam.”

By the sheer, delighted accumulation of detail, Dickens roused an appetite in his readers, which perhaps also fostered their spiritual hunger. Since the original meaning of Christmas is the living, material incarnation of God in a child, Dickens’ robust blending of lofty sentiments and mundane delights is not, for all its hearty earthiness, out of place. That surely is part of *A Christmas Carol*’s appeal.

DICKENS’ ENGLAND

Victorian England was, to many of us, a time of prosperity, refinement, high living standards and overstuffed living rooms; it was “Upstairs, Downstairs. But life in *fin de siècle* England was very different from life at mid-century. Inner-city England in the 1830s and 1840s was plagued by Industrial Revolution problems at their height. Air, soil and water pollution were not dealt with any more than overcrowded living conditions or factory life’s disruption of family structures. The British government encouraged the economic potential of the Revolution but discouraged legal or political intervention

in its problems. “The result was that by 1832 there was scant provision for the political, municipal, educational or sanitary needs of the population, most of whom were not even tolerably clothed or fed.” This, Dickens knew at first hand due to his family’s chronically unstable economic condition and his stint as a reporter for *The Mirror of Parliament*.

In the early 1800s, factory workers put in as many hours as their employers required or lost their jobs. Not until the Factory Act of 1833 limited the hours of children and youths and prohibited the employment of children under the age of nine, was there

any regulation. Implementation of the Act led to government factory inspection and to the Ten Hours Bill, which limited women and youths to ten hours labor per day. They performed much of the finish work in textile factories and the mining done in shafts no bigger than crawl spaces.

The Poor Law of 1834 created a board of three commissioners to oversee local parish relief, the first national government agency. Like preceding Poor Laws it also required that those unemployed but able to work be sent to workhouses, where conditions were often deplorable at best. Since 1688, workhouses had been under the control of private contractors, who set their own hours, maintained working conditions or not, and paid living wages or not with no one to answer to. An outbreak of fever in 1838 prompted the Board to intervene, leading to the formation of the Health Board in 1848, the Local Government Board and the Ministry of Health. However, the attitude of the well-to-do was: "Let the able-bodied man be given the choice of earning his own living or going into the workhouse, and then, if he still cannot find work on the land, send him to the factory or the colonies." This belief persisted well into the 19th century.

Prisons were also managed by private contractors, who, like those overseeing workhouses, took them on as profit-making ventures; there were no government subsidies or support of any kind. It is estimated that some 40,000 people were arrested every year for debt alone. In some prisons nothing could be had for nothing, as not even a minimum allowance of food was supplied out of the public funds. In

other prisons the free food was filthy and inadequate. The debtor, the most innocent class of prisoner, was least able to purchase alleviation.

While it's true that legislation such as the Education Act of 1870 eventually led to "a reading public co-extensive with the nation," in 1818 only one third of all children attended school. Many of these schools were church-sponsored; the government began supporting school construction in 1833 and formed an Education Committee in 1839 to monitor the construction grant and inspect the school buildings. In 1839, the government did nothing to maintain quality in education. Like prisons and workhouses, schools were operated by private individuals seeking to make a profit; there were no national standards to which they were compelled to conform.

Thus, by the time *A Christmas Carol* was published in 1843, the seeds had been sown for rudimentary change. Still, the working classes were faced with many of the same untenable conditions as they had been before, some of which were addressed by the Reform Bill of 1867. By then, "the idea of change was no longer new and shocking. In 1832, the nation had been made supreme and had been so defined as to include half the middle class. In 1867 it was defined again so as to include the rest of the middle class and the working men of the towns." This era of government legislation, including the Education Act and others, and the slowing of the Industrial Revolution's pace, paved the way for the improved living conditions and general material increase for all classes that we associate with Dickens' England.

CHRISTMAS CUSTOMS & WINTER CELEBRATIONS

Christmas, New Year's and the winter solstice are celebrated all over the world. St. Lucy's Day, or *Luciadagen*, is celebrated on December 13 and marks the official beginning of the Christmas season in Scandinavian countries. St. Lucy was betrothed to a pagan nobleman against her will, so she put out her eyes on the shortest, darkest day of the year. But God restored her vision and she became the symbol for the preciousness of light. Lucy means "light" and she appears in a shining white robe crowned by a radiant halo of candles set into a metal crown covered with lingonberry leaves. The oldest daughter of the family usually assumes the "Lucia" role, followed by her entourage of younger members of the family. They serve the family on the morning of December 13 with a tray of coffee and saffron buns.

