A CHRISTMAS CAROL
A Christmas Carol
by CHARLES DICKENS
adapted by LAVINA JADHWANI
directed by JOSEPH HAJ
November 11 – December 27, 2021
Wurtele Thrust Stage

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Spirit, conduct me where you will. I went forth last night on compulsion, and I learnt a lesson which is working now. Tonight — if you have aught to teach me, let me profit by it.

Ebenezer Scrooge
in *A Christmas Carol*

**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 theatergoing experience. You might be reading this because you fell in love with a show you saw at the Guthrie. Maybe you want to read up on a play before you see it onstage. Or perhaps you’re a fellow theater company doing research for an upcoming production. We’re glad you found your way here, and we encourage you to dig in and mine the depths of this extraordinary story.

**NOTE:** Sections of this play guide may evolve throughout the run of the show, so check back often for additional content.

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**FOR MORE INFORMATION**

Thanks for your interest in *A Christmas Carol*. Please direct literary inquiries to Resident Dramaturg Carla Steen at carlas@guthrietheater.org.
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.

### Synopsis

Ebenezer Scrooge, a miserly businessman, moves through the streets of London with tight fists and a closed heart. He shuns the 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. Marley warns Scrooge of the similar fate that awaits him if he doesn’t change his ways. Before vanishing into the darkness, the ghost 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 heartbreak of his youth. Next, Scrooge is introduced to the world around him when the Ghost of Christmas Present 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 Future, who reveals his dark fate if he remains on his current path.

Scrooge awakes to discover that it’s Christmas morning — and he fully resolves to be a new and 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 offers.
Setting and Characters

**SETTING**
London, December 24–25, 1843

**CHARACTERS**
- **Ebenezer Scrooge**, a miserly businessman
- **Bob Cratchit**, his clerk
- **Mrs. Cratchit**, Bob's wife
- **Martha, Belinda, Tiny Tim and Youngest Cratchit**, their children
- **Fred**, Scrooge's nephew
- **Fred's Wife**
- **Two Collectors**, raising money for the poor
- **Jacob Marley**, the ghost of Scrooge's old business partner
- **Ghost of Christmas Past**
- **Ghost of Christmas Present**
- **Ghost of Christmas Future**
- **Boy Scrooge**, Scrooge as a schoolboy
- **Fan**, Scrooge's sister
- **Mr. Fezziwig**, Scrooge's former employer
- **Mrs. Fezziwig**, Mr. Fezziwig's wife
- **Three Fezziwig Daughters**
- **Young Scrooge**, Scrooge as a young man
- **Dick Wilkins**, a fellow clerk at Fezziwig's
- **Belle**, Scrooge's former fiancee
- **Belle's Husband**
- **Ignorance**
- **Want**
- **Old Joe**, a junk salesman
- **Mrs. Dilber**, a laundress
- **Charwoman**
- **Father**, indebted to Scrooge
- **Mother**, indebted to Scrooge
- **Turkey Person**, a purveyor of poultry
- **Various Londoners, Carolers, Party Guests and Townspeople**
“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

There poured upon its author daily, all through that Christmas time, letters from complete strangers to him which I remember reading with a wonder of pleasure; not literary at all, but of the simplest domestic kind; of which the general burden was to tell him, amid many confidences about their homes, how the Carol had come to be read aloud there, and was to be kept upon a little shelf by itself, and was to do them all no end of good. Anything more to be said of it will not add much to this.

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.

John Forster  
*The Life of Charles Dickens*, Volume Two, 1874

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  

Who can listen to objections regarding such a book as this? It seems to me a national benefit, and to every man or woman who reads it a personal kindness.

Novelist William Makepeace Thackeray  
*Fraser’s Magazine*, February 1844
About Charles Dickens
1812–1870

By Carla Steen
Resident Dramaturg

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*.

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.

