



GUTHRIE
THEATER

Play Guide

HOLIDAY 2020



Dickens' Holiday Classic

A VIRTUAL TELLING OF
A CHRISTMAS CAROL

DECEMBER 19-31

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The Guthrie creates transformative theater experiences that ignite the imagination, stir the heart, open the mind and build community through the illumination of our common humanity.

Guthrie Theater Play Guide

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It is a fair, even-handed, noble adjustment of things, that while there is infection in disease and sorrow, there is nothing in the world so irresistibly contagious as laughter and good-humour.

Charles Dickens
Stave Three, *A Christmas Carol*

IMAGE: "SCROOGE'S THIRD VISITOR" HANDCOLORED ETCHING BY JOHN LEECH FROM 1843 PRINTING OF *A CHRISTMAS CAROL* (PUBLIC DOMAIN)

About This Guide

This play guide is designed to fuel your curiosity and deepen your understanding of a show's history, meaning and cultural relevance so you can make the most of your theater experience. In the virtual landscape, sharing resources is one way to foster a sense of connection. That's why we packed this play guide with information, historical context and curriculum ideas for the K-12 schools who will be streaming *Dickens' Holiday Classic*. We hope you enjoy mining the depths of Charles Dickens' extraordinary story.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Thank you for your interest in *Dickens' Holiday Classic*, a virtual telling of *A Christmas Carol*. Please direct literary inquiries to Dramaturg Carla Steen at carlas@guthrietheater.org and education inquiries to Education Manager Siddeeqah Shabazz at siddeeqahs@guthrietheater.org.



IMAGE: WOOD ENGRAVING OF PEOPLE BUYING TICKETS FOR DICKENS' READING OF *A CHRISTMAS CAROL* AT STEINWAY HALL IN NEW YORK CITY, *HARPER'S WEEKLY*, DECEMBER 28, 1867 (LIBRARY OF CONGRESS)

Charles Dickens took Scrooge's tale of transformation on the road beginning in 1853, standing at podiums and reading a self-edited version of *A Christmas Carol* in front of large crowds from London to Boston and beyond. We are using a modification of Dickens' own performance script, so the synopsis for both the novella and *Dickens' Holiday Classic* are one and the same.

Synopsis

Ebenezer Scrooge, a miserly businessman, moves through the streets of London with tight fists and a closed heart. He shuns light and love offered by those around him and greets each Christmas with a scowl and a "Bah! Humbug!"

On Christmas Eve, the ghost of his former business partner, Jacob Marley, appears before him wrapped in the chains of his own greed and callousness. He warns Scrooge of the similar fate that awaits him if he doesn't change his ways. Before vanishing into the darkness, Marley tells Scrooge to expect visits from three more spirits on successive nights.

As promised, when the clock strikes one, the Ghost of Christmas Past appears and draws Scrooge through

past memories to recall the misfortunes, joys and mistakes of his youth. Next, Scrooge is thrown into the world around him by the Ghost of Christmas Present, who shows him the happiness and community of people in his life who celebrate the holiday with gratitude no matter their wealth or poverty. Finally, Scrooge is visited by the silent Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come, who reveals his dark fate if he remains on his current path.

Scrooge awakes to discover it's Christmas morning, and he's fully resolved to be a new man — a better man. He greets everyone with a positive outlook, begins to make amends to those he has wronged and embraces all the happiness his second chance brings. [G](#)

“This Ghostly Little Book”

Comments on *A Christmas Carol*

I have endeavoured in this Ghostly little book, to raise the Ghost of an Idea, which shall not put my readers out of humour with themselves, with each other, with the season, or with me. May it haunt their houses pleasantly, and no one wish to lay it.

Their faithful Friend and Servant, C.D.

Charles Dickens

A Christmas Carol, December 1843

[*A Christmas Carol*] is a national benefit, and to every man and woman who reads it a personal kindness.

William Makepeace Thackeray

Fraser's Magazine, February 1844

There was indeed nobody that had not some interest in the message of the *Christmas Carol*. It told the selfish man to rid himself of selfishness; the just man to make himself generous; and the good-natured man to enlarge the sphere of his good nature. Its cheery voice of faith and hope, ringing from one end of the island to the other, carried pleasant warning alike to all, that if the duties of Christmas were wanting, no good could come of its outward observances; that it must shine upon the cold hearth and warm it, and into the sorrowful heart and comfort it; that it must be kindness, benevolence, charity, mercy, and forbearance, or its plum pudding would turn to stone and its roast beef be indigestible.

John Forster

The Life of Charles Dickens, Volume Two, 1874



IMAGE: "MARLEY'S GHOST" HANDCOLORED ETCHING BY JOHN LEECH FROM 1843 PRINTING OF *A CHRISTMAS CAROL* (PUBLIC DOMAIN)

Nothing is more Dickensian than the Dickens Christmas. It is a Christmas in which hobgoblins are more apparent than the Holy Spirit, a Christmas which may seem to glorify the Altar less than the Hearth; and, since more households have hearths than they have altars, a Christmas which has dominated the home-festival for well over a century.

Eleanor Farjeon

Introduction to *Christmas Books* by Charles Dickens, 1954 edition

As much as *A Christmas Carol* is about spiritual redemption, it's about money and poverty and work. ... If Dickens bequeathed us a consoling vision of Christmas, he also bequeathed us an image of urban poverty. When we think of the working poor in a city — the evictions, the health problems — the image that haunts our minds is essentially one that Dickens first vehemently brought to our attention.

