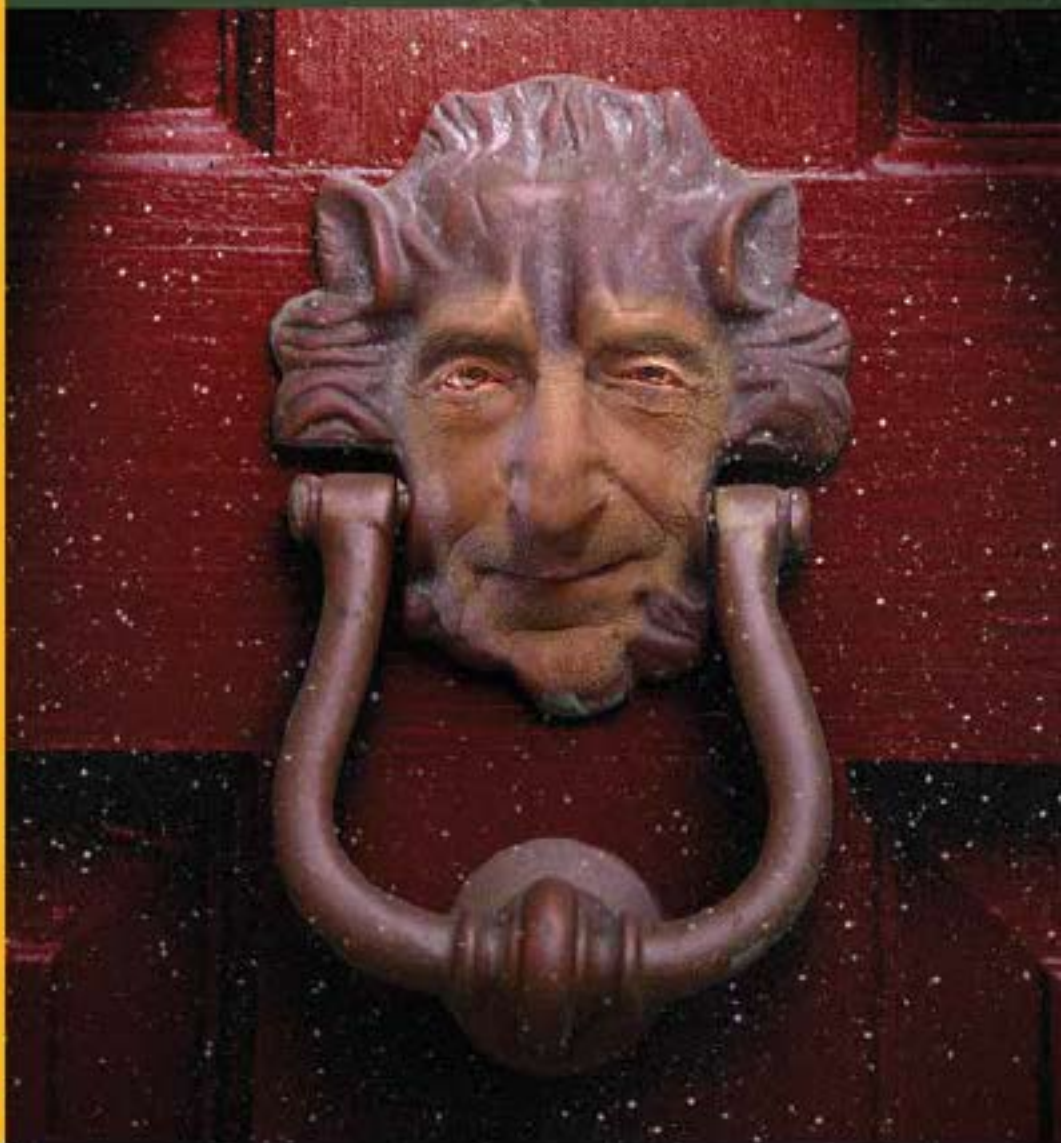
Prestwick House Literary Touchstone Classics

A Christmas Carol

by Charles Dickens



UNABRIDGED WITH GLOSSARY AND NOTES

A Christmas Carol

Charles Dickens

Prestwick House

LITERARY TOUCHSTONE CLASSICS™

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Notes

What is a literary classic and why are these classic works important to the world?