December 16 opens the nine-day *Posada* season in Mexico. The *Posadas* re-enact the story of Mary and Joseph searching for shelter the night Christ was born. Singers/actors

set out along the street to ask for shelter in various homes and finally find their kindly “innkeeper” who invites them in to feast.

In Italy, the day of Epiphany (January 6) is the day of gift-giving. The “Befana,” a benevolent old witch, comes down the chimney to fill children’s shoes with “goodies” or, in retribution for some misdeed, a few pieces of charcoal.

Some festivals celebrate events other than Christmas. Dewali is a November Hindu festival. It is a week of festivities illuminated by lamps, fireworks and bonfires, and includes gifts and festive meals. Families clean their homes and draw elaborate designs (alpanas) on their floors with colored powder to welcome the Hindu goddess of wealth and prosperity. They set up little clay lamps (diyas) on courtyards, windows and roofs because Lakshmi won’t bless a home that isn’t lit up to greet her.

The Jewish Hanukkah is celebrated for eight days that fall somewhere between November 25 and December 26. Hanukkah commemorates the successful rebellion of the Jews against the Syrians in 162 BC. After their victory, they cleansed and rededicated the Temple in Jerusalem and re-lit the Holy Perpetual Light. There was only enough oil to keep the lamp burning for one day and it would take eight days to get more. Miraculously, the oil lasted for the eight days. So, Hanukkah is also known as the Feast of Lights. It is celebrated by lighting a candelabrum called a Menorah, which holds eight candles, plus a ninth, the shamash or “server” used to light all the others. Gifts are given, especially to children.

The Chinese New Year begins in the 12th month of the Chinese year. A rigorous housecleaning is done both materially and spiritually. Dirt is thrown out the door

and with it goes evil. The Chinese family celebrates the hearth god on the 24th day of the 12th month. The family gives him a farewell dinner so that he can only say good things about them to the other gods. His image is set upon a chair of bamboo stalks then set afire so that the god rides up to heaven. People buy each other the traditional New Year’s gifts. The holiday ends with the Parade of the Golden Dragon, symbolizing strength that marks the end of one year and the beginning of another.

Kwanzaa was established in 1966 by Maulana Karenga. It is a time for African Americans to reaffirm their culture. Kwanzaa comes from a Swahili word meaning “first.” Occurring annually from December 26 to January 1, Kwanzaa is a time of fasting, feasting and self-examination. It is celebrated with the other seasonal holidays.

The celebration of Kwanzaa is guided by the Nguzo Saba or Seven Principles: unity, self-determination, collective work and responsibility, cooperative economics, purpose, creativity and faith. The symbols are fruits and vegetables, the placemat on which they are arranged and the seven branched candlestick that holds the red, black and green candles that are lit each evening. There are also the ears of corn representing each child in the home, the communal chalice from which a ceremonial libation is poured, and the gifts. It is a family holiday where one is free to improvise on the music, food and language.

The winter observances described above, have in common a rededication celebrated with light, food and gifts during the dark time of the northern hemisphere; these signify an end of the year and a rebirth or new beginning.

STUDY QUESTIONS

Pre-Performance questions

1. What central elements of Denver Center for the Performing Arts Theatre Company's production of *A Christmas Carol* do you think contribute to the fact that the production is a seasonal tradition for many families in the area?
2. What are your expectations as you come to see a theatrical adaptation of this classic piece of literature?

