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Synopsis

Adapted for the stage almost immediately after its publication—a performance in London is recorded in 1844—*Christmas Carol* easily lends itself to drama because of its many vivid characters, moral plotline along with its striking use of fantastic elements.

A Christmas Carol begins on Christmas Eve when the miserly Scrooge is visited by the ghost of his former partner, Jacob Marley, who died seven years earlier. Marley warns Scrooge that he is to be visited by three spirits. Without their insight, Scrooge will be unable to avoid the endless wanderings Marley now endures. The trio consists of the Ghosts of Christmas Past, Christmas Present and Christmas Yet to Come. Escorted by each in turn, Scrooge is first transported to the scenes of his youth, then to the present family life of his nephew and his loyal clerk Bob Cratchit (whose household includes the crippled Tiny Tim) and finally to the ominous shape of things to come if he does not change his ways. Chastened by his experiences, Scrooge awakens on Christmas Day transformed and basking in the warm glow of his restored humanity.

Charles Dickens

1812-1870

Charles Dickens is one of the most important figures in Victorian literature. His bustling presence as a popular novelist, magazine editor, journalist and social reformer dominates and helps to characterize this period of extremes. Few English novelists can compare to Dickens in the extravagant variety of his characters and narratives or the rich and powerful exploitation of all of the resources of language and symbol that he managed to achieve.

Dickens' own life provided source material for his fiction, especially the closely autobiographical *David Copperfield* (1849). David's struggle to rise from the boyhood misery in the infamous blacking warehouse to a position of wealth and renown as a novelist parallels the author's own experiences. After a few false starts in acting and parliamentary reporting, Dickens' career took off with the publication of *Sketches by Boz* (1836). The subtitle of this volume proclaimed them "Illustrative of Everyday Life and Everyday People," an apt description both of these stories and much of Dickens' work. The *Sketches* were not, however, merely lively journalistic pieces about common events or familiar London characters; they were sparked by an uncommon insight into personality, close observation of social interaction and a verbal dexterity that would become known as "Dickensian."

Success followed success for Dickens. *The Pickwick Papers* (1836) began the fashion for monthly serial publication. This format, though onerous for many slower-working novelists, was congenial to the energetic, exuberant creative temperament of Dickens. He always worked at dazzling speed, with intense concentration, seldom making serious artistic compromises. A phenomenal best seller, *Pickwick Papers* was eagerly passed from hand to hand, read aloud by parents to their

families and by hired readers to illiterates in pubs. Dickens found himself in young manhood more than an established writer; he was an international celebrity.

Dickens' literary work falls into three distinct periods. The first extends through *Oliver Twist* (1837), *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838), *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840), and *Barnaby Rudge* (1841). These brilliant early achievements are already marked by such recurrent features in Dickens' art as the sympathetic treatment of thieves, prostitutes and other outcasts, indignation at all forms of hypocrisy, compassion for the afflicted and profound empathy with the feelings of sensitive, unprotected children. Satire, sentiment and sensation coexist harmoniously within a framework of bursting abundance, ranging through the whole of England from Fagin's foul urban den in *Oliver Twist* to Squeer's brutal boarding school in *Nicholas Nickleby*.

Dickens' triumphant speaking tour of the United States inaugurated his middle period. He formed a poor opinion of the country, which he satirizes as boorish in the American section of *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843). In the same year that Dickens began the serialization of this uneven novel, he also published his first "Christmas book," *A Christmas Carol*. This work, arguably the first product of Dickens' maturity as an artist, is regarded by many as his most representative and by some as his best. In his treatment of the unloved boy who becomes the loveless elderly miser Scrooge, he achieved perhaps the most memorable dramatization of the central Dickensian theme, which could be called "the death of the heart." Dickens was fascinated by the forces in childhood and society that distort healthy human development. When Scrooge finally saves Tiny Tim, he also restores the innocent child within himself. This "resurrectionist"

Continued on next page

theme runs throughout all of Dickens' later fiction, becoming perhaps most pervasive in *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859).

Of the numerous works closely following *A Christmas Carol*, *Dombey and Son* (1846) is the most impressive. This novel, with the masterful psychological plausibility of the "poor little rich girl" Florence, demonstrated Dickens' ability to portray believable female characters as something other than grotesque and empty-headed ingénues. The serialization of *David Copperfield* (1849) ended this creative decade to great acclaim.

The next 20 years produced the amazing string of classics for which Dickens is perhaps chiefly known: *Bleak House* (1852), *Hard Times* (1854), *Little Dorrit* (1855), *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), *Great Expectations* (1861), *Our Mutual Friend* (1864), and *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870). These gripping later novels, all partially plotted within the new mystery genre, are distinguished by a deepening engagement with issues of social injustice, a more probing exploration of the enigma of differences among family members, and darker philosophical vision. Dickens had moved from the sunniness of Mr. Pickwick's picnics to the chilling opium den fantasies of John Jasper.