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**CHARLES DICKENS: A SELECTED CHRONOLOGY**

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

- **1812** Charles Dickens is born on February 7 in Portsmouth, Hampshire, England.
- **1822** The Dickens family moves to London.
- **1824** Dickens’ father is imprisoned for debt in the Marshalsea Prison.
- **1833** Dickens’ first short story is published in Monthly Magazine. Sketches by Boz, a collection of previously published sketches. Dickens marries Catherine Hogarth, with whom he will have 10 children.
- **1837** The Pickwick Papers.
- **1838** Oliver Twist.
- **1839** Nicholas Nickleby.
- **1841** The Old Curiosity Shop; Barnaby Rudge.
- **1842** American Notes, a book of essays and observations from his visit to the U.S.
- **1844** The Cricket on the Hearth, a Christmas book.
- **1845** Pictures From Italy, a book of essays and observations; The Battle of Life, a Christmas book.
- **1846** Dombey and Son; The Haunted Man, a Christmas book. David Copperfield; Household Words, a weekly magazine (editor until 1859).
- **1848** A Tale of Two Cities; Little Dorrit.
- **1850** Bleak House.
- **1851** Great Expectations.
- **1852** Our Mutual Friend.
- **1854** A Tale of Two Cities; All the Year Round, a weekly magazine (editor until 1870).
- **1855** Hard Times.
- **1856** Little Dorrit.
- **1857** A Tale of Two Cities.
- **1858** Dickens separates from his wife.
- **1859** Our Mutual Friend.
- **1861** Little Dorrit.
- **1867** Dickens travels to the U.S. and does a public reading tour for five months. The Mystery of Edwin Drood (unfinished). Dickens dies on June 9 and is buried in Poets’ Corner, Westminster Abbey.

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Reprinted from the 2020 Dickens’ Holiday Classic play guide.
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 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.

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Edited and adapted from the Guthrie’s 2018 *A Christmas Carol* play guide.
CULTURAL CONTEXT

An Enduring and Changing Legacy

By Carla Steen
Resident Dramaturg

A Christmas Carol was published nearly 180 years ago on December 19, 1843. The story touched a cultural nerve then and has continued to remain a vital, relevant story for every generation since. The reasons for its longevity may lie in the story’s chameleon-like ability to be to each age what that age requires. Various aspects and themes of the story have resonated at different times since the 1840s. Read on for an overview of the novella’s reception since its debut.

1843

Upon publication, A Christmas Carol is reviewed to nearly universal acclaim. Second and third printings are required after 6,000 copies sell in five days. The novella has 10 printings by early 1845.

One thing that sets Dickens apart is that unlike a wistful predecessor such as Washington Irving, who seemed content to lament the passing of those grand and glorious celebrations of yore and the general malaise of the society around him, Dickens was convinced that he had the tonic for what ailed his countrymen. His approach was to restore Christmas, not lament its passing.

Les Standiford
The Man Who Invented Christmas, 2008
1844
The story finds success with audiences of all kinds and is almost immediately pirated. By January 6, Peter Parley’s Illuminated Library prints the first installment of its “reoriginated” version, and by February, eight theater companies are performing an adaptation of the novella, only one of which is sanctioned by Dickens.

1840s to 1850s
In The Lives and Times of Ebenezer Scrooge, Paul Davis notes that the original audience for the Carol receives it as a tale of their time, with the sections about Christmas Present, the Cratchits and depictions of an urban Christmas with its markets and street life of most interest. They recognize the Christian religious undertones in the story but mostly see it as a story accurately reflecting their own lives. The Cratchits and their plight are the heart of the story, with Bob sometimes displacing Scrooge as the story’s central figure. The spiritual power of the story is secular and sentimental — not theological.

Dickens’ story proved that urbanization had not destroyed Christmas. In the British imagination, Christmas was associated with the manor house, peasant revels and baronial feasts. ... Dickens’ story provided celebratory proof that despite dour dissenting tradesmen who condemned Christmas revels, the old Christmas could flourish in the new cities. Scrooge’s reformation thus became urban Britain’s counter-reformation to puritanical excess.

Paul Davis
The Lives and Times of Ebenezer Scrooge, 1990

1857
In July, Dickens reads A Christmas Carol for the first time to a commercial audience in London. Eventually, he edits a 90-minute version for these readings.

1860s
Before A Christmas Carol, goose is the typical fowl served for Christmas dinner. By the late 1860s, however, the standard dish becomes turkey. Scrooge’s purchase of the prize turkey for the Cratchits’ holiday dinner has profound influence on the goose (near disaster) and turkey (huge boon) industries.