Post-Performance Questions

1. Explain how you felt after seeing the production? What was the specific moment that caused you to have such a feeling?
2. How did the design elements support or enhance the production? How does music add to the production?
3. Who was your favorite character(s) and why? What did the actor(s) do to make the character(s) memorable?
4. In what ways do you share similar values with your favorite character(s)?
5. How does Scrooge transform during the play? In your opinion, what moment is the turning point for the character?
6. How would you describe the relationship between Scrooge and Cratchit?
7. How do each of the ghosts influence Scrooge? Explain if any of the ghosts have more influence on Scrooge than the others.
8. Why and how are Ignorance and Want represented in the play both as characters and also as societal concepts?
9. How is social class treated in the play? Does this commentary still hold truth within contemporary society?
10. In what ways do you believe *A Christmas Carol* may have stimulated social reform at the time it was first published?
11. Explain why or why not you would have ended the play differently than the way Charles Dickens ends *A Christmas Carol*?
12. What do you think will be different in the next Christmas Season for Scrooge, the Cratchit family, and/or the Fezziwigs?

ACTIVITIES

Page to Stage: Adapting *A Christmas Carol*

1. Start by picking a short excerpt from the novel *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens or another story he wrote. After reading the excerpt, find some key themes and character choices that you can adapt into a monologue or scene for the stage.
2. From the passage, change what happens on the written page into a script for a play. Pay close attention to the dialogue and the action in the passage.
3. After writing the first draft, cast the scene and have the students read the scenes that they have written.
4. Discuss the differences between scenes in the novel and their theatricalization. What did the playwrights do to convey the characters and plot? Did they have to invent, delete, or change anything to communicate what was written in the novel?
5. Raising the bar: After the first draft of the scene or monologue has been adapted, change the point of view. What changes would have to be made to clearly show that the events being described are from a different person?
6. Discuss how the scene may change when told through the different voice. Discuss the process of an adapter and how you chose the best voice for your perspective?
7. After seeing the production, what did the playwright and composer modify to tell their version of Charles Dickens' story? What were the differences between the scenes in the production and those written in class? In what ways does adapting literature into a play limit or expand the adapter's possibilities?

Writing PG: Effectively use content-specific language, style, tone and text structure to compose or adapt writing for different audiences and purposes.

Writing PG: Write with clear focus, coherent organization, sufficient elaboration, and detail.

Drama and Theatre Arts PG: Employ drama and theatre skills, and articulate the aesthetics of a variety of characters and roles.

Perspective Writing – Personal Narratives for Other Characters

1. Select an important moment from the play. This should be a moment that has more than one person in attendance. For example, the meeting between Scrooge and Fan or when the Ghost of Christmas Past enters.
2. From this moment, the students are to pick a character from the story and to give the character’s perspective and attitude of what transpired. Explanations of how they felt about this moment and how it affects them should be explored.
3. Each person will write a short monologue describing the moment from the character’s perspective of what they experienced.
4. Compare the monologues about the event from other characters that were involved. Discuss the similarities and differences that arose during the writing process. Was there general agreement of what happened or marked differences? Why were the moments similar or different? Were they subtle or obvious variations? Did the class agree on what was important to include and why? If not how would the elimination of some elements change the way the story would be understood when read?

Colorado Model Content Standards

Writing PG: Articulate the position of self and others using experiential and material logic.

Writing PG: Write with clear focus, coherent organization, sufficient elaboration, and detail.

Character Mapping

This activity looks at the internal and external characteristics of a certain character.

1. Start with a circle in the middle of a piece of paper. As there will be writing inside and outside the circle, be careful to leave space. At the top of the page, either place a generic title such as “Townsperson,” “Miser,” etc. or the name of a character from the play such as “Scrooge” or “Bob Cratchit.” If this activity is played before seeing the production, start with generic titles.
2. Inside the circle, write descriptive words, phrases, or draw pictures that describe the character’s perceptions of themselves. These descriptions are essential character traits. For example, Scrooge is male, the owner of a business and miserly.
3. Outside the circle, write descriptive words to describe how the characters are perceived by the other characters. These would be immediate qualities that are obvious or those traits that characterize the character.
4. After seeing the production or reading the text, return to the circle work above and add another circle. Within this circle, write quotes that the above character uses to describe themselves. On the outside of the circle, write quotes that the other characters use to describe themselves.

Writing PG: Effectively use content-specific language, style, tone and text structure to compose or adapt writing for different audiences and purposes.

Writing PG: Write with clear focus, coherent organization, sufficient elaboration, and detail.