Dickens died suddenly at his Gad's Hill home in 1870, literally in mid-sentence, leaving the half-finished *Edwin Drood* an exciting puzzle to challenge his readers forevermore. His death at the peak of his powers made front-page news throughout the English-speaking world and for weeks mourners lined up to pay their final respects at Dickens' grave in Westminster Abbey. For many Dickensians, the most unforgettable dimension of his legacy resides in the extraordinary characters that he created. They have become not only a part of our language but also our way of perceiving. To say of a devious man that he is "a regular Uriah Heep," for example, is to render a devastating caricature. The characters in Dickens'

novels form an indispensable element of our sensibility.

In addition to his literary achievements, Dickens' tireless contributions to social reform helped to change the child labor laws and the educational system that he deplored in the form of Gradgrind's "school of facts" in *Hard Times*. That children today are commonly regarded, in literature and in life, as beings with imaginations and feelings to be carefully nurtured, is perhaps more to Dickens's credit than it is to Freud's. One could reasonably maintain that the period of "High Victorianism" ended with the death of Dickens in 1870, to be followed by an age of transition essentially pre-modern in nature. With his keen psychological examination of the divided aims of the human mind in the last novels, Dickens prefigured the introspective period in which we now live.

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A Dickensian TIMELINE

February 7, **1812**

Charles Dickens is born in Kent.

1823 The Dickens family moves to Cheapside, London; Charles is kept out of school to save money.

1824 Charles is sent to the boot-blackening factory. Two weeks later his father goes to debtor's prison; the rest of the family, except Charles, follows soon after. Charles continues to work after his family leaves prison.

1824-25 Charles returns to school.

1827-30 Charles becomes an office boy in an attorney's office, learns shorthand and eventually becomes a freelance reporter.

1830 He obtains a "reader's ticket" to the British Museum; becomes a staff reporter for *The Mirror of Parliament*.

Ca. **1830** Begins seeing Maria Beadnell; her family does not approve and she strings him along until he finally breaks it off. She is said to be a model for *David Copperfield's* Dora.

1833 Publishes his first London sketch in *Monthly Magazine*.

1836 *Sketches by Boz* published.

1836 Charles marries Catherine Hogarth.

1836-37 *The Pickwick Papers* and *Oliver Twist* appear in monthly installments simultaneously. With *Pickwick* finished and *Oliver Twist* half written, he begins *Nicholas Nickleby*.

1841 Publication of *The Old Curiosity Shop* in *Master Humphrey's Clock* pushed that magazine's sales to a 100,000 per week.

1842 First American tour.

1843 His first Christmas story, *A Christmas Carol*, sells 6,000 copies the first day.

1843-44 *Martin Chuzzlewit*

1843 Dickens begins his private theatrical productions; public readings of *A Christmas Carol*, *Cricket on the Hearth* and other works begin.

1849 *David Copperfield*

1852 *Bleak House*

1854 *Hard Times*

1857 *Little Dorrit*

1858 Catherine Hogarth Dickens moves out of the Dickens household, having withstood Charles' flirtations with other women and neglect for many years.

1859 *A Tale of Two Cities*

1861 *Great Expectations*

1864-65 *Our Mutual Friend*

1867 Second American tour.

1860s Public readings supplant writing new novels.

1868 His health becomes increasingly delicate. Doctors counsel him that he is risking paralysis and a stroke.

1869 He begins *Edwin Drood*.

March 15, 1870 Last public reading.

June 1870 He moves to the Kent countryside, where he dies, **June 9**, surrounded by his children.

June 14, 1870 Buried in Poet's Corner, Westminster Abbey.

FROM DARKNESS *into Light*

Once upon a time Charles Dickens wrote a ghost story of Christmas. His intent was to utterly transform the lives of those who read it. This conjuration of ghosts was animated by a passionate concern for the gloomy condition of contemporary society. England was in a state of economic depression. The Industrial Revolution had already begun to generate an atmosphere of indifference to human well being. Social injustice was epidemic. Children labored under appalling conditions and, for the most part, the masses lived lives of grinding poverty.

Instead of merely writing a pamphlet, which was to be entitled *An Appeal to the People of England on Behalf of the Poor Man's Child*, Dickens launched upon a work which he believed would be much more powerful. "By the end of the year," he said, "you will certainly feel that a sledgehammer has come down with 20 times the force—20 times the force I could exert by following my first idea!" He was already thinking about *A Christmas Carol*.

