
A Christmas Carol

By Charles Dickens, Adapted by David H. Bell

STUDY GUIDE



Welcome to the Alliance Theatre's production of *A Christmas Carol*, written by Charles Dickens and adapted for stage by David H. Bell, who also originally directed this production. This study guide can be used before or after the play and is designed to help incorporate the play into your curriculum. Happy Holidays from Alliance Theatre!

Synopsis

On Christmas Eve, the ghost of Jacob Marley, Scrooge's deceased and selfish business partner, visits him. He warns Scrooge about leading the life of a man of greed, and then proceeds to inform him that three spirits will visit him. These spirits provide him an opportunity to reform his behavior. Marley leaves him with the warning that Scrooge will roam the earth bound by chains for eternity unless he changes his ways.

The story follows Scrooge on a journey into the past, present, and future. The ghosts of Christmas Past, Christmas Present, and Christmas Yet-to-Come take him to different Christmases throughout his life. They veil his presence by making him invisible and unheard to the participants in each of his journeys. This allows Scrooge to observe his manipulation of the world and their reaction to his greedy actions.

He is reminded of his past loves and regrets as he takes the journey that will lead him to share with all of those who are embracing life already. A visit from Christmas Future is what solidifies Scrooge's transformation, because he learns about his lonely death and unappreciated existence. He realizes he can not change what he has done, which include foreclosure of the home of his previous employer, the jolly and generous Fezziwig, and his treatment of a young girl who would have been his wife. But he endeavors to change henceforth, discovering the joy of charity and humanity.

Charles Dickens



Charles Dickens was born in London in 1812, the son of Elizabeth and John Dickens. As a Naval Pay Officer, John Dickens was imprisoned for debt when Charles was a boy. Consequently, Charles was separated from his family and sent to work in a factory that produced shoe blacking, one of the most traumatic experiences of his life. By the age of fifteen, he had progressed to an apprenticeship with an attorney. A prolific writer from the start, Dickens' experience as a freelance and shorthand reporter gave him the experience to prepare him for a career as a novelist.

In the time before he wrote *A Christmas Carol*, Dickens received the opportunity to lecture at the Atheneum, a charitable institution for the middle class. There he spoke on the education of the poor, a subject he felt passionately about. From this lecture and a visit to the streets of London, his growing sympathy turned to the writing table. The result of that was *A Christmas Carol*. Though the book sold sluggishly at first, it went on to change the face of the holiday season. England once celebrated Christmas as a mixture of Pagan customs and Twelve Days celebrations. Dickens helped transform the idea of the Christmas season into what we recognize as such today.

Though his novels were generally popular successes, a string of less successful books prompted his publisher to threaten a reduction in his salary if he did not deliver on the next book. It was under that pressure that he wrote *A Christmas Carol*, a book he expected to fare better than it did initially. He expected his first royalty check to be about £1000, but it turned out only to be £250. Fortunately, the book caught on and has become the most celebrated novel of Dickens' career.

Charles Dickens' other books include *Great Expectations*, *David Copperfield*, *The Pickwick Papers*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, and *Oliver Twist*. Dickens died in 1870.

Adapting *A Christmas Carol*

David H. Bell, adapter and director of the Alliance's version of *A Christmas Carol*, undertook quite a challenge to put this play on the stage. The original story was written in narrative form. Although narrative contains some dialogue, the omniscient narrator clues us in to the world of the story. However, in a play, sights and sounds tell the story and keep it moving forward. Because of these factors, dialogue had to be constructed from the narrative version to create an adapted play.

One of the most original aspects of Mr. Bell's adaptation is his inclusion of the Victorian warehouse. The clutter of hundreds of repossessed items represents Scrooge's greed and disregard for his fellow man. This is an element of the set that hints at a detail about the story. When you first walk into the theatre, you will see the clutter of furniture, rugs, and other articles all over the stage. This indicates the foreclosed items.

Another interesting aspect of the scenic elements is the way the sets indicate different times and places. The play jumps back and forth to dozens of locations in different

periods of time. Scenic pieces fly in and out, as if by magic and help the audience know when the scenes are moving into different places.