Jerome Weeks

"Turning Marley's Face Into a Doorknob is Just Problem Number One for *Carol* Adaptors," *American Theatre*, December 2000

About Charles Dickens

1812–1870

By Carla Steen

Charles John Huffam Dickens was born in Portsmouth, along the southern coast of England, on February 7, 1812, and was the second child of Elizabeth Barrow and John Dickens. The family moved frequently during Charles' childhood, and he recalled an especially happy time of several years in Chatham, Kent. The family moved permanently to London in 1822, and their finances deteriorated as John Dickens was never particularly responsible with money. At age 12, to help his family, Charles was sent to work at Warren's Blacking Factory, where he put in 10-hour days pasting labels on shoe polish bottles, sometimes working at a window in full view of passersby, for which he earned six shillings a week.

Several days after Charles started to work, John Dickens was arrested for debt and put in the Marshalsea Prison. As was the custom, his family joined him there — all but Charles, who boarded near the blacking factory. The dashed hopes, family separation and horrible conditions of this work experience stayed with Charles into adulthood; it inspired not only instances and characters in his writing but his advocacy to improve conditions for the poor and working classes.

An inheritance relieved the family's pinched economics, eventually allowing Charles to quit the factory and spend the next two years at school. At age 15, he left school for good to begin work in a solicitor's office. He also taught himself shorthand and began to work as a court stenographer. From there, it was a short jump into journalism. Although politics and the law didn't interest him particularly, he was fascinated by the people he encountered and began to write sketches of urban life, which were published in periodicals. In 1836, he collected these pieces into the book *Sketches by Boz* (Boz was the nickname for his youngest brother). Shortly afterward, on April 2, he married Catherine Hogarth, the daughter of his editor at the *Evening Chronicle*.



IMAGE: WOOD ENGRAVING OF CHARLES DICKENS, *THE ILLUSTRATED LONDON NEWS*, APRIL 8, 1843 (LIBRARY OF CONGRESS)

That same year, Dickens began writing *The Pickwick Papers*, a weekly serial that continued into 1837, which was met with enormous popular acclaim and solidified his reputation. The next few years saw a burst of activity, both personally and professionally, as he produced the novels *Oliver Twist*, *Nicholas Nickleby*, *The Old Curiosity Shop* and *Barnaby Rudge*; began to edit the new monthly periodical *Bentley's Miscellany*; and, with Catherine, welcomed the first four of their 10 children.

In 1842, Dickens and Catherine took a six-month sightseeing tour of the U.S. where his work was extremely popular. He met American authors Washington Irving, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and Edgar Allan Poe but raised hackles when he spoke out against slavery and pressed for an international copyright. (His work could be printed in America without permission or remuneration.) Later that year, he published his impressions of the U.S. in *American Notes for General Circulation*, which did not flatter the young country and soured his reputation there.

His next serialized novel, *Martin Chuzzlewit*, wasn't as successful as he hoped (despite sending Martin to America for a brief sojourn), so for both financial and socially conscious ends, he published a Christmas book in 1843. Taking inspiration from a short story he'd written in *The Pickwick Papers* ("The Story of the

Goblins Who Stole a Sexton”) and voicing his concern after reading a Parliamentary commission on children’s employment and visiting a ragged school for destitute children, Dickens wrote the now-iconic redemption story of Ebenezer Scrooge in only six weeks. He consciously began to mine his own life in writing *A Christmas Carol*, indirectly addressing his childhood experience in the blacking factory through Scrooge’s memories and experiences. The novella was published on December 19, 1843, selling 6,000 copies in five days.

He published four more Christmas novels between 1844 and 1848: *The Chimes*, *The Cricket on the Hearth*, *The Battle of Life* and *The Haunted Man and the Ghost’s Bargain*. The rest of the decade saw the publication of *Pictures From Italy*, *Dombey and Son* and finally *David Copperfield*, a semiautobiographical novel and Dickens’ personal favorite. With these latter novels, he combined the cheerfulness and sentimentality characteristic of his earlier work with more realistic depictions of life. By the end of the decade, his marriage to Catherine had begun to deteriorate, and the financial needs of his large family and travels pressured him to maintain his strenuous writing schedule.

In 1850, Dickens founded the weekly periodical *Household Words*, which he replaced with its successor, *All the Year Round*, in 1859. He became a champion of other writers, publishing their fiction, and continued to point out the social ills he saw around him. The novels of this period grew darker in tone and included *Bleak House*, *Hard Times*, *Little Dorrit* and *A Tale of Two Cities*. He also permanently separated from Catherine and fell in love with actor Ellen Ternan.

In 1853, Dickens had begun to give public readings of *A Christmas Carol* for charity. Five years later, he became a professional reader of excerpts of his own works and a special cutting of *A Christmas Carol*. Besides the substantial income these readings provided, they scratched the theatrical itch Dickens had held since childhood and allowed him to bask personally in his adoring public. In 1859, a journalist in New York suggested that Dickens undertake a reading tour to the U.S., but Dickens ultimately decided against it. Instead, he published an essay collection, *The Uncommercial Traveller*, and two novels, *Great Expectations* and *Our Mutual Friend*.