Sharing

You will need:

Treats for the class — but only half as many as you normally need — and napkins.

To Start:

1. Have children wash their hands. Choose a helper to pass out napkins. Choose another child to pass out the food. Ask children to wait until every thing has been passed out.
2. Have the children suggest solutions when it is discovered there isn't enough to go around. Listen to all the possible solutions; then encourage the group to decide on the best idea.
3. Praise the class for their resolution and willingness to share.

Variation: Pass out a sheet of paper and one crayon to each child. Ask them to draw a picture. Explain that they may use their crayon or trade with friends. When the children have finished, let them show their pictures. Talk about how colorful their pictures are because they learned to share.

Pass the Parcel

This is a game English children play.

You will need:

A small box, tape, tissue paper or comics from the newspaper, one sticker or other treat for each child, music. Put the treats in the box and wrap a layer of tissue paper or funny papers around it. Continue wrapping more layers around the box. (Ten layers work well. Or make enough layers so each child in the room can unwrap the package.)

To start:

1. Have the children sit in a circle and explain that this is a game that children in England like to play at parties. It's called "Pass the Parcel" because in England people call a package a "parcel." The game is played by passing the package around the circle while music plays.
2. When the music stops, whoever is holding the parcel may unwrap one layer. When the music starts, they must continue passing the parcel. (If it stops at a child who has already unwrapped a layer, then the package is passed to the next child who has not had a turn.)
3. Play the game until the last layer is unwrapped. The person holding the box may then pass out the treats to the rest of the class.

Ask: "How do you think children in England are like you? What game would you like to teach children in England?"

Variations: Let the children wrap the package for the game. Wrap a book, puzzle or new toy the whole class can enjoy.

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

The Denver Public Library recommends:

Read!

The Man who Invented Christmas by Les Standiford (2005)

Charles Dickens had seemed to reach his peak with the publication of his *The Old Curiosity Shop*, his *Chuzzlewit* was fizzing and it wasn't until his richly illustrated *A Christmas Carol* hit the scene that the man we know as Dickens was really launched into the American zeitgeist. His tour of America to promote this story created a holiday heretofore celebrated with very little pomp and circumstance. Read more about the ways in which this modern fairytale impacted and "invented" Christmas as we now know it.

Watch!

Scrooged (Paramount Pictures, 1988)

A Christmas Carol has been remade many times, but only one production stars Bill Murray (our Scrooge stand in), Bobcat Goldthwait (representing Bob Cratchit), and Carol Kane (an unparalleled Ghost of Christmas Present) with a cameo by olympic gymnast Mary Lou Retton, playing none other than Tiny Tim! *Scrooged* sticks closely to the source material but there are few surprises plot-wise, leaving plenty of room for memorable gags, and for a grim portrayal of corporate greed circa the late 1980s. *Scrooged* tells the story of despicable television executive Frank Cross, his cruel deeds in the world, and his network's attempt to update *A Christmas Carol* beyond good taste and recognition; in the midst of all this, Frank is visited by three ghosts, each trying to get him to change his ways before it's too late. A fun film on it's own, and totally made worthwhile by the final musical number.

Listen!

The Christmas Stories of Charles Dickens

A Christmas Carol was a financial success for Dickens, the proceeds of which allowed him to focus on the great works of literature that came after. To follow up on this popularity, Dickens dutifully prepared other Christmas stories, almost one a year, creating a wealth of lesser known holiday tales. This collection compiles six of the more notable stories in his series, including "A Christmas Tree," and "What Christmas is as We Grow Older." This audio production is read by stage actor Michael Page, whose voice brings an emotional range and timbre to the sentimental stories, a perfect complement to Dickens's work.

Download!

The Victorian City: Everyday Life in Dickens' London by Judith Flanders.

Flanders is an expert in Victorian-era London having written numerous books on the topic which take quirky looks into the city's history. Here she takes on Victorian London from Dickens' own lens as a passionate walker of the early 19th-century London streets. Flanders shows us the Victorian Capital through its markets, its sewers, its slums and gin palaces, among other fascinating and unique facets each of which Dickens used to expand and personify his wonderful prose.



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