The Industrial Revolution

The England that existed before the Industrial Revolution was a country filled with fireside entrepreneurs. Cottage industries, in other words, labored out of the homes of Englishmen. Working families invested in raw goods and focused on small-scale production. However, by the middle of the eighteenth century, a new work ethic was gaining momentum. This new direction led to the Industrial Revolution, calling for mass production in factory settings. Underpaid, overworked, and underappreciated personnel were subjected to unconscionable working conditions. The abuse of children for use in manufacturing was an alarming practice. Children laborers were actually sold, in essence, by their families to the factories that employed them; the child would slave away in the factory and their families would receive the child's salary. Many children tried running away, but most were caught and beaten severely. In most cases, adult factory workers could not afford to buy what they labored to make. By the mid-nineteenth century, the England of Dickens was intimately familiar with industry and the problems associated with it.



The children pictured were among the many employed by factories during the industrial revolution. Working conditions for children were often inhumane before child labor laws were passed.

Charles Dickens' London was one of the world's most crowded cities, grappling with major sanitation, corruption, and crime problems. The streets were horribly crowded with omnibuses, cabs, vendors, carriages, carts, businesspersons, and destitute individuals. In a twelve-hour day, between the hours of nine a.m. and nine p.m. 125,859 vehicles passed through the streets – and that does not include foot traffic. One could imagine how Dickens' impressions of the world and his expression as a writer was influenced by all the factors of his world.

Money, Money, Money...

Victorian England Money System

4 farthings = one penny (d)

12 pence (or pennies) = 1 shilling (s)

20 shillings = 1 pound (£)

A (one) guinea = 21 shillings

British money was written in the following order: pounds/shilling/pence (£/s/d).

Prices less than one pound generally appeared as shilling/pence (s/d)

American Money System

5 pennies = one nickel (.05 or 5c)

10 pennies = one dime (.10 or 10c)

25 pennies = one quarter (.25 or 25c)

100 pennies = one dollar (\$1.00)

The approximate conversion from one Victorian Pound to U.S. Dollar amount 2000 is...
One Victorian Pound = 100 U. S. Dollars (2002)

The number of servants a person employed signaled his or her status in the society of Victorian England. The basest of social climbers, wanting to be a part of middle class society, had at least one servant – the minimum required for middle-class standing. This person's living expenses were covered by the employer; however, beyond that a servant typically earned a meager sum of £10.00 cash per year. Although the wages earned by laborers ranged, the sum equated with basic survival was about £40-50 per year.

Food as Tradition

Victorian England embraced the preparation and consumption of food as part of their tradition. The play refers to foods like Christmas pie, roast goose, turkey, ham, minced pies with spiced oranges, turkeys, geese, game, poultry, brawn, meat, pigs, sausages, oysters, pies, pudding, fruit punch, strong hot gin punch, the dressing of a Christmas goose, pears, apples, nice Spanish onions. And who can forget the plum pudding? Delicate care and careful attention went into preparation of foods of an English holiday. Note this example in the making of plum pudding.



This picture depicts a Christmas pudding being served to an eager family. In England, pudding is not like the soft mousse-like dessert the name denotes here in America. English pudding is more firm and cake-like.

- "To plum" once meant to rise or swell as we see in the modern, "to plump." To early mild porridge or frumenty (sweet, cooked wheat cereal) were added lumps of meat, dried fruits such as raisins and currants, rum and brandy, butter, sugar, eggs, and many spices...made in large copper kettles and were prepared several weeks before Christmas. The making of the pudding was attended with much ceremony. The entire household was present and each family member took turns at stirring the thick steaming stew...the arrival of the plum pudding was the capstone at Christmas dinner, there was always room, no matter how full the stomach. (Page 68, The Christmas Almanack, Del Re)
- There was also a ring or thimble placed in the pudding and whoever retrieved it was deemed with the qualities associated with that object, i.e. ring = marriage. "Mince pies contain no mince meat and plum pudding has no plums, but the English would never let that fact stand in the way of tradition." (Page 68, The Christmas Almanack, Del Re)

Curriculum Connections

CCRR3. Analyze how and why individuals, events, and ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.

CCRR4. Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.

CCRR7. Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

CCRS2. Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

CCRS3. Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric.

CCRL3. Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening.

CCRL4. Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases by using context clues, analyzing meaningful word parts, and consulting general and specialized reference materials, as appropriate.

ELACC6-12RH2. Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary...