By 1867, Dickens had changed his mind about an American reading tour. He arrived in November for a tour that extended into April. Among the reasons that a tour appealed to him, besides a financial gain, was that he wanted to read his work for a new audience. He traveled to numerous cities from Baltimore, Maryland, to Albany, New York, performing more than 70 readings for audiences as large as 2,500 people. Whatever bad blood existed between Dickens and the U.S. since the publication of *American Notes* had evaporated. He was as popular as ever, and he later noted that the U.S. had changed considerably over the previous 25 years.

Although Dickens’ health had been declining and the readings were physically taxing on him, he gave a farewell tour in England in 1870 and started writing *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, which remained unfinished upon his death on June 9, 1870. Dickens was buried in Poets’ Corner at Westminster Abbey. 

CHARLES DICKENS: A SELECTED CHRONOLOGY

All titles are novels unless otherwise indicated. Dates indicate book publication.

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| <p>1812 Charles Dickens born on February 7 in Portsmouth, Hampshire, England.</p> <p>1822 Family moves to London.</p> <p>1824 Father is imprisoned for debt in the Marshalsea Prison.</p> <p>1833 Dickens’ first short story is published in <i>Monthly Magazine</i>.</p> <p>1836 <i>Sketches by Boz</i>, a collection of previously published sketches. He marries Catherine Hogarth, with whom he will have 10 children.</p> <p>1837 <i>The Pickwick Papers</i>.</p> <p>1838 <i>Oliver Twist</i>.</p> <p>1839 <i>Nicholas Nickleby</i>.</p> <p>1841 <i>The Old Curiosity Shop</i>; <i>Barnaby Rudge</i>.</p> | <p>1842 <i>American Notes</i>, a book of essays and observations from his visit to the U.S.</p> <p>1843 <i>A Christmas Carol</i>, a Christmas book.</p> <p>1844 <i>Martin Chuzzlewit</i>; <i>The Chimes</i>, a Christmas book.</p> <p>1845 <i>The Cricket on the Hearth</i>, a Christmas book.</p> <p>1846 <i>Pictures From Italy</i>, a book of essays and observations; <i>The Battle of Life</i>, a Christmas book.</p> <p>1848 <i>Dombey and Son</i>; <i>The Haunted Man</i>, a Christmas book.</p> <p>1850 <i>David Copperfield</i>; <i>Household Words</i>, a weekly magazine (editor until 1859).</p> | <p>1853 <i>Bleak House</i>. Dickens gives first public reading of <i>A Christmas Carol</i>.</p> <p>1854 <i>Hard Times</i>.</p> <p>1857 <i>Little Dorrit</i>.</p> <p>1858 Dickens separates from his wife.</p> <p>1859 <i>A Tale of Two Cities</i>; <i>All the Year Round</i>, a weekly magazine (editor until 1870).</p> <p>1861 <i>Great Expectations</i>.</p> <p>1865 <i>Our Mutual Friend</i>.</p> <p>1867 Travels to the U.S. and does a public reading tour for five months.</p> <p>1870 <i>The Mystery of Edwin Drood</i> (unfinished). Dickens dies on June 9 and is buried in Poets’ Corner, Westminster Abbey.</p> |
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A Novel Petition for London's Poor

By Jo Holcomb

In the spring of 1843, Charles Dickens began work on a pamphlet titled “An Appeal to the People of England on behalf of the Poor Man’s Child.” Although beloved for his fiction, Dickens was first and foremost a political writer and reformer.

Not long after conceiving the idea for his political pamphlet, he changed course. In October 1843, he began writing *A Christmas Carol* and finished it in six weeks. Truth be told, Dickens was in a bit of a financial crisis himself. He was 31, already raising four (of what would be 10) children and the returns from his recent serial, *Martin Chuzzlewit*, were disappointing. He “dashed off” *Carol*, and it was published on December 19, 1843 — just in time for late holiday sales and the Dickens’ family Christmas.

The fact that Dickens considered income when writing *Carol* should in no way diminish his own commitment to social reform and his arguments on behalf of the poor. The realities of his own life led him to recognize the serious need for reforms that would provide more comprehensive care for the poor — particularly the children of poverty. As a child, Dickens experienced the fear and uncertainty of his family’s diminishing resources. His father was sent to prison for not paying his debts, and the rest of the family joined him there with the exception of 12-year-old Charles, who was left behind to earn his keep at Warren’s Blacking Factory putting labels on pots of blacking boot polish.

As an adult, having pulled himself out of the mire of poverty, Dickens never forgot the experience of his youth and, in many ways, continued to be damaged by it. His writing would reflect his memories, as evidenced in the hard road of *Oliver Twist* or the semiautobiographical *David Copperfield*. By the year he wrote *Carol*, child labor in Great Britain had reached a critical tipping point. Children who didn’t attend school worked in factories, mines, shipyards, construction or any number of menial jobs. Many



IMAGE: SKETCH BY FRED BARNARD FROM *THE LIFE OF CHARLES DICKENS* BY JOHN FORSTER

children began working at age 3 in some of the most dangerous places, averaging 16 hours of hard labor a day. Life expectancy was low, as they rarely lived beyond their mid-20s.

In Dickens’ day, only a fraction of the population received a formal education and thousands of children in London didn’t attend school of any kind. “Ragged schools” were established by charity institutions to provide a free, rudimentary education for destitute children.

Leading up to the novella’s writing, Dickens was particularly struck by two factors directly related to the treatment of poor children. Earlier in 1843, he had read a government report on child labor with statistics that were supported by interviews with child laborers. He learned that girls who sewed for a new market of the middle class were housed above the factory floor and worked 16-hour days, much like Martha Cratchit. Another report revealed that 8-year-olds dragged coal carts through underground tunnels for 11 hours a day. Sadly, these stories represented a norm — not an exception.

