

A CHRISTMAS CAROL

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A Christmas Carol by Dickens

Story

As a fictional realist, Dickens likes to set the stage of his novels, taking maximum advantage of his readers' sensitivity to atmosphere. *A Christmas Carol* opens on an atmosphere-rich scene on Christmas Eve in London, seven years after the death of Jacob Marley, the business partner of Jacob Scrooge. Scrooge, who is aging and miserly, has just refused a Christmas invitation from his nephew, Fred, and has brusquely turned away two charity seekers, looking for donations to help the poor with heating. With reluctance Scrooge gives his clerk, Bob Cratchit, Christmas day off.

At home that night, Scrooge receives a visit from the ghost of Jacob Marley, who is circulating around the earth loaded down with chains and money boxes. Marley tells Scrooge that he will receive three more nocturnal visits, and that he had best pay attention to them, if he wants to survive.

The first of the nocturnal visits, that of the Ghost of Christmas Past, reminds Scrooge of scenes of his childhood and boyhood. Scrooge revisits his beloved sister, Fan, his own first employer, who treated him like a son, and Scrooge's now happily married fiancée, Belle, who had left him when she discovered that he loved money more than he loved her.

The second spirit to come by is the Ghost of Christmas Present. The ghost takes Scrooge to places where families are making preparations for Christmas dinner, and Christmas festivities. There is a visit to a lonely lighthouse, and to a miner's poor cottage. Then the ghost takes Scrooge to the cottage of Bob Cratchit, Scrooge's clerk; we are introduced to Cratchit's young son, Tiny Tim, who is seriously ill, and will not survive without some financial assistance. Scrooge meets two wasted specter children, named Ignorance and Want, and is told to beware of them.

In the final apparition, Scrooge meets the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come. We find ourselves looking at a Christmas day in the future. We are present at the funeral of a man who is not liked, and whose last rites are of interest only to businessmen, and to them only if they can get a free lunch out of it. The only people who feel emotion over the death of the unloved man, are a couple in debt to him. At the very end of the story, Scrooge asks to be shown any death at which there is emotion; the example given him is the death of Tiny Tim, whose family is mourning him. Finally Scrooge sees a graveyard with its tombstone, and the letters Scrooge. He breaks down weeping.

On Christmas morning, after this overwhelming psychodrama, Scrooge wakes up in a great mood. He goes about dispensing good cheer— anonymously sends a turkey to the Cratchit home, and spends the day with his nephew friend and his family, and in subsequent days gives Cratchit a raise and treats everybody like a worthy human being and neighbor.

A classic, and heart wringer, *A Christmas Carol* is the kind of soap opera that only Dickens could have raised to the level it deserves, a level at which it continues to melt hearts and change attitudes to our very moment.

Characters

Ebenezer Scrooge is a fairly successful small business man, who has it in his power, at least, to make life much more pleasant for others, like the charity-donation visitor, who knocks on his door, or his employee Bob Cratchit, who has almost no heat to work by in Scrooge's small office. Of course the drama, here, will involve the deep turnaround in Scrooge, after three instructive trips with Jacob Marley's

ghost. Only Dickens, say it once again, could sell us on the genuine joy compacted into this rather shmarmy optimism.

Bob Cratchit is a loving family man, torn apart by distress over the serious illness of his son. The old Scrooge mistreats him terribly as an employee; only later the new Scrooge becomes a great benefactor of the man.

Themes

The latent theme of this short story seems to be that a foundation of love underlies all of us. After all, if Scrooge can convert into a benevolent and fatherly character, anyone can.

Examples can be very powerful. The fact is, that Scrooge needed the abrasive experience of three tours with Marley's ghost, before he could be brought to tears, and turn his mind around to benevolence. The example of his own tombstone hit him like a ton of bricks.