A literary classic is a work of the highest excellence that has something important to say about life and/or the human condition and says it with great artistry. A classic, through its enduring presence, has withstood the test of time and is not bound by time, place, or customs. It speaks to us today as forcefully as it spoke to people one hundred or more years ago, and as forcefully as it will speak to people of future generations. For this reason, a classic is said to have universality.

Charles Dickens

Portrait of Charles Dickens by Francis Alexander

Charles Dickens was born in Portsmouth, England in February 1812. His father, John Dickens, was a spendthrift, and the family moved frequently during Dickens' childhood. At one point, they lived in a tiny house in Camden Town that many people believe serves as the model for the Cratchits' house in *A Christmas Carol*. When Dickens was twelve years old, his father was sent to debtor's prison, and Dickens was forced to quit school and begin working. The sympathy he developed for the poor, especially poor children, is reflected in all of his books.

Dickens at the Blacking Warehouse. Charles Dickens is here shown as a boy of twelve years of age, working in a factory.

READING POINTERS

Reading Pointers For Sharper Insights

1. *A Christmas Carol* is arguably Charles Dickens' best-known and best-loved book for many reasons. To fully appreciate the book and understand its broad appeal, consider the following:

    a. Notice the **narrative tone** of the book, the mildly sarcastic, tongue-in-cheek voice, and the frequent direct address to the reader.

    b. Find the many puns and other wordplay Dickens uses to make the story fun to read.

    c. Look for the fairly obvious symbolism, especially in the three spirits' physical appearances:

        - The Ghost of Christmas Past, glimmering and shining (the past always seems brighter than the present), yet indistinct with parts fading in and out of view (memory is always incomplete).
        - The Ghost of Christmas Present is the cultural marriage of Father Christmas on the one hand and the pagan vegetation god on the other. Note his empty scabbard and his torch shaped like a Horn of Plenty.
        - The two children cowering beneath the robes of the Ghost of Christmas Present represent the two social problems Dickens believed were the result of humanity's greed, which if unchecked, would threaten humanity's future.
        - The Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come is silent, robed, and hooded like the figure of Death, the Grim Reaper.

d. Look for Dickens' use of stereotype and stock characters:
    - Scrooge as the typical greedy, oppressive capitalist;
    - Cratchit as the longsuffering, but faithful and good servant;
    - The Cratchit Family as the "noble and deserving poor";
    - Tiny Tim as the good, spiritually precocious Prophet-child;
    - Fred as the perennial optimist.

e. Notice how Dickens manages to develop Scrooge considerably beyond the stereotype, offering plausible reasons for his adult cold-heartedness and greed.

2. Pay close attention to Marley's prediction of when the three spirits will each visit Scrooge.

3. Notice how Dickens blends the secular, festival celebration of Christmas (traditional in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, but outlawed by the Puritans in the seventeenth century) with a more religious observation, thus essentially inventing the "modern Christmas."

5. Don't miss the richness of Dickens' sensory imagery, especially descriptions of food.

6. Consider Dickens' use of light and dark as images and possibly as symbols in the book.

7. Compare the original story with any of the numerous book, film, theatrical, and television versions and adaptations, and consider what each of them has *in common,* thus explaining the story's mass appeal.

8. Note the elements in the story that actually border on propaganda.

STAVE[†] 1

Marley's Ghost

MARLEY WAS DEAD: to begin with. There is no doubt whatever about that. The register of his burial was signed by the clergyman, the clerk, the undertaker, and the chief mourner. Scrooge signed it: and Scrooge's name was good upon 'Change,[†] for anything he chose to put his hand to. Old Marley was as dead as a door-nail.