We cannot gauge to what degree the book eased the ills of early Victorian society. We do know, however, that Charles Dickens resurrected Christmas. At a time when the old holiday festivities were on the decline, he reconstructed a model for the season that embraced sparkling merriment, warm open-heartedness, hospitality, bright fires, glowing faces, radiant spirits, flickering laughter and dazzling generosity. His "sledgehammer" blow was more like a warm breath thawing a frozen heart. By rekindling an almost extinguished flame, his name was forevermore made synonymous with Christmas. With the writing of *A Christmas Carol*, the vision that man's estate could be "a warm and glowing celebration of sympathy and love" came closer

to becoming more than a dream.

Dickens believed that the diseases of society could only be cured by a profound revolution within the individual human spirit. So, Ebenezer Scrooge came to be. He epitomized the "utilitarian man" of the age, a man whose existence was impelled solely by the accumulation of wealth. He embodied the mercenary indifference of the prosperous classes who believed that their responsibilities toward their fellow man were completed once they had paid their taxes. In the redemption of the seemingly irredeemable, Scrooge signifies the possibility of redemption for all of us.

"At a time when the old holiday festivities were on the decline, he reconstructed a model for the season that embraced sparkling merriment, warm open-heartedness, hospitality, bright fires, glowing faces, radiant spirits, flickering laughter and dazzling generosity."

How Dickens *Saved Christmas*

“Anticipate charity by preventing poverty.”

—Maimonides.
Charity’s Eight Degrees.

Charles Dickens probably had more influence on the way that Christians celebrate Christmas today than any single individual in human history except Jesus Christ.

At the time Dickens wrote *A Christmas Carol* (1843), the observance of the holiday was in decline in many areas. Earlier in the century, the practice of singing Christmas carols had dwindled and the Industrial Revolution allowed workers little time “for fripperies like celebration of a Medieval, Christian and pagan festival in the middle of winter,” writes Richard Blystone.

When Dickens wrote *A Christmas Carol*, he was concerned at the way Victorian society was dealing with the problem of the poor. “Thousands of children lived in unimaginable poverty, filth and disease. In 1839 it was estimated that nearly half of all the funerals in London were for children under the age of ten.”² Dickens introduces these children in the story through the allegorical twins, Ignorance and Want. The Ghost of Christmas Present shows them, wretched and primitive in appearance, with the warning: “This boy is Ignorance. This girl is Want. Beware them both, and all of their degree, but most of all beware this boy, for on his brow I see that written which is Doom, unless the writing be erased.”³

Dickens was a major social critic of his

time, though the reforms he advocated didn’t really come to fruition until after World War II, says Blystone. But the idea of generosity at Christmas is the one that comes forth from this story. In a way, the secular view of Christmas and its dwindling religious impact in the minds of many, harkens back to *A Christmas Carol*. There was not much religion in it, but a great deal of feasting and celebration—and a cracking good ghost story.

Stephen Nissenbaum in his book, *The Battle for Christmas*, argues that Dickens was responsible for another facet of holiday gift giving and charity. In the story Scrooge has little contact with the poor except for his relationship with Bob Cratchit. Cratchit is his clerk, not a laborer in a factory. He may be poor but he is literate; his appearance is clean, though he lacks an overcoat. Except for his eldest daughter, his family does not work outside the home. He does his job well and seemingly is not in danger of losing his position unlike many workers in the Industrial Revolution. But it is the way that Scrooge treats Cratchit and his ignorance of the clerk’s family life that illustrates the disparity among the social classes.

However, in his experiences with the Spirits, Scrooge sees the wretchedness of the Victorian age as well as the paucity of his own life and emotions. These scenes produce a profound change in him. After that night his activities and relationships are softened by family values; he recognizes his obligation to treat people more humanely. Indications of this change are sending the Cratchits a Christmas turkey, but he does not deliver it in person. He also makes a financial pledge to help the poor when he sees the gentlemen who approached him earlier, but he does not visit the impoverished. What does Scrooge do on

Continued on next page

Christmas day? He takes dinner with his family—his nephew, Fred and Fred’s young wife.

Thus, Scrooge’s conversion allows us to see the distinction made between different kinds of Christmas obligations. To members of his family he owes face-to-face participation; to the known poor he deals with daily he sends a present. But his debt to the unknown poor, the faceless sufferers of the industrial society, can be paid by a donation to a charitable agency. “If the reborn Scrooge were approached on the street,” says Nissenbaum. “He could now respond with a clear conscience by saying, in effect, ‘I gave at the office.’ ”⁴. Thus, by the 1840’s, Christmas giving was beginning to be divided into two different activities: gifts for family and friends became “presents” while gifts given to the needy were “charity”. The presents were usually luxury items of a frivolous nature given in person, while gifts to the unknown poor were necessities purchased and distributed by third parties—charitable organizations. Without recognizing it, perhaps Dickens helped establish our gift-giving priorities.