- of the source distinct from prior knowledge or opinions. Grades 6-8
- of how key events or ideas develop over the course of the text. Grades 9-10
- that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas. Grades 11-12

- **Discussion Questions and Activities**

1. Have you ever been to a large metropolis, other than Atlanta? If so, describe what it was like to walk on the streets of that city? What were vendors selling? What noises did you hear? What were people on the streets saying? How do you suppose life has changed in large cities over the last 160 years? How has it stayed the same?
2. Do you think that music helps to move this story of reformation and change closer to universal understanding? After reading the book *A Christmas Carol*, are there any places where songs are sung? Have you ever been a part of a chorus or caroling troupe? How does singing make you feel? Do you think that music would help to solidify the uplifting of attitude?
3. Write one short paragraph detailing an experience you've had and regretted. Why did you regret it? Did your actions harm someone else? How did that make you feel? Now write another short paragraph, but this time write it from the other person's perspective. How did they feel about what you were doing to them? Were they mad or hurt? How did they express that?
4. Do you think Scrooge could have had a higher quality of life, had he been more aware of how his actions affected other people? Do you think it is ever too late to change? Have you ever known anyone who has made the kind of life transformation that Scrooge did? How did they do so?
5. Bob Cratchit, with a wife and five children to support, earned only **15 shillings a week**. Use the table to convert the amount of Cratchit's weekly pay in shillings, into a weekly and yearly salary, of American Dollars. Make a one-week grocery list for Bob Cratchit and his family, with the approximate dollar amount beside each item. Do they need more food than they can afford?
6. Read the dialogue in this scene from *A Christmas Carol*:

Scrooge

Five coals, Mr. Cratchit?

Cratchit

Begging your pardon, sir?

Scrooge

I find you basking in almost tropical warmth, Mr. Cratchit, and discover five coals burning in our stove when three would have sufficed.

Cratchit

An oversight, sir.

Scrooge

The farthing cost of a coal will be deducted from your week's pay, Mr. Cratchit, and we will enter the ha' penny in our books as an oversight.

Cratchit

Yes, sir. Sorry, sir.

Scrooge

You may continue at your work, sir. And mind you, don't drowse in this stuffy heat.

(Scrooge crosses to his office and sits at his large and well-organized desk.)

Cratchit

No, sir. Thank You, sir.

Now, re-write the dialogue using words that are part of your everyday language. For example, if you call people by nicknames, or if there are certain favorite phrases shared by your group of friends, feel free to use them, however, maintain the essence of the scene. Did your version make more sense to you? Why or why not?

7. A costume designer is very important to any theatre production. The actors come on the stage, and before they speak a word, the audience associates certain attitudes toward them simply based on their mode of dress. Get out your pens, pencils, paint, scissors, and glue and prepare to be a costume designer. Sketch, paint, or make a collage representing Ebenezer Scrooge. Put his costume into the time and place of your production. (Your production doesn't have to take place in Victorian England, it could be in Japan, or even space.) Feel free to use symbols and colors that will speak to the audience about what sort of man he was. Would his costume change at the end of the play, after he has reformed?
8. Name your favorite holiday dish and describe the process by which it is made and presented. Are there any special rituals that take place? Are there assigned roles?

Other Resources

<http://www.helsinki.fi/kasv/nokol/dickens.html>

Pertinent information about Dickens, online texts, and outstanding links

<http://members.aol.com/mhirotsu/kevin/trip2.html>

"The Industrial Revolution: A Trip to the Past"

One of the best available sources for information regarding the Industrial Revolution because it is neatly presented and gives specific and comprehensive information on general and specialty topics.

<http://tqjunior.advanced.org/4132/index.htm>

This fun site has games and puzzles. It also provides the user with pertinent information and many useful links. The site specializes in the relevance of America's role in the Industrial Revolution.

<http://applebutter.freesevers.com/worker/>

"Life of the Industrial Worker in 19th-Century England"

A wonderful site with journals and documents that detail the working and living conditions in England during this time period. Maintained by Laura Del Cole

<http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/IRchild.htm>

Extensive information about child labor in England during the Industrial Revolution.

Books:

Ackroyd, Peter. *Dickens*. Great Britain: Harper Collins, 1990.

Brown, Ivor. *Dickens in His Time*. Great Britain: Thomas Nelson and Sons Limited, 1963.

Del Re, Gerard and Patricia. *The Christmas Almanack*. New York: Doubleday & Co., 1972.

Dickens, Charles. *The Christmas Books: Volume I: The Christmas Carol and The Chimes*. England: The Penguin Group, 1971.

Hayes, John. London: A Pictorial History. New York: Arco Publishing Company Inc., 1969.

Miles, Clement A. Christmas, Customs and Traditions: Their History and Significance. New York: Dover Publications, 1976.

Welsh, Alexander. The City of Dickens. Great Britain: Oxford University Press, 1971.