Mind! I don't mean to say that I know, of my own knowledge, what there is particularly dead about a door-nail. I might have been inclined, myself, to regard a coffin-nail as the deadest piece of ironmongery [†] in the trade. But the wisdom of our ancestors is in the simile; and my unhallowed hands shall not disturb it, or the Country's done for. You will therefore permit me to repeat, emphatically, that Marley was as dead as a door-nail.

Scrooge knew he was dead? Of course he did. How could it be otherwise? Scrooge and he were partners for I don't know how many years. Scrooge was his sole executor, his sole administrator, his sole assign, his sole residuary legatee,[†] his sole friend and sole mourner. And even Scrooge was not so dreadfully cut up by the sad event, but that he was an excellent man of

[†]Terms marked in the text with (†) can be looked up in the Glossary for additional information.

business on the very day of the funeral, and solemnised it with an undoubted bargain.

The mention of Marley's funeral brings me back to the point I started from. There is no doubt that Marley was dead. This must be distinctly understood, or nothing wonderful can come of the story I am going to relate. If we were not perfectly convinced that Hamlet's Father died before the play began, there would be nothing more remarkable in his taking a stroll at night, in an easterly wind, upon his own ramparts, than there would be in any other middle-aged gentleman rashly turning out after dark in a breezy spot—say Saint Paul's Churchyard for instance—literally to astonish his son's weak mind.

Scrooge never painted out Old Marley's name. There it stood, years afterwards, above the warehouse door: Scrooge and Marley. The firm was known as Scrooge and Marley. Sometimes people new to the business called Scrooge Scrooge, and sometimes Marley, but he answered to both names: It was all the same to him.

Oh! but he was a tight-fisted hand at the grindstone, Scrooge! a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous old sinner! Hard and sharp as flint, from which no steel had ever struck out generous fire; secret, and self-contained, and solitary as an oyster. The cold within him froze his old features, nipped his pointed nose, shrivelled his cheek, stiffened his gait; made his eyes red, his thin lips blue and spoke out shrewdly in his grating voice. A frosty rime was on his head, and on his eyebrows, and his wiry chin. He carried his own low temperature always about with him; he iced his office in the dog-days; and didn't thaw it one degree at Christmas.

External heat and cold had little influence on Scrooge. No warmth could warm, nor wintry weather chill him. No wind that blew was bitterer than he, no falling snow was more intent upon its purpose, no pelting rain less open to entreaty. Foul weather didn't know where to have him. The heaviest rain, and snow, and hail, and sleet, could boast of the advantage over him in only one respect. They often "came down" handsomely, and Scrooge never did.

Nobody ever stopped him in the street to say, with gladsome looks, "My dear Scrooge, how are you? when will you come to see me?" No beggars implored him to bestow a trifle, no children asked him what it was o'clock, no man or woman ever once in all his life inquired the way to such and such a place, of Scrooge. Even the blindmen's dogs appeared to know him; and when they saw him coming on, would tug their owners into doorways and up courts; and then would wag their tails as though they said, "No eye at all

is better than an evil eye, dark master!"

But what did Scrooge care? It was the very thing he liked. To edge his way along the crowded paths of life, warning all human sympathy to keep its distance, was what the knowing ones call "nuts" to Scrooge.

Once upon a time—of all the good days in the year, on Christmas Eve—old Scrooge sat busy in his counting-house.† It was cold, bleak, biting weather: foggy withal: and he could hear the people in the court outside, go wheezing up and down, beating their hands upon their breasts, and stamping their feet upon the pavement-stones to warm them. The city clocks had only just gone three, but it was quite dark already: it had not been light all day: and candles were flaring in the windows of the neighbouring offices, like ruddy smears upon the palpable brown air. The fog came pouring in at every chink and keyhole, and was so dense without, that although the court was of the narrowest, the houses opposite were mere phantoms. To see the dingy cloud come drooping down, obscuring everything, one might have thought that Nature lived hard by, and was brewing on a large scale.