*“Christmas won’t be Christmas
without any presents.”*

–Louisa May Alcott.
Little Women (1868)

NOTES on *A Christmas Carol*

“I have endeavoured in this Ghostly little book to raise the Ghost of an Idea.”

– from Charles Dickens’ preface to the original edition.

Dickens called his little Christmas book a carol after the songs and ballads celebrating the holiday for the birth of Christ. He carried the pretense further by calling the chapters “staves.” “Stave” is an archaic form of the word “staff,” a stanza of a poem or song.

Despite the lyrical title, the good-spirited story was written in a dismal, disappointing time for Dickens. At the end of 1843, the writer faced the possibility of decline in popularity and income. His newest novel, *Martin Chuzzlewit*, had not been well received; his wife Kate was expecting their fifth child; his family pressed him for funds, and his own extravagances in keeping a large house on Devonshire Terrace, London all factored in depleting his earnings. In the midst of his personal travails, he was plagued by the problem of child labor, so he decided to write a short pamphlet called *An Appeal to the People of England on Behalf of the Poor Man’s Child*.¹ The pamphlet was never written, but Dickens’ sympathies for the poor garnered him an invitation from the Atheneum, a charitable institution for the Manchester working class, to speak at a fund-raising event in October, 1843. The audience’s enthusiastic response and their “bright eyes and beaming faces—inspired a

desire to try to capture the warm feelings of the people at large.”² The inspiration was so strong that on his return to London, Dickens immediately became engrossed in writing his story. He would walk the streets of London late at night alternately weeping and laughing as the story developed.

At odds with his publishers, Dickens paid for the publishing costs of the book himself and insisted on the lavish design that included a gold-stamped cover and four hand-colored etchings. He also priced the book at five shillings so it would be affordable to nearly everyone. Published a week before Christmas 1843, the book was an instant sensation; however, due to the high production costs, Dickens’ profits from the work were less than expected. In addition, the work was the victim of pirated editions because of the lack of international copyright laws. Nevertheless, Dickens fought these fraudulent publications while popularizing the work himself by reading it aloud in his public tours.

The prototype for Scrooge may be found in Dickens’ earlier writing. In the story “The Goblins Who Stole a Sexton,” one of the characters is a bad-tempered gravedigger, Gabriel Grub. On Christmas Eve he can think of nothing better to do than drink beer and dig a grave until he is spirited away by a band of goblins who take him to a cavern where he views panoramas of both rich and poor celebrating Christmas. Through this supernatural medium, Gabriel Grub, like Ebenezer Scrooge, is converted to a new reformed life. Dickens probably derived his miser’s name from the colloquial word “scrooge” which means to crowd or squeeze. In Scrooge’s case, he is described as a “squeezing, grasping, scraping, clutching covetous old sinner.”³

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Jacob Marley got his surname from Dr. Miles Marley who practiced in Cork Street. He met Dickens at a party, and, knowing that the novelist was interested in unusual names, mentioned that he thought his own name quite remarkable. Dickens reportedly replied: “Your name will be a household word before the year is out.”⁴ The Cratchit family name likely came from “cratch,” an archaic English word for crèche, the manger where Jesus was laid. The name also suggests the scratching of the clerk’s pen. Tiny Tim was named “Little Fred” in the first edition, but Dickens’ visit to Manchester in 1843 provided another inspiration. His sister Fanny had an invalid son, Harry Burnett, whom Dickens immortalized as both Tiny Tim and the lost boy Paul Domby in *Domby and Son*. As for Tiny Tim’s illness, it is likely he suffered from distal renal tubular acidosis (type I), a kidney disease that made his blood too acidic, writes Dr. Donald Lewis in the *American Journal of Diseases of Children* (1992). Therapies such as alkaline solutions were available to treat this condition in 1843, but the Cratchits couldn’t afford them and the symptoms grew worse. Untreated, Tiny Tim would have died within a year, but Scrooge’s newfound generosity provided the funds for the doctors.