Dickens also visited the Field Lane ragged school at the behest of a friend and philanthropist, which further incited Dickens to take action with his pen. He was sickened by what he called the “atmosphere of taint and dirt and pestilence.” In *Carol*, Dickens made a plea for the poor by writing about the living and education situations for poor children and adults alike and contrasting it to the grasping Scrooge — an attempt to reveal not only the need for Scrooge’s reclamation but the need for a radical change of heart across London’s entire population. 



IMAGE: "MR. FEZZIWIG'S BALL" HAND-COLORED ETCHING BY JOHN LEECH FROM 1843 PRINTING OF A CHRISTMAS CAROL (PUBLIC DOMAIN)

Dickens and the Christmas Tradition

By Matt McGeachy

It is often said that Dickens “invented” modern Christmas. While this may be a slight exaggeration, it is no exaggeration to suggest that he radically shaped — and continues to shape — the way we celebrate Christmas today.

The historical Christmas origin tale is generally well known: Christian belief mixed in with the Roman traditions of Saturnalia, the Scandinavian Yule traditions of feasting and merriment and a mixture

of northern European cuisines — combined with a heady mixture of North American commercialism. But it was not always this way, and Dickens is largely responsible for the festive, family-oriented celebration we know today.

There is no date given in the Christian *Bible* for the birth of Jesus, but beginning in late antiquity and continuing through the Middle Ages, the Feast of the Nativity was usually celebrated on December 25.

In the early Middle Ages, Advent was a time of general merriment. Harvest festivals, feasting and revelry began on the Feast of St. Martin de Tours on November 11 and lasted for 40 days. When Charlemagne was crowned Holy Roman Emperor on Christmas Day 800 A.D., the actual celebration on December 25 gained greater prominence so that by the later Middle Ages, Christmas was the dominant feast of winter.

Christmas in the Middle Ages was a very public affair. Communities celebrated together, and it was a time to solidify relationships through gift giving. Employers and servants would exchange small gifts, as would landlords and tenants. On occasion, a manorial lord might give his manor the gift of a feast or some ale. All people of means would give alms to the poor. In England, where *A Christmas Carol* takes place, Christmas became a widely celebrated party with lots of food, wine, dancing and card playing.

Following the Protestant Reformation, the Puritans in England sought to eliminate the celebration of Christmas. Since it had no Biblical basis, they viewed it as a Catholic invention and decried the lax morality of drinking and dancing to celebrate the Nativity. Following the English Civil War (1642-1651), the Puritans effectively banned Christmas in 1647, which remained in effect throughout the Commonwealth and Protectorate of Oliver Cromwell. Christmas became legal again with the restoration of the monarchy in 1660, but celebration remained sparse, and even church services for Christmas were relatively poorly attended until the early 19th century.

Dickens' *Christmas Carol* has become such an essential part of Christmas that we can hardly imagine the holiday season without it.

Theodore and Caroline Hewitson
A Chronicle of Dickens' Christmas Carol, 1951



IMAGE: EARLY CHRISTMAS CARD COMMISSIONED BY SIR HENRY COLE FROM ARTIST JOHN CALLCOTT HORSLEY

Thus by the time Dickens wrote *A Christmas Carol*, Christmas was a fairly subdued affair. It was neither the community festival of the Middle Ages nor the important religious celebration of late antiquity nor the ribald celebration of the 17th century. But the tide was turning. The royal family began decorating and displaying Christmas trees — borrowed from their German heritage — and Christmas dinners became more elaborate and common. So when Dickens proclaims that Christmas is a “good time: a kind, forgiving, charitable, pleasant time,” he is hearkening back to a well-established tradition of merriment, charity and reverence, combining aspects of Christmases past.

Dickens focuses his holiday not in the commons but at the family hearth. It becomes a personal celebration and a time for reflection. Dickens both reflects his society's views about the importance of hearth and home as well as projects his own social conscience into Christmas. Dickens' Christmas is not solely inward-looking, portraying an idealized scene of Victorian domesticity; it also requires that each person admit that humankind is their business — it is an opportunity to make the world a better place. For Scrooge, perhaps Dickens' most famous invention, Christmas is an opportunity for rebirth. No doubt Dickens hoped Scrooge would be an example to keep Christmas in one's heart, always, and not to shut out the wisdom the season offers us. 

Edited and adapted from the Guthrie's 2010 *A Christmas Carol* play guide.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Celebrating the holidays in the midst of a global pandemic has many people around the world rethinking and reinventing their traditions. Therefore, it felt timely to consider how Christmas traditions evolved both during and since Dickens' time. As McGeachy points out above, many traditions associated with Christmas are not, in fact, rooted in religious practice, but rather in loved ones creating meaningful rituals around the hearth and at home. In that spirit, we wish you and yours a season rich with traditions, both old and new.

Dickens, Scrooge and British Diplomacy

By Matt DiCintio

Charles Dickens' relationship with America spanned more than a quarter century. It drew friends and colleagues into harsh conflict and, for many of those 25 years, widened the gulf that had existed between Britain and the U.S. since the Revolutionary War.

