



## ABOUT "A CHRISTMAS CAROL"

Adapted from Wikipedia: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A\\_Christmas\\_Carol](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Christmas_Carol)

***A Christmas Carol*** (originally, ***A Christmas Carol in Prose, Being a Ghost Story of Christmas***) is a novella by English author Charles Dickens about the curmudgeonly miser Ebenezer Scrooge, and his secular conversion and redemption after being visited by four ghosts on Christmas Eve. The book was first published on December 19, 1843 with illustrations by John Leech, and quickly met with commercial success and critical acclaim. The tale has been viewed as an indictment of nineteenth-century industrial capitalism and has been credited with returning the Christmas holiday to one of merriment and festivity in Britain and America after a period of sobriety and somberness. *A Christmas Carol* remains popular, has never been out of print and has been adapted to film, opera, and other media.

The principal forces that shaped *A Christmas Carol* were the profoundly humiliating experiences of the author's childhood—when Dickens was 12, his father was put into debtors' prison. While the rest of the family moved into the prison, Charles was forced to take lodgings nearby, pawn his books, leave school, and work in a shoe polish factory. It was then that Dickens began observing the lives of men, women, and children in the most impoverished areas of London, witnessing the social injustices they suffered.

His sympathies grew over the decades; in early 1843, the year *A Christmas Carol* was written, Dickens toured the Cornish tin mines where he saw children working in the most appalling conditions. He also visited the Field Lane Ragged School, one of several London schools set up for the education of the capital's half-starved, illiterate street children. In May 1843, he planned to publish an inexpensive political pamphlet tentatively titled, "An Appeal to the People of England, on behalf of the Poor Man's Child" but changed his mind, deferring the pamphlet's production until the end of the year. The pamphlet would become *A Christmas Carol*. Dickens began *Carol* in October 1843, and completed the book in six weeks.

### Plot

The tale begins on Christmas Eve, seven years after the death of Ebenezer Scrooge's business partner Jacob Marley. That night the ghost of Jacob Marley appears before Scrooge and warns him that his soul will wear heavy chains for eternity if he does not change his greedy ways, and also predicts that a series of other ghosts will follow.

Three Christmas ghosts visit Scrooge during the course of the night, fulfilling Marley's prophecy. The first, the Ghost of Christmas Past, takes Scrooge to the scenes of his boyhood and youth which stir the old skinflint's gentle and tender side.

The second spirit, the Ghost of Christmas Present, takes Scrooge to the home of his nephew Fred to observe his game of Yes and No and to the humble dwelling of his clerk Bob Cratchit to observe his Christmas dinner.

The third spirit, the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come, harrows Scrooge with dire visions of the future if he does not learn and act upon what he has witnessed.

Crippled Tiny Tim does not die as the ghost foretold and Scrooge becomes a different man, treating his fellow men with kindness, generosity, and compassion, and gaining a reputation as a man who embodies the spirit of Christmas.

Scrooge's redemption underscores the conservative, individualistic, and patriarchal aspects of Dickens's *Carol* philosophy, which depended on a more fortunate individual willingly looking after a less fortunate one (who had demonstrated his worthiness to receive such attention). Government was not called upon to effect change in an economy that created extremes of wealth and poverty, but personal moral conscience and individual action were expected to do so.

Modestly priced at five shillings, the first run of 6,000 copies sold out by Christmas Eve and the book continued to sell well into the New Year. The book was a huge artistic success with most critics in generous and kind moods. The tale gave Dickens's career a much needed boost after the fiasco of his disappointing previous novel, *Martin Chuzzlewit*.

### **Critical reception**

The book received immediate critical acclaim. The Athenaeum declared it, "A tale to make the reader laugh and cry—to open his hands, and open his heart to charity even toward the uncharitable." Poet and editor Thomas Hood wrote, "If Christmas, with its ancient and hospitable customs, its social and charitable observances, were ever in danger of decay, this is the book that would give them a new lease. The very name of the author predisposes one to the kindlier feelings."

Even the caustic critic Theodore Martin (usually virulently hostile to Dickens), spoke well of the book, noting it was "[...] finely felt, and calculated to work much social good". In the spring of 1844, *The Gentleman's Magazine* attributed a sudden explosion of generosity to the poor to Dickens's novella.

### **Themes**

Dickens wrote in the wake of British government's changes to the welfare system known as the Poor Laws, which required among other things, welfare applicants to "work" on treadmills. Dickens asks, in effect, for people to recognize the plight of those whom the Industrial Revolution has displaced and driven into poverty, and the obligation of society to provide for them humanely. Failure to do so, the writer implies through the personification of Ignorance and Want as ghastly children, will result in an unnamed doom for those who, like Scrooge, believe that wealth and status qualifies them to sit in judgment of the poor rather than to assist them.

## Legacy

Since its first publication, *A Christmas Carol* has had a profound effect upon its audience. A Mr. Fairbanks attended a reading on Christmas Eve in Boston in 1867, for example, and was so moved he closed his factory on Christmas Day and sent every employee a turkey. Dickens's joyful depiction of Christmas has its roots in the ancient Saturnalia, and in the appropriation of pre-Christian customs by the medieval church. The book redefined the spirit and importance of Christmas and initiated a rebirth of seasonal merriment after Puritan authorities in 17th century England and America suppressed pre-Christian rituals associated with the holiday. The religious and social implications of *Carol* and its depiction of Christmas traditions have played a significant role in reinventing Christmas with an emphasis on family, goodwill, and compassion. The name "Scrooge" has entered the English vocabulary as a synonym for "miser", and the phrase "Bah! Humbug!" has become a rejoinder to anything a listener thinks overly sentimental or ludicrous.