Dickens drew heavily on his own experiences to develop the plot. Left alone at school, the young Scrooge takes comfort in the same books loved by the young Dickens. The Cratchits’ humble but exuberant Christmas dinner recalls Dickens’ own celebrations as a child in Camden Town. The author also knew the sorrow of the death of a child, since the young boy experienced the tragedy of losing a brother and sister in infancy. Dickens’ preoccupation with children and a specific child is an accusation at a society ignoring a terrible responsibility. *A Christmas Carol* may be seen as a “serio-comic parable of social redemption. Scrooge is the symbol of the pursuit of

material gain and indifference to human welfare and his conversion is a symbol of that change of heart in society on which Dickens had set his own heart.”⁵

“Scrooge is the symbol of the pursuit of material gain and indifference to human welfare and his conversion is a symbol of that change of heart in society on which Dickens had set his own heart.”⁵

Christmas Carols

in the Victorian Age

“Here we come a-wassailing
among the leaves so green
It’s here we come
a’wandering so fair to be
seen;
Love and joy come to you,
and to you your wassail
too...”

—Anonymous, 19th Century
England.

In England, caroling has always been an indispensable and joyous part of the Christmas holiday. Many of the earliest carols sung were preserved in a diary or “commonplace book” that was kept by Richard Hill, a grocer’s apprentice, between 1500 and 1536. Hill was interested in numerous subjects and carols were one of them. In 1850 his book was discovered wedged behind an old bookcase. Thanks to this piece of good fortune and Richard Hill’s curiosity, we have the earliest of all surviving English secular carols, “The Boar’s Head Carol”. The lyrics are:

“The boar’s head in hand bear I,
Bedecked with bays and rosemary;
And I pray you my masters merry be;
Quot estis in convivio. (Everyone who is at
this feast.)

Caput aprī defero, reddens laudes Domino
(The boar’s head I bring, Giving praise
to the Lord.)

(*International Christmas*, Bryn Mawr, PA:
Theodore Presser Co., 1966, p. 35.)

British caroling was inextricably linked with wassailing. The word dates back to the 5th century and the Saxon toast “waes hal” meaning “Your health.” A common recipe for the drink includes brown ale, brown sugar, cinnamon sticks, nutmeg, ginger, lemon slices, roasted apples and one bottle of Madeira or sherry. As caroling groups went from house to house singing, they would receive cups of steaming hot wassail and food, in keeping with the custom that none who knocked on the door would be turned away.

By the Victorian age, caroling was a dying tradition. Oliver Cromwell and the Puritan regime (1649-1658) had banned Christmas carols and other observances of the holiday; the custom never returned in full vitality. In the 17th and 18th centuries, British printers tried to revive interest by circulating songs on cheap, oversized pieces of paper called “broadsides”, selling them for a penny. However, by 1830 caroling had degenerated into a sort of advanced begging technique employed by the poor.

By 1833 “God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen” was known in the cities as “the” carol. William Sandys began in that year to compile his volume of *Ancient and Modern Carols*, but he had to travel to the midlands and farther north to collect any vestige of Christmas songs. However, the Victorians rediscovered the joy of these unique songs aided by Dickens’ story and a Victorian collection, *Christmas Carols Old and New*, published in 1871.

In this adaptation of *A Christmas Carol*, several Victorian carols are included. “God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen” is one, but others are less well known. “The Advent Carol” by Rowland H. Prichard is a lovely piece

Continued on next page

scored for string orchestras and bells. The “Londoners’ Carol” is also known as “Now Thrice Welcome Christmas”, but its composer and lyricist are unknown. It was first found in *Poor Robin’s Almanac* for 1695. In Edith Rickert’s *Ancient English Christmas Carols: 1400-1700*, it is known as “A Christmas Song.” Finally, Dickens himself wrote the lyrics to “The Hearty, the True and the Bold” which is found in Chapter 28 of *The Pickwick Papers*.

These carols conjure up Dickens’ world of goodhearted fellowship, crackling fires and the spirit of goodwill.

Dickens and Christmas

There is a famous story that soon after Dickens' death, a simple London girl was heard to say, "Dickens dead? Then will Father Christmas die too?" For by that time *A Christmas Carol* had already become the recognized modern classic of the holiday season, and Dickens was revered as a literary Father Christmas to millions of children. Interrupting work on *Martin Chuzzlewit* in 1843, he had turned out the complete *Carol* in less than six weeks. This feverish speed was clearly matched by inspiration, for *Carol* is one of the most cohesive and sustained efforts in the Dickensian canon.

With the original edition of 6,000 copies sold out its first day and tremendous demand sparked for not only new editions but new stories, Dickens turned out dozens of short holiday tales and four longer works in the following years: *The Chimes* (1845), *The Cricket on the Hearth* (1846), *The Battle of Life* (1846) and *The Haunted Man* (1848). Dickens took more time with these and in fact had slowed production on the *Carol* to insure high quality production and illustration. But he could not maintain the flash of genius that had created the original story and the judgment of critic Philip Hobsbawm is probably correct: "Collectively, the Christmas books amount to a brilliantly whimsical parable, an incipient social satire, two sentimental love stories and, finally, an imperfectly allegorist piece of autobiography. As literature, only *A Christmas Carol* can be said to have lasting merit."