1867–1868
On his second visit to the U.S., Dickens makes a five-month reading tour, with the most popular programs being A Christmas Carol and Trial From Pickwick. In total, Dickens reads A Christmas Carol at least 125 times in the U.K. and U.S., preserving his own version of the story and reaching audiences who may not have read the novella.

1870
Charles Dickens dies on June 9, 1870. In the latter part of the Victorian era, after Dickens’ death, the understanding and appreciation of the Carol shifts, with readings taking on more overtly religious overtones, identifying the Cratchit family with the Holy Family and Scrooge with the wise man making a pilgrimage to visit the humble child.

1885
The British weekly magazine Punch publishes the first of its annual parodies of A Christmas Carol, complete with illustrations that echo the original John Leech drawings, and uses Dickens’ story for social and political commentary. Punch’s satirization runs counter to most adaptations’ tendency to retain some reverence for the story, but this isn’t the last time the Carol is used for satire.

1900–1920
A Christmas Carol enters the public domain, and many editions are published with new illustrations. During his life, Dickens was frustrated with the lack of copyright protection for authors. With all strictures lifted, stage editions, music hall versions, audio recordings, satires and silent films of the Carol joined the litany of publications to make the story what Paul Davis calls “common cultural currency.”

Now a full generation or two removed from his death, Dickens is more likely to be remembered as the author of favorite childhood novels and characters; thus A Christmas Carol enters the realm of “children’s classic.” Critics and other writers associate Dickens and A Christmas Carol with childishness, a fairy tale with little appeal to the adult mind of the early 20th century. The fun and games at Fred’s party come to the fore as a model for children’s celebrations, and the scenes featuring children are emphasized.
1910
One of the earliest film adaptations of *A Christmas Carol* is a 10-minute silent film by Edison Studios with Marc McDermott as Scrooge and Charles Ogle as Cratchit.

**Post-World War I**
Fairy tale innocence ends with World War I. In the wake of so many “Tims” dying in war, scholars debate whether Tiny Tim survives in the novella (Dickens’ clarification, “who did NOT die,” was a late addition to the text). Some war-scarred cynics even see Dickens not as the “inventor of Christmas” but its destroyer, having stripped it of spiritual significance and leaving it mere function.

1930
Although the occasional version of *A Christmas Carol* draws parallels between Scrooge and the fat-cat capitalist and Cratchit and the exploited worker, they’re the exception, not the rule, during the Great Depression. Most versions lean into escapism and the fantasy of being released from economic needs.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt sometimes reads from the *Carol* during his Christmas Eve radio addresses, drawing lessons for his New Deal from the text (see sidebar).

1935
A pre-World War II film starring Seymour Hicks (who first played Scrooge onstage in 1901) emphasizes British unity and Scrooge’s isolation from society, including a scene of people singing “God Save the Queen.”

1951
A feature film starring Alastair Sim as Scrooge becomes, for some, the gold standard of film adaptations. It captures a post-World War II, post-Freudian interest in psychology.

A Christmas rite for me is always to reread that immortal little story by Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*. Reading between the lines and thinking as I always do of Bob Cratchit’s humble home as a counterpart of millions of our own American homes, the story takes on a stirring significance to me. Old Scrooge found that Christmas wasn’t a humbug. He took to himself the spirit of neighborliness. But today, neighborliness no longer can be confined to one’s little neighborhood. Life has become too complex for that. In our country, neighborliness has gradually spread its boundaries — from town, to county, to state and now, at last, to the whole nation.

For instance, who a generation ago would have thought that a week from tomorrow — January 1, 1940 — tens of thousands of elderly men and women in every state and every county and every city of the nation would begin to receive [Social Security] checks every month for old age retirement insurance — and not only that, but that there would be also insurance benefits for the wife, the widow, the orphan children and even dependent parents? Who would have thought a generation ago that people who lost their jobs would, for an appreciable period, receive unemployment insurance — that the needy, the blind and the crippled children would receive some measure of protection, which will reach down to the millions of Bob Cratchits, the Marthas and the Tiny Tims of our own “four-room homes”?

