

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

SCROOGE

Frederic Will, Ph.D.

Scrooge (in Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*) **disagreeable**

Overview Dickens published *A Christmas Carol* in 1843, at a time when, in the midst of the 'stable reign' of Victoria and Albert, British society was up for a reaffirmation of the 'family virtues'—especially around the Christmas season. Dickens had the sharpest of ears for such social trends—whether in the law courts, boarding schools, or labor workshops—and in the character of Scrooge he found a perfect candidate for conversion from skinflintism to love of man. The literary strategy caught on, and the first edition of *A Christmas Carol* was sold out by Christmas of 1843, its year of publication. The book has remained a world-wide classic since that time. Scrooge's terror-driven conversion to a generous human being caught the world's ear.

Character Ebenezer Scrooge is a miserly London money lender who works around the calendar—only Christmas day excluded—charging heavy interest for small loans to small borrowers. His partner Marley having passed away seven years earlier, Scrooge leads a (self-chosen) lonely and life, dining grumpily in his favorite tavern, where he reads the evening papers; otherwise he is busy keeping his bank-books in tip top shape, and giving orders to his patient and long-suffering employee, Bob Cratchitt. He might be happy in his selfish routine, were it not for the terrible conscience, after a life of greed, which has been brought on him by apparitions of the ghost of Marley, and through which he is in the end converted, into an awareness of his greed and into an opening of his heart.

Parallels Misers are natural targets for literary portrayal inside capitalist society, and in fact abound in post-Renaissance western literature. Many come to mind: Shakespeare's Shylock (in *The Merchant of Venice*, 1596), a money lender like Scrooge; Ben Jonson's Volpone, in the play of the same name (1605) a skilled bilker of dupes, and a not too subtle sensualist; Molière's unfriendly miser Harpagon (1668); Felix Grandet, the avaricious adorer of his gold pile, in Balzac's *Eugénie Grandet* (1833). To note; each of these hoarders is a patient accumulator with a quasi-physical addiction to the *piling up* of capital, and a short stack, when it comes to compassion.

Illustrative moments

Temperament Scrooge is generally to be found in his office, where he spends his time in money lending and in copying out figures. He is seldom in a good mood—he tends to rebuff visitors who lean toward small talk—and he keeps his quarters uncomfortably cold, especially in the outer room reserved for his copyist, Bob Cratchitt--so that he can save money on coal. A pervasive sense of damp cold follows Scrooge everywhere: 'he carried his own low temperature around with him; he iced his office in the dog-days, and didn't thaw it one degree at Christmas.'

Contact Except when lending money or reprimanding Bob Cratchitt, the old Scrooge—that is, before the conversion that sets in with the appearances of Marley's ghosts—has little contact with the outer world. (He does eat out every evening in a nearby tavern.) Typically that world is a cold and distant place for him: 'it was cold, bleak, biting weather, foggy without; and he could hear the people in the court outside, go wheezing up and down...' Passing people, for Scrooge, are simply potential money borrowers, and come to his door only for that purpose. After the Marley ghost experience these same people become living fellow humans.

Rage

Scrooge rejects all outside efforts to raise his spirits and remind him of the oneness of humanity. Carolers come to his door with their cheery song: 'God bless you merry gentlemen! May nothing

you dismay!' But Scrooge is enraged by this intrusion onto the solitude of his financial calculations. 'Scrooge seized the ruler with such energy of action, that the singers fled in terror, leaving the keyhole to the fog and even more congenial frost...' The keyhole becomes a symbol of the narrow passageway separating Scrooge from the 'outer world,' a passageway which he would be glad to see frozen solid.

Recreation Scrooge, of course, was all about routine. He was unmarried, had nothing to do with children, and had no friends. Evening dinner was his one regular concession to the 'pleasures' of the body. 'Scrooge took his melancholy dinner in his usual melancholy tavern; and having read all the newspapers, and beguiled the rest of the evening with his banker's book, went home to bed.' Reading the newspapers, interestingly, is Scrooge's largest pre-conversion conversation with the wider world—though by Christmas Day, after having been terrified by apparitions, the shortness of life and the terror of death, he has become a friend to humanity.

Discussion questions

Dickens was a sentimentalist. He laid it on thick. By stingy he meant really stingy, and by converted he meant really converted. Does he win your attention, in *A Christmas Carol*, or is he too poster-like?

It is said that *A Christmas Carol* actually influenced the revival of the 'Christmas spirit' in England and America? Does that sound plausible?

Is *A Christmas Carol* a 'religious text'? Is Dickens writing and persuading as a Christian or as a humanist?