That one small book, however, is justly praised by another critic as "the one great Christmas myth of modern literature." Its reading is a ritual in many homes and it has inspired plays, films, and radio dramas. And it has become a cherished classic because Dickens imbued it with his own deeply felt love for the holiday season. With its Christmas trees and feasts, toasts and presents, mingling of material bounty with spiritual exultation, *A Christmas Carol* helped to codify the tradition of holiday ritual, which in Dickens' own youth was still struggling to emerge.

Dickens felt that the spirit of Christmas should be kept alive year-round and he once spoke of his "Carol philosophy" as the basis of a large projected book. This was never written, and is

probably no great loss. For Dickens had already done his job of making Christmas the supreme holiday of the secular if not the religious calendar. Partly this was because he had created words and images, which brought together and balanced the respective treasures of Christmas, material and spiritual.

The spiritual "message" of the book is most clearly stated by the ghost of old Marley to Scrooge, when he laments that money-grubbing was a false vocation: "Business! Mankind was my business. The common welfare was my business; charity, mercy, forbearance and benevolence were all my business. The dealings of my trade were but a drop of water in the comprehensive ocean of my business!"

On the other hand is the typically Dickensian emphasis upon the material delight of things, especially food. Images of food, lovingly described, are common to his books. One of the best occurs in the *Carol*, introduced by a ripe evocation of atmosphere:

"The walls and ceilings were so hung with living green, that it looked a perfect grove.... The crisp leaves of holly, mistletoe and ivy reflected back the light, as if so many little mirrors had been scattered there; and such a mighty blaze was roaring up the chimney as the dull petrification of a hearth has never known in Scrooge's time, or Marley's Heaped upon the floor to form a kind of throne, were turkeys, geese, game, poultry, prawns, great joints of meat, suckling-pigs, long wreaths of sausages, mince-pies, plum-puddings, barrels of oysters, red-hot chestnuts, cherry-cheeked apples, juicy oranges, luscious pears, immense twelfth-cakes, and seething bowls of punch, that made the chamber dim with their delicious steam."

By the sheer, delighted accumulation of detail, Dickens roused an appetite in his readers, which perhaps also fostered their spiritual hunger. Since the original meaning of Christmas is the living, material incarnation of God in a child, Dickens' robust blending of lofty sentiments and mundane delights is not, for all its hearty earthiness, out of place. That surely is part of *A Christmas Carol's* appeal.

Dickens' ENGLAND

Nineteenth century Victorian England was, to many of us, a time of prosperity, refinement, high living standards and overstuffed living rooms; it was “Upstairs, Downstairs. But life in *fin de siècle* England was very different from life at mid-century. Inner-city England in the 1830s and 1840s was plagued by Industrial Revolution problems at their height. Air, soil and water pollution were not dealt with any more than overcrowded living conditions or factory life’s disruption of family structures. The British government encouraged the economic potential of the Revolution but discouraged legal or political intervention in its problems. There was no precedent for legislation of private enterprise, the prevalent economic theory being *laissez-faire*. “The result was that by 1832 there was scant provision for the political, municipal, educational or sanitary needs of the population, most of whom were not even tolerably clothed or fed.” This, Dickens knew at first hand due to his family’s chronically unstable economic condition and his stint as a reporter for *The Mirror of Parliament*.

In the early 1800s, factory workers put in as many hours as their employers required or lost their jobs. Not until the Factory Act of 1833 limited the hours of children and youths and prohibited the employment of children under the age of nine, was there any regulation. Implementation of the Act led to government factory inspection and to the Ten Hours Bill, which limited women and youths to ten hours labor per day. They performed much of the finish work in textile factories and the mining done in shafts no bigger than crawl spaces.

The Poor Law of 1834 created a board of three commissioners to oversee local parish relief, the first national government agency. Like preceding Poor Laws it also required that those unemployed but able to work be sent to workhouses, where conditions were often deplorable at best. Since 1688, workhouses had been under the control of private contractors, who set their own hours, maintained working conditions or not, and paid living wages or not with no one to answer to. An outbreak of fever in 1838 prompted the Board to intervene, leading to the formation of the Health Board in 1848, the Local Government Board and the Ministry of Health. However, the attitude of the well-to-do was: “Let the able-bodied man be

given the choice of earning his own living or going into the workhouse, and then, if he still cannot find work on the land, send him to the factory or the colonies.” This belief persisted well into the 19th century.