President Franklin D. Roosevelt
From a radio address on December 24, 1939

1962
An animated TV holiday special, “Mister Magoo’s Christmas Carol,” is broadcast, bringing a new pop culture flavor to the story’s “common cultural currency.”

[VIEW IT ONLINE](www.publicdomainmovie.net/movie/a-christmas-carol-1910)
1975
The Guthrie Theater produces the first of what will become 47 consecutive productions of *A Christmas Carol*. Adapted by Barbara Field and directed by Stephen Kanee, it launches a holiday tradition at numerous regional theaters around the country.

Late in 1974, when I took up my post as literary manager at the Guthrie, Artistic Director Michael Langham asked me to write an adaptation of the Dickens novella for the 1975 holiday season “as a gift to the community.” … We quickly determined that we did not want a Freudian *Carol*, an outer-space *Carol* or a deconstructed *Carol*. We wanted to take the source material seriously and play it straight. …

During the first few years of production, I used “bookend” scenes of the Charles Dickens family, and the author himself strolled among the players, talking to us, the audience. My dramaturgical reason for putting Dickens in the play sprang from my need for a strong narrative voice. How can you do *Carol* without starting with “Marley was dead to begin with”? Dickens wrote the book because he was pressed for money, but in the course of writing it, he underwent a conversion worthy of Scrooge. Creating the novella ended up giving him boundless joy, and it was fun for the audience to share this double reformation.

Barbara Field
*New Classics From the Guthrie Theater*, 2003

1988
Bill Murray stars as the cynical television executive Frank Cross in a film adaptation called *Scrooged*.

*Scrooged* is nothing if not contemporary. Frank Cross’ passionately delivered final speech, in which he endorses the power of love and the importance of old-fashioned family values, might have come out of the recent Presidential campaign.

Vincent Canby
In a review for *The New York Times*, November 23, 1988

1992
The film release of *The Muppet Christmas Carol*, starring Michael Caine as Scrooge, Kermit the Frog as Bob Cratchit, Gonzo as Charles Dickens and Rizzo the Rat as Dickens’ sidekick, becomes the new standard for *Carol* interpretations.

Perhaps in a full-circle moment (echoing the events that spurred Dickens to write *A Christmas Carol* in the first place), *TIME* magazine puts a caricature of Republican Newt Gingrich on its cover with the label “Uncle Scrooge” for a feature story about the incoming Speaker of the House’s political agenda.

So maybe all Ebenezer Scrooge needed was a spin doctor, someone who would warn him to stop calling the Christmas spirit “humbug” and reterm it “misguided compassion.” But Gingrich is right to be concerned about whether the GOP revolution is seen as spirited or mean-spirited. House Republicans have come roaring into Washington promising not just to remake welfare but to pull down the whole edifice of federal poverty programs. … But in their unbridled willingness to go after immigrants and the poor, the new House firebrands may be getting out ahead of the public mood.

Richard Lacayo

2019
A dark, dystopian TV miniseries released by the BBC and FX, featuring Guy Pearce as Scrooge, Andy Serkis as Christmas Past, Joe Alwyn as Bob Cratchit and Vinette Robinson as Mary Cratchit, brings the story into the #MeToo era.

This *Christmas Carol* has darker ideas for how Scrooge would maliciously dehumanize people, going so far as to get Scrooge verifiably canceled. One can’t help but think that a story involving him harassing Mary Cratchit was added in part because of a recent public reckoning with high-profile predators. It doesn’t feel out of place in terms of [Director Nick] Murphy’s relentlessly bleak tone, but the execution is tone-deaf (as is the handling of Scrooge’s own history of abuse), especially with its place in a story of forgiveness.

Nick Allen
In a review on www.rogerebert.com, December 18, 2019

CULTURAL CONTEXT

It is often said that Charles 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.

Dickens and the Christmas Tradition

By Matt McGeachy
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 poorly attended until the early 19th century.

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.

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

Edited and adapted from the Guthrie’s 2010 *A Christmas Carol* play guide.
**apprenticeship** — To learn a skilled trade or craft, young people were apprenticed to a master in that field. Their parents paid a fee to the craftsperson and signed articles of apprenticeship. The apprentice had to obey the master and keep trade secrets, and the master provided room and board while teaching the apprentice the trade. Most apprentices began their training between ages 10 and 14, and training could take up to seven years.