The door of Scrooge's counting-house was open that he might keep his eye upon his clerk, who in a dismal little cell beyond, a sort of tank, was copying letters. Scrooge had a very small fire, but the clerk's fire was so very much smaller that it looked like one coal. But he couldn't replenish it, for Scrooge kept the coal-box in his own room; and so surely as the clerk came in with the shovel, the master predicted that it would be necessary for them to part. Wherefore the clerk put on his white comforter, and tried to warm himself at the candle; in which effort, not being a man of a strong imagination, he failed.

"A merry Christmas, uncle! God save you!" cried a cheerful voice. It was the voice of Scrooge's nephew, who came upon him so quickly that this was the first intimation he had of his approach.

"Bah!" said Scrooge, "Humbug!"

He had so heated himself with rapid walking in the fog and frost, this nephew of Scrooge's, that he was all in a glow; his face was ruddy and handsome; his eyes sparkled, and his breath smoked again.

"Christmas a humbug, uncle!" said Scrooge's nephew. "You don't mean that, I am sure."

"I do," said Scrooge. "Merry Christmas! what right have you to be merry? what reason have you to be merry? You're poor enough."

"Come, then," returned the nephew gaily. "What right have you to be dismal? what reason have you to be morose? You're rich enough."

Scrooge, having no better answer ready on the spur of the moment, said "Bah!" again; and followed it up with "Humbug."

"Don't be cross, uncle," said the nephew.

"What else can I be," returned the uncle, "when I live in such a world of fools as this? Merry Christmas! Out upon merry Christmas! What's Christmas time to you but a time for paying bills without money; a time for finding yourself a year older, but not an hour richer; a time for balancing your books and having every item in 'em through a round dozen of months presented dead against you? If I could work my will," said Scrooge indignantly, "every idiot who goes about with 'Merry Christmas' on his lips, should be boiled with his own pudding, and buried with a stake of holly through his heart. He should!"

"Uncle!" pleaded the nephew.

"Nephew!" returned the uncle sternly, "keep Christmas in your own way, and let me keep it in mine."

"Keep it!" repeated Scrooge's nephew. "But you don't keep it."

"Let me leave it alone, then," said Scrooge. "Much good may it do you! Much good it has ever done you!"

"There are many things from which I might have derived good, by which I have not profited, I dare say," returned the nephew; "Christmas among the rest. But I am sure I have always thought of Christmas time, when it has come round—apart from the veneration due to its sacred name and origin, if anything belonging to it, can be apart from that—as a good time: a kind, forgiving, charitable, pleasant time: the only time I know of, in the long calendar of the year, when men and women seem by one consent to open their shut-up hearts freely, and to think of people below them as if they really were fellow-passengers to the grave, and not another race of creatures bound on other journeys. And therefore, uncle, though it has never put a scrap of gold or silver in my pocket, I believe that it *has* done me good, and *will* do me good; and I say, God bless it!"

The clerk in the tank involuntarily applauded. Becoming immediately sensible of the impropriety, he poked the fire, and extinguished the last frail spark for ever.

"Let me hear another sound from *you*," said Scrooge, "and you'll keep your Christmas by losing your situation! You're quite a powerful speaker, sir," he added, turning to his nephew. "I wonder you don't go into Parliament."[†]

"Don't be angry, uncle. Come! Dine with us to-morrow."

Scrooge said that he would see him—yes, indeed he did. He went the

whole length of the expression, and said that he would see him in that extremity first.

"But why?" cried Scrooge's nephew. "Why?"

"Why did you get married?" said Scrooge.

"Because I fell in love."

"Because you fell in love!" growled Scrooge, as if that were the only one thing in the world more ridiculous than a merry Christmas. "Good afternoon!"

"Nay, uncle, but you never came to see me before that happened. Why give it as a reason for not coming now?"

"Good afternoon," said Scrooge.

"I want nothing from you; I ask nothing of you; why cannot we be friends?"

"Good afternoon," said Scrooge.

"I am sorry, with all my heart, to find you so resolute. We have never had any quarrel, to which I have been a party. But I have made the trial in homage to Christmas, and I'll keep my Christmas humour to the last. So A Merry Christmas, uncle!"

"Good afternoon!" said Scrooge.

"And A Happy New Year!"

