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Opening extract from

A Christmas Carol

Written by

Charles Dickens

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THE CHARACTERS



Scrooge

A mean, miserable, lonely old miser. Can he learn the truth about Christmas and about himself before it is too late?



Bob Cratchitt

Scrooge's poor office clerk and a loving father. Can he earn enough money to save his son's life?



Tiny Tim

Bob's gentle, frail son.
Will he live or will he die?

Jacob Marley's ghost

Scrooge's dead business partner.
Will his terrible warning come too late?





Ghost of Christmas Past

Why does this ghost make Scrooge weep with both joy and sorrow?

Ghost of Christmas Present

A cheerful spirit. Will Scrooge heed his warnings?





Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come

A frightening, silent ghost.
Can Scrooge change the dreadful future this spirit shows him?



A CHRISTMAS CAROL

'Bah, humbug,' complained Scrooge. 'Fools wishing me a Merry Christmas should be forced to sit on cushions stuffed with holly leaves or boiled with their own Christmas puddings. Go away and take your "Merry Christmas" with you.'

'But Uncle, I'm wishing you a merry Christmas in spite of yourself. Remember,' shouted Scrooge's beaming, rosy-cheeked nephew, turning back as he left the office, 'you are welcome to join us for Christmas dinner.' As the nephew left, his warmth went with him. Now the office was cold. Cold is cheap, and Scrooge liked it that way.

In the dim light of his inadequate fire, Scrooge muttered 'Humbug' again, and went back to counting his money.

At another desk in the same room, Scrooge's office clerk, Bob Cratchitt,



sat scribbling furiously. He had wished Scrooge's nephew a Merry Christmas, and felt afraid of Scrooge's reaction.

'And you, Bob Cratchitt, what right has someone as poor as you to be merry?'

'I'm sorry, Mr Scrooge.'

'I suppose you would like to stay at home tomorrow to spend Christmas with your children?'

'I would dearly love it, sir.'

'Why should I pay you for a day at home? Christmas is just an excuse for picking my pocket. I shall expect you in early the next day to make up for it.'

'Yes, certainly, Mr Scrooge.'

Poor Bob pulled his scarf more tightly around his neck and blew on his hands in a vain attempt to warm them. He returned to his work. The one coal that Scrooge allowed on the fire was dying, and with it the slight warmth that it brought.

But for Scrooge's clinking money and Bob's scratching pen the room was silent.

Clang! The bell above the door clanged its cheerless clang, announcing the arrival of another unwelcome visitor.

'Merry Christmas, sir,' said a portly smiling gentleman.

'Is it?' muttered Scrooge.

'It certainly should be, sir. Christmas is a time for goodness, for generous giving. I am collecting for homeless children, that they might be sheltered and fed this Christmas.'

'What!' exclaimed Scrooge, 'Are there no prisons, no workhouses to do this job?'

'Unfortunately, sir, there are plenty of both.'

'Then the beggars have no need of my charity,' grumbled Scrooge. His cold hands ushered the stunned gentleman back out through the door, the bell clanging farewell.

Bob coughed and rubbed his hands together. His employer was a grasping, scraping, selfish, cold old sinner, hard and sharp, and very lonely.

As Bob reached for a new coal for the fire, Scrooge snapped at him. 'Go on then. Go and join the other fools out there.'

'Thank you, sir,' Bob scuttled to the door, hurriedly putting on his coat before

Scrooge could change his mind. 'And a Merry Christm—'

'Go!' shouted Scrooge. 'Humbug,' he muttered as the clanging bell echoed his loneliness.

The fire dead, the candle extinguished, and the cashbox firmly locked, Scrooge pulled the door closed behind him as he stepped out into the street. He looked up at the sign above the shop door – 'Scrooge and Marley' it said, even though Jacob Marley had been dead seven years. Scrooge hadn't bothered to paint out the 'Marley' – it would cost money for someone to do it. Sometimes people new to the business called Scrooge 'Scrooge', and sometimes 'Marley', but he answered to both names. It was all the same to him. What was not in doubt, however, was that Marley was dead, utterly dead, dead as a doornail. Scrooge, the sole mourner at his funeral, had seen his coffin lowered into the ground.

Swiftly kissing every Cratchitt on the cheek, he pranced lightly out of the door in his stockinged feet. As he left, he called back into the house, 'Merry Christmas! God bless you all!'

'God bless us every one,' replied Tiny Tim.



TAKING THINGS FURTHER

The real read

This *Real Read* version of *A Christmas Carol* is a retelling of Charles Dickens' magnificent work. If you would like to read the full novel in all its original splendour, many complete editions are available, from bargain paperbacks to beautifully bound hardbacks. You may well find a copy in your local charity shop.

Filling in the spaces

The loss of so many of Charles Dickens' original words is a sad but necessary part of the shortening process. We have had to make some difficult decisions, omitting subplots and details, some important, some less so, but all interesting. We have also, at times, taken the liberty of combining two events into one, or of giving a character words or actions that originally belong to another. The points below will fill in some of the gaps, but nothing can beat the original.