Dickens arrived in Boston on January 3, 1842, only 29 years old and already the successful author of *The Pickwick Papers*, *Oliver Twist* and *Nicholas Nickleby*. Upon that arrival, he was received as a pop star, not unlike four members of another British invasion in 1964. But by the time Dickens returned to England four months later, he had passed from youthful anticipation to swift and enthusiastic confirmations, and then to a bitter disappointment that was just as swift. Dickens thought to find in America the social and political correction of the ills he had spent his young career denouncing — the poverty, child labor, low wages and workhouses that provided the context for his successful novels.

By the 1840s, America and Britain had hardly become allies. Negotiations between the countries' diplomats were constantly renewed during much of the 19th century, and both militaries were in a permanent state of alert in case these diplomats failed. Arguments persisted over the Canada-Maine boundary and the lucrative lumber there as well as over possession of the Oregon territories. In addition, legislatures of seven U.S. states had voted to default on bonds, and, in so doing, they repudiated their debts to many foreign investors, notably the British. In 1837, a small group of Canadians attacked a U.S. vessel in the Niagara River; one American was killed. The U.S. blamed Britain for having provoked the Canadians; Britain promised war if the accused was found guilty (an acquittal came in



IMAGE: "SCROOGE AND BOB CRATCHIT" WOOD ENGRAVING BY JOHN LEECH FROM 1843 PRINTING OF A CHRISTMAS CAROL (PUBLIC DOMAIN)

1841). Also, the British still insisted, as they had done prior to the War of 1812, on searching ships at sea and seizing any slaves found aboard. The U.S., unlike many countries in Europe, refused to participate in the suppression of slave trafficking. It was against this backdrop that Dickens arrived in America. He was unaware that the Americans looked to him to be the supreme diplomat, capable of diffusing centuries of hostility. Those hopes, however, soon faded.

While Dickens was in America, he took the opportunity to campaign for international copyright law. At that time, virtually none existed, and it would be another 50 years before an agreement would be reached between the U.S. and Britain. As a result, Dickens saw neither penny nor pound from sales of his works in America. Before the first month of his visit passed, Dickens had already been severely criticized for his own lionization and branded as greedy by members of the American press for advancing the copyright effort. After all, any such law would take profits from American businesses and put them into British pockets. It was this criticism that prompted Dickens' change from hope to disillusion, and he told all in his *American Notes*, published in the fall of 1842. Unfortunately, Dickens' literary advisor and biographer, John Forster, convinced the author not to publish a preface in which he insists he applied his criticism objectively, but nearly apologizes for his harshness.

It didn't take long for U.S. publishing houses to pirate this work as well, and when Americans read it, they believed Dickens had come to America on a mercenary errand, only to record their country as a failed experiment in democracy. After all, the majority of the work is criticism, often petty, of American manners, and, more importantly, filled with brash condemnations of both slavery and the American press for condoning it. Moreover, just before *American Notes* was printed, the British magazine *Foreign Quarterly* published an anonymous article that attacked the U.S. press just as savagely. Dickens did not write this article, but a footnote in the *Notes* that praises the article, in union with the fact that the article was published before the book, was enough for American critics to suspect a conspired attack. They fired back for over a year in a series of malicious articles and letters to British critics.

Dickens retaliated; his honest (as he thought) criticism in *American Notes* rapidly descended into rancor. The journalistic bickering on both sides of the Atlantic was ever-increasing while he was writing *Martin Chuzzlewit* in 1843, and when sales of that novel began to slump, Dickens thought he knew exactly what would sell. He abruptly moved the title character to America, where he encounters severe caricatures of the habits and manners Dickens himself experienced not too long before. Through Martin, Dickens satirized the press (again), politics, Americans' unapologetic boasts of liberty, their Anglophobia and their commercialism (which, for Dickens, meant no copyright laws). The unwelcomed commentary in *American Notes* became abuse in *Martin Chuzzlewit*. The American public was outraged. Dickens, of course, still made no money, his anger mounted and the vicious circle went round and round.

American Notes had outraged U.S. critics and unanimously received poor reviews from British critics. Though *Martin Chuzzlewit* became notorious in America, no one was buying it in Britain. To regain his reputation, fortune and fame, Dickens returned to

To regain his reputation, fortune and fame, Dickens returned to one of his most popular novels, *The Pickwick Papers*, and lifted from it a chapter he would rewrite, hoping the seasonal appeal would help him recapture his popularity. He titled the new story *A Christmas Carol*.

one of his most popular novels, *The Pickwick Papers*, and lifted from it a chapter he would rewrite, hoping the seasonal appeal would help him recapture his popularity. He titled the new story *A Christmas Carol*. Unfortunately, Dickens insisted the book's first edition be published very lavishly and sold at five times the cost of his previous novels. The book was popular, but few could afford it. Nevertheless, not long after its original publication, *A Christmas Carol* was, like all Dickens' works, pirated in America, in less expensive editions the general public could purchase. The tale was sufficient for many American readers, and even some of Dickens' harshest critics in the press, to forgive the author his anti-American transgressions. A lack of copyright finally worked to the author's advantage; he was paid in public favor.