"Good afternoon!" said Scrooge.

His nephew left the room without an angry word, notwithstanding. He stopped at the outer door to bestow the greetings of the season on the clerk, who, cold as he was, was warmer than Scrooge; for he returned them cordially.

"There's another fellow," muttered Scrooge; who overheard him: "my clerk, with fifteen shillings a week, and a wife and family, talking about a merry Christmas. I'll retire to Bedlam."[†]

This lunatic, in letting Scrooge's nephew out, had let two other people in. They were portly gentlemen, pleasant to behold, and now stood, with their hats off, in Scrooge's office. They had books and papers in their hands, and bowed to him.

"Scrooge and Marley's, I believe," said one of the gentlemen, referring to his list. "Have I the pleasure of addressing Mr. Scrooge or Mr. Marley?"

"Mr. Marley has been dead these seven years," Scrooge replied. "He died seven years ago, this very night."

"We have no doubt his liberality is well represented by his surviving partner," said the gentleman, presenting his credentials.

It certainly was; for they had been two kindred spirits. At the ominous

Glossary

STAVE 1

Stave – a musical term, which comes from the word *staff*; it indicates an individual group of five lines and four spaces on paper upon which notes of a song are written. Another meaning for *stave* is a stanza or verse of a poem. Dickens uses the word *stave* instead of the usual word, *chapter*, to separate the sections of *A Christmas Carol*. This seems to be a clever way for Dickens to make the reader notice that this book is titled for a musical piece—a *carol*.

'Change – a place where merchants meet to transact business; an exchange

ironmongery – an iron object

residuary legatee – the inheritor of an estate after bills are paid

counting-house – a room or building used by accountants for business

Parliament – the chief lawmaking body of the United Kingdom; it is composed of three parts: the king or queen (called a monarch, who is not elected), the House of Commons (whose members are elected), and the House of Lords (whose members are appointed). These two Houses function somewhat similarly to the United States Senate and House of Representatives.

Bedlam – derived from the word *Bethlehem* and used to describe the St. Mary of Bethlehem Hospital in London, which was an asylum for the mentally ill in the early 1400s; today's meaning for *bedlam* is "noisy,""confused," or a "state of uproar," which is exactly what asylums for the mentally ill were in centuries past when the mentally unstable were confined and given little treatment.

Union workhouses – institutions supported by the taxes of the people of a number of church parishes that joined together; the workhouse itself was supported by these united parishes where the able-bodied poor did unpaid work in return for food and housing.

The Treadmill – (also called the treadwheel) a large wheel for milling grain through the hard labor of men who had to climb a short stair over and over to power the turning of a large wheel to grind grain

Vocabulary

STAVE 1

aldermen – members of a governing body
assign – the only person to whom property is assigned
balustrades – ornamented railings
benevolence – a goodness toward others
brazier – a person working in brass
covetous – jealously eager to possess something
cravat – a scarf
destitute – poor
dirge – a song or melody of mourning, usually associated with funerals
executor – the term for a person responsible for carrying out an assigned task, especially relating to a will
facetious – playful, joking, lighthearted
fain – willing, eager
fettered – chained, shackled
forbearance – self-control; patience
garret – an attic
gladsome – [archaic] glad
gruel – a thin cereal-like oatmeal
hob – a shelf beside a fire to keep the kettle hot
homage – a public show of respect
impropriety – an improper act; indecency
incredulous – not willing to believe, skeptical
irresolution – an action lacking firmness of purpose; hesitation
livery – a uniform of a servant or chauffeur
misanthropic – disliking people or mankind in general
palpable – capable of being felt
peal – the loud reverberating sound of bells, thunder, laughter, etc.
portly – overweight, stout
poulterers – people who raise fowl (chickens, turkey, etc.)
ramparts – fortification walls
rime – an icy crust
ruddy – a healthy reddish color, particularly from outdoor life
sallied – to come, go, or set out in an energetic manner
shade – a ghost
situation – a position of employment
susceptible – impressionable; yielding readily to
tremulous – quavering; trembling