**Bedlam** — A famous hospital for the mentally ill in South London.

**Camden Town** — A northeast suburb of London. As a boy, Charles Dickens and his family lived there for a while after their move from Chatham to London.

**charwoman** — A servant who is hired by the day to do odd household chores.

**door-nail** — A nail used to stud doors to increase strength or ornamentation.

**dowry** — Money or property a woman brings to a marriage.

**humbug** — A pretense, sham or fraud.

**milliner** — A person who makes hats and other accessories. A millinery apprenticeship in Dickens’ day usually lasted two to three years.

**pound** — British currency is based on the pound. In 1843, one pound = 20 shillings = 240 pence. Equivalencies in today’s money can be tricky to calculate, but roughly speaking, one pound in 1843 would be worth about $1,100 today. Bob Cratchit’s weekly earnings of 15 shillings is worth about $850 today for an annual salary of about $44,000.

**prisons and workhouses** — Individuals unable to pay their expenses might be put into debtor’s prison, as Dickens’ father was for a few months in 1824. A person in jail couldn’t work to pay off their debt, but after three months, they could choose, if able, to give their personal property to creditors to get out of jail. In 1834, the New Poor Law in Britain established the workhouse system to provide relief to the poor. People had to show eligibility at a regional workhouse, such as being born or apprenticed in the parish. Because the goal was to keep workhouses from being flooded, conditions were made unappealing and inhospitable: poor ventilation and food, uniforms, separation of families and laborious work like breaking stones.

**pudding** — Christmas pudding, also known as plum pudding, is traditionally made five weeks before Christmas. Made with a mixture of fresh or dried fruit, nuts and sometimes suet, the rich, heavy pudding is boiled or steamed. Then it is kept in a cool, dry place until it’s steamed again a few hours before serving. It might be decorated with a spray of holly, doused in brandy or set on fire (or all three).
## A Scrooge Primer

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<tr>
<td>Invite/invitations.</td>
<td>Judge/poverty with severity.</td>
<td>Kick/those who are down.</td>
<td>Lend/to the rich.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Quiz/the quite helpless.</td>
<td>Ruin/rich relations.</td>
<td>Seldom/believe anything.</td>
<td>Tell/only others’ secrets.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Undermine/antagonists.</td>
<td>Vilify/the unpopular.</td>
<td>Watch/women warily.</td>
<td>Xtol/elegant extravagance.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Yield/your convictions readily.</td>
<td>Zeal/is very ridiculous.</td>
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Discussion Questions and Classroom Activities

THEMES AND IDEAS
Discussion Questions
• What do you believe is the central theme of *A Christmas Carol*? 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?

Classroom Activity
Place students in groups and ask them to create three to five tableaus (frozen poses that create a picture) that feature one of the themes from *A Christmas Carol*. 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.

COMEDY VS. TRAGEDY
Discussion Questions
• Do you believe *A Christmas Carol* 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 *A Christmas Carol*? 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 *A Christmas Carol* 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.

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 A Christmas Carol, how did the production use theatrical elements — lighting, symbolism, music, setting — to capture the spirit of Dickens’ story?
• When were the theatrical elements most successful?
• What do you feel is the central theme of this particular adaptation?

Classroom Activity
Many 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. Where would they set the story? Who would play their Scrooge? In what industry would Scrooge and Bob Cratchit 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 A Christmas Carol?
• 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 and sound. 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 A Christmas Carol, do you believe Scrooge had a true change of heart?
• How does Scrooge participate in his redemption journey?
• What evidence do you see that indicates this change of heart 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 v. 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 Future. 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

ABOUT CHARLES DICKENS

WEBSITES
www.gutenberg.org/files/25851/25851-h/25851-h.htm
The text of Charles Dickens’ A Christmas Carol.

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

www.stormfax.com/1dickens.htm
Free download of G.K. Chesterton’s biography, Charles Dickens, 1906.

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.

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 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 Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe by C.S. Lewis, 1950.
“A Christmas Memory” by Truman Capote, 1956.
How the Grinch Stole Christmas! by Dr. Seuss, 1957.
“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.
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.

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