- After seeing Marley's face in the doorknocker, Scrooge sees it again in a carving on his mantelpiece.
- When the Ghost of Christmas Past takes Scrooge to visit his school, there is another classroom scene. We see a young Scrooge all alone at Christmas, reading books. His loneliness is evident when he treats the characters in his books as his friends.
- The Ghost of Christmas Present takes Scrooge to see his former fiancée, Belle, and her husband. Her husband says that he saw Scrooge in the street that day, and tells Belle that Scrooge is a lonely man.
- The Ghost of Christmas Present takes Scrooge to see his nephew Fred's party. The scene is one of great enjoyment: fun, games, flirtation and an engagement. Scrooge enjoys the party, but cannot be seen by the others.

- The businessmen who refer to Scrooge's death did not witness his servants sharing his possessions.
- Scrooge is shown poor people, in a poor alleyway, comparing the goods they stole from his house and attempting to sell them.
- Scrooge sees some people who owed someone money expressing relief at his death.
- On Christmas Day, Scrooge apologises to the man who asked for charity at the beginning of the novel. He sends a turkey to Bob's house and attends his nephew's party.
- The following day, in his office, he promises Bob a pay rise and says that he will help his family.
- At some time in the future we see Scrooge enjoying spending time with Bob's family.



Back in time

The population of Victorian London was increasing rapidly, partly due to immigrants from Ireland who were escaping the potato famine, and partly from migration from the countryside caused by the industrial revolution. This made it very difficult to find work. People like Bob Cratchitt were therefore paid very low wages – barely enough to live on.

Many in London were living in great poverty. Whilst the wealthy made more and more money, the poor died of disease and starvation. Many people who were reasonably well off, like Scrooge, felt that poverty was a sign of weakness or laziness. The Poor Laws of 1834 stated that people could only receive assistance from the state if they lived and worked in workhouses. Debtors were put in prison. Remember Scrooge's comment to the man collecting for charity?

Charles Dickens experienced poverty at first hand – his father was imprisoned for debt and the young Charles made to work in a warehouse. These experiences affected him deeply.

Unlike Scrooge, some Victorians were concerned by this poverty and devoted themselves to helping others. Dr Barnardo set up his first school in 1870, twenty-seven years after the first publication of *A Christmas Carol*.

Ghost stories became very popular in Victorian times. New capabilities of the human mind were being explored and discovered. Many of these advances must have amazed people. They probably felt that if there was a lot about the natural world that was beyond their knowledge or understanding, the same could be true of the supernatural world.

Charles Dickens played a central role in exploring the idea of the supernatural in Victorian literature. Whilst it greatly interested him, he urged critical investigation rather than unthinking belief.

Finding out more

We recommend the following books and websites to gain a greater understanding of Charles Dickens' and Scrooge's London:

Books

- Terry Deary, *Loathsome London* (Horrible Histories), Scholastic, 2005.
- Terry Deary, *Vile Victorians* (Horrible Histories), Scholastic, 1994.
- *Victorian London,* Watling Street Publishing, 2005.
- Ann Kramer, *Victorians* (Eyewitness Guides), Dorling Kindersley, 1998.
- Peter Ackroyd, *Dickens*, BBC, 2003.

Websites

- www.victorianweb.org

Scholarly information on all aspects of Victorian life, including literature, history and culture.

- www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/victorians

The BBC's interactive site about Victorian Britain, with a wide range of information and activities for all ages.

- www.dickensmuseum.com

Home of the Dickens Museum in London, with details about exhibits, events and lots of helpful links.

- www.dickensworld.co.uk

Dickens World, based in Chatham in Kent, is a themed visitor complex featuring the life, books and times of Charles Dickens.

- www.charlesdickenspage.com

A labour of love dedicated to Dickens, with information about his life and his novels. Many useful links.

- www.barnardos.org.uk/who_we_are/history.htm

An interesting description of the conditions in Victorian London that inspired Dr Barnardo to devote his life to helping poor children.

Food for thought

Here are some things to think about if you are reading *A Christmas Carol* alone, or ideas for discussion if you are reading it with friends.

In retelling *A Christmas Carol* we have tried to recreate, as accurately as possible, Dickens' original plot and characters. We have also tried to imitate aspects of his style. Remember, however, that this is not the original work; thinking about the points below, therefore, can help you begin to understand Charles Dickens' craft. To move forward from here, turn to the full-length version of *A Christmas Carol* and lose yourself in his wonderful storytelling.

Starting points

- How do you feel about Scrooge at the beginning of the book?
- What clues are there that Scrooge has not always been a miser?

- Which ghost do you find the most frightening? Why?
- Which experiences do you think affect Scrooge the most? Why do you think this?
- What do you think Scrooge has learned by the end of the story?
- Which description of Christmas do you like best?

Themes

What do you think Charles Dickens is saying about the following themes in *A Christmas Carol*

- Christmas
- poverty
- society
- family life
- charity

Style

Can you find paragraphs containing examples of the following?

- descriptions of setting and atmosphere
- the use of simile, onomatopoeia and personification to enhance description
- emotive writing
- humour
- the use of a very simple sentence to achieve a particular effect

Look closely at how these paragraphs are written. What do you notice? Can you write a paragraph in the same style?