Prisons were also managed by private contractors, who, like those overseeing workhouses, took them on as profit-making ventures; there were no government subsidies or support of any kind. It is estimated that some 40,000 people were arrested every year for debt alone. In some prisons nothing could be had for nothing, as not even a minimum allowance of food was supplied out of the public funds. In other prisons the free food was filthy and inadequate. The debtor, the most innocent class of prisoner, was least able to purchase alleviation.

While it’s true that legislation such as the Education Act of 1870 eventually led to “a reading public co-extensive with the nation,” in 1818 only one third of all children attended school. Many of these schools were church-sponsored; the government began supporting school construction in 1833 and formed an Education Committee in 1839 to monitor the construction grant and inspect the school buildings. In 1839, the government did nothing to maintain quality in education. Like prisons and workhouses, schools were operated by private individuals seeking to make a profit; there were no national standards to which they were compelled to conform.

Thus, by the time *A Christmas Carol* was published in 1843, the seeds had been sown for rudimentary change. Still, the working classes were faced with many of the same untenable conditions as they had been before, some of which were addressed by the Reform Bill of 1867. By then, “the idea of change was no longer new and shocking. In 1832, the nation had been made supreme and had been so defined as to include half the middle class. In 1867 it was defined again so as to include the rest of the middle class and the working men of the towns.” This era of government legislation, including the Education Act and others, and the slowing of the Industrial Revolution’s pace, paved the way for the improved living conditions and general material increase for all classes that we associate with Dickens’ England.

Scrooge: A Study in Tragedy and Comedy

In the fourth century B.C. Aristotle wrote a treatise called *The Poetics*. While only fragments of his complete works on literature survive today, *The Poetics* remains a critical starting point for discussion of drama. According to the guidelines in *The Poetics*, all drama builds around an “action” or “praxis.” Tragic action is defined as a man’s knowledge of a grievous mistake he has made, for which he must suffer intensely perhaps resulting in death, after exhausting all apparent alternatives. Comic action exposes some sort of foolishness and results in the renewal of human nature, rather than the extermination of it.

A tragic character may be guided by forces of which he is unaware. He makes choices that lead him to his eventual downfall despite the appearance of their initial wisdom. The true nature of the deeds, that they were clear mistakes when revealed to the character, is as surprising to him as it is shocking. Aristotle calls these errors, and the inability to see them as errors, “hamartia.” Along with “hamartia,” tragic characters often suffer from the flaw of “hubris,” or overweening pride.

Comic characters, while they may possess some tragic characteristics, proceed through life committing small errors. Comic characters are by definition not among the great personages. They represent less than average people. Their badness or lack of honor does not go to the extent of depravity or total ridiculousness, but they make choices that are unseemly and shameful.

The effect of tragedy is the purification of the spectator’s emotions through the process of “catharsis.” The imitating of fear and pity on the stage creates tension in the emotions of the audience members, who are relieved

by the outcome of the plot. The resolution of that tension results in pleasure for the spectators as they share those intense emotions, then recover from that experience.

The ideal character for a tragedy is one “whose place is between [the] extremes. Such is the man who on the one hand is not pre-eminent in virtue and justice, and yet on the other hand does not fall into misfortune through vice or depravity, but falls because of some mistake; one among the number of the highly renowned and prosperous...”

How does Uncle Scrooge fit into this scheme?

He makes choices
that lead him to his eventual
downfall despite the appearance
of their initial wisdom.

FOOD

in 19th Century England

During Dickens' time, the poor man lived on bread and sometimes with the bread, onions, potatoes or bacon. The wife and children might only get bread because the "breadwinner" had to keep up his strength. A primary source of food came from the pig, which was considered a rural lower-class food. Pigs were prolific, grew fast and could forage in wooded areas. They were full of fat and their meat could be preserved by salting or smoking. The poor man often ate cheese instead of butter and fish instead of meat because these were cheaper. Strangely enough, oysters were a poor man's food. They were pickled and salted to keep for several weeks. Because fuel was expensive and few people had ovens, the average farm worker might only have one hot meal a week and this cooked over an open fire. On Sundays and holidays the poor would take any geese they had to local bakers to get them cooked. To preserve meat it was hung in chimney smoke and then from the ceiling or rafters. Pudding was also a favorite of the lower class. There was Christmas plum pudding, batter pudding, black pudding, kidney pudding, marrow pudding, bread and butter pudding, blood pudding, suet pudding, roly-poly pudding and so on. It was a good food because it provided carbohydrates, fats, sugar and fruit for warmth and energy.