On November 19, 1867, Dickens again arrived in Boston. He was finally lured back to America by the promise of payment for a series of 80 readings to give throughout several northern states. By the time he left America the following April, he had grossed \$228,000, barely evaded arrest for tax evasion (the \$12,000 the U.S. government thought he owed was in fact exempt thanks to a tax law loophole) and successfully dissipated most Anglo-American hostility. When rumors of Dickens' return began to circulate among publishing houses, they frantically republished *Martin Chuzzlewit* and *American Notes*, both with new prefaces from Dickens, stating apologetically that the novel focused exclusively on the "ludicrous" side of American culture, while the travel journal was unprejudiced criticism, as he described in the first discarded preface. There was no need for the scouts Dickens hired to go ahead of him into Boston and New York City to ensure that he would be safe there; he was welcomed just as jubilantly as he had been 25 years earlier.

The reading tour was a triumphant success, and, despite failing health, Dickens was welcomed by packed houses and standing ovations. He read from his shorter fiction and from *David Copperfield*, *Nicholas Nickleby* and that "ghostly little book" *A Christmas Carol*. It was this final work the public most loudly clamored for, perhaps because of the humor and heart with which Dickens read it, perhaps because of its enduring message of hope and redemption, or perhaps because Ebenezer Scrooge was the first person capable of bringing Dickens to America, and America to Dickens, reconciling two nations along the way. 

A Scrooge Primer

| | | | |
|--|--|---|---|
| Avoid clergymen. | Borrow money. | Conceal your covetousness. | Distrust the distressed. |
| Emulate the opulent. | Favour fashionable frivolity. | Give nothing rashly. | Help successful humbug. |
| Invite invitations. | Judge poverty with severity. | Kick those who are down. | Lend to the rich. |
| Make mercenary marriages. | Never know the needy. | Order what you please. | Pay what you must. |
| Quiz the quite helpless. | Ruin rich relations. | Seldom believe anything. | Tell only others' secrets. |
| Undermine antagonists. | Vilify the unpopular. | Watch women warily. |  |
| Xtol elegant xtravagance. | Yield your convictions readily. | Zeal is very ridiculous. | |

As printed in *Punch* magazine, 1859.

IMAGE: "THE LAST OF THE SPIRITS" HANDCOLORED ETCHING BY JOHN LEECH FROM 1843 PRINTING OF A CHRISTMAS CAROL (PUBLIC DOMAIN)



IMAGE: WOOD ENGRAVING BY SOL EYTINGE FROM *A CHRISTMAS CAROL IN PROSE*, 1869 EDITION (THE VICTORIAN WEB)

Victorian Parlor Games

Charles Dickens writes in *A Christmas Carol*, “But they didn’t devote the whole evening to music. After a while they played at forfeits; for it is good to be children sometimes, and never better than at Christmas, when its mighty Founder was a child himself.” Along with music and dancing, parlor games entertained friends and family, young and old together, at holiday gatherings in Victorian England. Here are the rules to a few favorites, several of which are mentioned in *Dickens’ Holiday Classic*.

BLINDMAN’S BUFF

One player is blindfolded. The others spin them around, and then they scatter throughout the room. The blindfolded player tries to catch and identify someone. If they guess correctly, the caught player becomes the next to be blindfolded. For an extra bit of fun, players often try to trick, tease or confuse the blindfolded player during the game.

EDITOR’S NOTE: We asked Accessibility Manger Hunter Gullickson to provide some context around the problematic title of this game: “Taunting or confusing the ‘blind man’ in the game has some intrinsic cruelty that implies a person who is blind is a lesser person. In addition, simulating disabilities can reinforce misconceptions instead of helping people understand the richness of living with a disability. Although this game was commonplace in the Victorian era, we would choose a different name and/or game today to be more inclusive of people of all abilities.”

FORFEITS

Players surrender a personal belonging to a “judge.” In order to get their belongings back, each player must perform a task or forfeit. Forfeits may also be demanded in other parlor games if, for instance, a player loses a game or answers a question incorrectly. Some of these forfeits have included:

- Kneel to the prettiest, bow to the wittiest and kiss the one you love the best.
- Go to the four corners of the room. Sigh in one, cry in one, sing in one and dance in one.
- Spell E-b-e-n-e-z-e-r S-c-r-o-o-g-e.
- Make three people laugh.
- Recite a poem.

YES AND NO

In this game similar to Twenty Questions, one player thinks of a person, place or thing. The others try to guess what they are thinking about by asking questions that must be answered with a “Yes” or “No.” When someone guesses correctly, it is their turn to think of a person, place or thing.



IMAGE: "SCROOGE EXTINGUISHES THE FIRST OF THE THREE SPIRITS" WOOD ENGRAVING BY JOHN LEECH FROM 1843 PRINTING OF A CHRISTMAS CAROL (PUBLIC DOMAIN)

THE MINISTER'S CAT

Each player describes the minister's cat using an adjective that starts in the first round with the letter A, in the second round with the letter B and so on. For example, “The minister's cat is an angry cat” and “The minister's cat is an anxious cat.” Once every player has given an adjective, the player who began the round starts with the letter B.

A player is out of the game when they can't think of an adjective or they repeat one that was already said. The rounds continue through the alphabet until one player is declared the winner.

LA-DI-DA

Each player holds a walnut in their right hand, and everyone joins in the rhythmic incantation “La-Di-Da.”

First part: On the words “La” and “Di,” the players merely thump the walnut on the table in front of them. On the word “Da,” however, each player passes the nut to the person on their right.

Second part: Each player places the nut they received in their right hand. Everyone repeats the first part, passing the nut to the right and letting go of it on “Da.”

