

# A CHRISTMAS CAROL

## Charles Dickens

**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.

**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—anonously 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.

## Themes

**Love.** The message of the story is that love conquers all.

**Terror.** 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.

## 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.

## MAIN CHARACTER

**SCROOGE** (disagreeable)

**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* ‘religious text?’ Is Dickens writing and persuading as a Christian or as a humanist?