Third part: Things get more difficult now! The rhythmic incantation becomes “La-Di-Da-Di-Da-Di-Da.” Each player places the nut they received in their right hand. The nut is thumped to the right on “La,” to the left on “Di,” back to the right on “Da” (don't let it go this time), back to the left on “Di,” back to the right again on “Da” (don't let go yet), back to the left again on “Di” and finally to the right again on the final “Da” when the nut is passed to the right and let go of as before.

Repeat all three parts and move through the sequence without stopping, making the tempo faster and faster. If played properly, there should be a constant movement of nuts around the players in a counterclockwise direction, with each strike on the table in absolute time and a fluidity of movement that is a joy to behold. (In reality, there will be nuts flying all over the place. One player will inevitably end up with a huge collection of nuts, and the game will end in chaos, which is just as fun.) 

Discussion Questions and Classroom Activities

By Siddeeqah Shabazz

THEMES AND IDEAS

Discussion Questions

- What do you believe is the central theme of *Dickens' Holiday Classic*? In what scenes or actions is the theme most obvious? Which characters help express the theme of the story?
- Can you think of examples of other books, movies, stories, songs or works of art that have a similar theme? If you are familiar with other works by Dickens, can you find similar themes?
- Do you believe this story has a moral? If so, what do you believe it is?
- How does Dickens utilize character, plot, subject matter and narrative style to express these ideas and themes?
- Are there other authors or artists who come to mind that are concerned with the same themes as Dickens?

Classroom Activity

Place students in groups and ask them to create three to five tableaux that tell a story using one of the themes from *Dickens' Holiday Classic*. The story must have a beginning, middle and end. No words are to be spoken, but props and music may be used. After each group presents, take a few minutes to talk about the story and the theme being communicated.



IMAGE: "IGNORANCE AND WANT"
WOOD ENGRAVING BY JOHN
LEECH FROM 1843 PRINTING
OF A CHRISTMAS CAROL
(PUBLIC DOMAIN)

COMEDY VS. TRAGEDY

Discussion Questions

- Do you believe *Dickens' Holiday Classic* is a comedy or tragedy?
- What do these classifications mean to you? Which aspects of the story are comedic? Which aspects are tragic?
- Do you think comedy or tragedy is more effective in *Dickens' Holiday Classic*? How does one support the other in the telling of the story?

Classroom Activity

Individually or in groups, ask students to retell the story of *Dickens' Holiday Classic* as either a comedy or tragedy. Each story should be no more than five minutes and may be presented as a stand-up routine, song, dance, mime or story told by a narrator. The sky is the limit! The goal is for students to determine if the story is a comedy or tragedy and retell it from their unique point of view.

HUMBUG!

Discussion Questions

- What does the word "humbug" mean?
- Which words are modern-day equivalents to "humbug"?
- Thinking about Dickens' story, which aspects of the holiday celebrations does Scrooge call "humbug"? Why do you think he has such a cranky outlook on these celebrations?
- What events led to Scrooge's feelings about Christmas?
- Are there any aspects of the holiday season that you believe are "humbug"?

Classroom Activity

In this fun and rhythmic activity, students choose a character from *Dickens' Holiday Classic* and battle each other as those characters. Using only language from the 19th century, have students come up with clever wordplay to top their opponents. Think of fun pairings like the Cratchit kids vs. Scrooge, Marley vs. the Ghost of Christmas Past or Fezziwig vs. everyone.

THE LESSONS OF THE GHOSTS

Discussion Questions

- Each ghost reveals something to Scrooge. If you were visited by the three ghosts, what would they show you? What would they say to you?
- What lessons do you think they would want you to learn?

Classroom Activities

- Have students write a letter to themselves in three parts, one from each ghost, using the prompt questions below. Then ask them to seal the letters in envelopes and not look at them until the end of the school year (or longer).
 - What would you say to your younger self? What do you want your younger self to know?
 - What would you say to yourself now? Are there goals you would like to set for yourself?
 - What do you want to say to your future self? Who would you like to be in the future?
- Reflecting on their past, present and future, have students write a poem with three stanzas that begin “I was”/“I am”/“I will be.” Invite each student to share their poem with the class, and encourage them to use creativity, such as music or sound effects, to make their poem more performative.

ADAPTATION

Discussion Questions

- Adapting a novella for stage or film poses many challenges. After seeing *Dickens’ Holiday Classic*, how did the production use theatrical elements — lighting, symbolism, music, setting — to capture the spirit of Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*? How were film techniques — scenic cuts, close-up shots, camera angles — used to tell the story?
- When were the theatrical elements most successful? When were the film elements most successful?

Classroom Activity

Many TV and film adaptations have been made of *A Christmas Carol*. In groups, have students imagine their own modern-day adaptation and develop a few scenes that demonstrate their creative vision. Ask them to consider setting, characters and plot as they work. Then have each group present their scenes to the class and discuss the differences between the adaptations.

MUSIC

Discussion Questions

- How is music used throughout *Dickens’ Holiday Classic*?
- How does the music set a tone for a scene, advance the action of the story, define characters and contribute to the overall production?

Classroom Activity

In groups, have students pick a scene from the story and recreate it only using music. They can use music that is already made, create the music with instruments, incorporate objects found around the classroom or at home, or choreograph their bodies to create the music. After each group presents their musical scene, take a few minutes to discuss how the music helped tell the story.

THE TRIAL OF EBENEZER SCROOGE

Discussion Questions

- After watching *Dickens’ Holiday Classic*, do you believe Scrooge had a true change of heart?
- What evidence do you see that indicates this change will or won’t last?
- Do you believe Scrooge should be forgiven for his past? Should we forgive others for theirs?

Classroom Activity

All rise! In this mock trial of the Ghosts vs. Ebenezer Scrooge, students will be divided into the following groups: ghosts, Scrooge, judge, witnesses and jurors. Scrooge has tweeted awful things about people, publicly decried the holidays and treated his employees terribly. The Ghosts of Christmas Past and Present have brought a case against Scrooge, and the toughest judge has been assigned to the case — the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come. After hearing arguments from both sides and the testimony of various witnesses, can Scrooge win his case and prove to the jury that he’s had a change of heart? Or will he be sentenced to death? After the trial, have a group discussion about what the students learned from experiencing and observing the story through their various roles. 🗣️

For Further Reading and Understanding

BOOKS

The Annotated Christmas Carol by Michael Patrick Hearn.
New York: Clarkson Potter, 1976.

Charles Dickens by Jane Smiley.
New York: Penguin Books, 2002.

Christmas Books by Charles Dickens.
London: Oxford University Press, 1954.

Christmas Stories by Charles Dickens.
London: Oxford University Press, 1956.

The Lives and Times of Ebenezer Scrooge by Paul Davis.
New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990.

Oxford Reader's Companion to Dickens by Paul Schlicke.
London: Oxford University Press, 1999.

The Penguin Dickens Companion by Paul Davis.
New York: Penguin Books, 1999.

The Victorian Christmas Book by Antony and Peter Miall.
New York: Pantheon Books, 1978.

WEBSITES

www.stormfax.com/1dickens.htm
The text of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*.

www.charlesdickenspage.com
David Perdue's Charles Dickens page includes information on Dickens — on the page, onstage and in life.

manybooks.net/titles/chestertothe09CD-1.html
G.K. Chesterton's biography, *Charles Dickens*, 1906.

www.gutenberg.org/files/25851/25851-h/25851-h.htm
Entire text of John Forster's biography, *The Life of Charles Dickens*, 1872-1874.

www.ph.ucla.edu/epi/snow/1859map/
Searchable map of Victorian London from the UCLA Department of Epidemiology.

www.victorianweb.org
Site designed and edited by professor George P. Landow for Brown University as a resource for students studying Victorian literature.

ABOUT CHARLES DICKENS

Charles Dickens by Michael Slater.
New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009.

Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and Triumph by Edgar Johnson.
New York: Simon and Schuster, 1952.

Dickens by Peter Ackroyd.
New York: HarperCollins, 1990.

Dickens: A Biography by Fred Kaplan.
Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1988.

Dickens and Women by Michael Slater.
Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1983.

The Invisible Woman: The Story of Nelly Ternan and Charles Dickens by Claire Tomalin.
New York: Knopf, 1991.

The Life of Charles Dickens by John Forster.
London: Chapman and Hall, 1872-1874.

FILMS AND VIDEOS

www.imdb.com/list/ls003558245/

A list of films adapted from Dickens' novels and short stories.

A SELECTION OF CHRISTMAS LITERATURE

EDITOR'S NOTE: Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* is one among many stories arising out of the Christmas holiday. What follows is a selected list that may include many of your own favorites.

NOVELS, SHORT STORIES AND POEMS

The first Christmas, Luke, chapter two, *Bible*.

"The Legend of Befana," traditional European story.

"Baba Yaga," folktale, probably Russian in origin, 19th century.

"The Nutcracker and the Mouse King" by E.T.A. Hoffmann, 1816.

The Sketch Book by Washington Irving, 1819-1820.

"The Night Before Christmas" by Clement Clarke Moore, 1822.

"The Fir Tree," "The Snow Queen" and "The Little Match-Seller" by Hans Christian Andersen, 1845.

Little Women by Louisa May Alcott, 1869.

"How Santa Claus Came to Simpson's Bar" by Bret Harte, 1870.

Christmas Every Day and Other Stories by William Dean Howells, 1892.

"The Burglar's Christmas" by Willa Cather, 1896.

"Yes, Virginia, There Is a Santa Claus" by Francis P. Church, *The New York Sun*, 1897.

The Life and Adventures of Santa Claus by L. Frank Baum, 1902.

The Tailor of Gloucester by Beatrix Potter, 1902.

"The Gift of the Magi" by O. Henry, 1906.

The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe by C.S. Lewis, 1950.

"A Child's Christmas in Wales" by Dylan Thomas, 1954.

"A Christmas Memory" by Truman Capote, 1956.

How the Grinch Stole Christmas! by Dr. Seuss, 1957.

The Polar Express by Chris Van Allsburg, 1985.

"Santaland Diaries" from *Holidays on Ice* by David Sedaris, 1992.

Santa's Twin by Dean Koontz, 1996.

PLAYS

Babes in Toyland by Victor Herbert and Glen MacDonough, 1903.

The Man Who Came to Dinner by George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart, 1939.

Black Nativity by Langston Hughes, 1961.

The Best Christmas Pageant Ever by Barbara Robinson, 1972.

Christmas on Mars by Harry Kondoleon, 1983.

Reckless by Craig Lucas, 1989.

The Eight: Reindeer Monologues by Jeff Goode, 1994.

They Sing Christmas up in Harlem: A Lenox Avenue Christmas Carol by Eric L. Wilson, 2000.

Mrs. Bob Cratchit's Wild Christmas Binge by Christopher Durang, 2005.