The middle-class diet was built around mutton, overcooked vegetables and potatoes. Salads were not eaten because it was thought that raw foods were tough on the digestion. Lack of variety in diet and keeping foods fresh was a major problem. People bottled and preserved whatever they could. Water was often contaminated, so beer and ale were standard fare and eventually coffee and tea.

Children were first fed breast-milk from their mothers or wet nurses. Later they were raised on mutton, potatoes, bread, suet or rice pudding and oatmeal. Fresh milk was expensive and often contaminated until the 1890s when it began to be pasteurized.

Recycling During Dickens time:

Ladies gowns were passed down to the lady's maid. Household servants kept rag-bags of used cloth eventually sold and turned into paper. Tea leaves were used to clean carpets. Drippings (animal fat) were used instead of butter by the poor. Bones were sold to the "rag and bone" man for fertilizer. Household ash was sold for bricks. Soot that was swept out of chimneys was turned into insect-killer.

On the streets, cigar butts and dog waste were collected and sold to tanyards for use in processing the leather for the "kid" gloves worn by the upper classes. (The people scrounging through sewers and picking up dog excrement were desperately poor, and not likely to overlook any possible means by which to sustain themselves. Their only alternative was the workhouse.)

The Roots of *Christmas Time Celebrations*

Although the Christmas story centers on the Christ Child of Bethlehem, celebrations at this time commenced long before His coming. They began in Mesopotamia more than 4,000 years ago as the festival of renewal called “Zagmuk.” There, the New Year was a time of crisis. The Mesopotamians believed that their chief god, Marduk, had routed the monsters of chaos and built an orderly world, but after crops had been harvested, the empty brown fields revealed that life was dying. To keep death from triumphing, the sacrificial drama of Marduk and the evils of chaos were re-enacted each year. Presumably, the king of the Mesopotamians died at the end of the year in order to accompany Marduk into the underworld and do battle at his side, while a new king took his place on earth. Traditionally, however, a criminal was substituted for the king; he was selected, dressed in royal garb and given all the homage and indulgence due a king during the celebration. When his reign ended, he was sacrificed in place of the real king. The people then rejoiced, joined processions of masquerades, built bonfires and exchanged gifts and visits.

Another festival called *Sacaea* was celebrated by the ancient civilizations of the Persians and Babylonians. There, masters and slaves traded places; the slaves commanded; the masters obeyed. One slave was chosen to be head of the household and everyone paid homage to him. This ritual lasted 12 days. As the old year died, the rules of ordinary living were relaxed. Then, as the new year arrived, the order of the world was restored.

For the Romans, the festival of *Saturnalia* began around the middle of December when the days were darkest and continued until January 1. In its midst was December 25, the day, as the Romans calculated, when the sun

was at its lowest ebb. The Roman *Saturnalia* and the holidays that followed were boisterous. People masqueraded through the streets, ate huge dinners, visited their friends and gave each other good-luck gifts. The Roman houses were decked with boughs of laurel and green trees, with lighted candles and lamps—for the spirits of darkness were afraid of light. Masters and slaves ate together on this occasion and sometimes traded roles.

The Christians found *Saturnalia* celebrations to be too boisterous for their liking, so they turned to the Persian religion, *Mithraism*. The followers of *Mithraism* worshiped the sun and celebrated its return to strength on December 25, as the day of the *Unconquered Sun*. Thus the Christian church borrowed that day of merriment, greenery, lights and gifts to celebrate the birth of the Babe of Bethlehem.

To Christians, the beginning of a new era was marked by the coming of Christ, His death and His resurrection. By 336 or 353 AD, the birth of Christ was officially celebrated on December 25 in the city of Rome. Thus, Christians celebrated this event during that long interval between the dying of the old year and the birth of the new and on into spring. This time of celebration was a centuries-old habit, but borrowed as it was from other cultures and religions, it was now richer and different in meaning.

To these events must be added the feast that accompanied the Jewish cleansing of the Temple that occurred in the latter part of December. While in the cold North, the Teutons observed the winter solstice, calling it “Yule.”

Christmas Customs & Winter Celebrations

Christmas, New Year's and the winter solstice are celebrated all over the world. St. Lucy's Day, or *Luciadagen*, is celebrated on December 13 and marks the official beginning of the Christmas season in Scandinavian countries. St. Lucy was betrothed to a pagan nobleman against her will, so she put out her eyes on the shortest, darkest day of the year. But God restored her vision and she became the symbol for the preciousness of light. Lucy means "light" and she appears in a shining white robe crowned by a radiant halo of candles set into a metal crown covered with lingonberry leaves. The oldest daughter of the family usually assumes the "Lucia" role, followed by her entourage of younger members of the family. They serve the family on the morning of December 13 with a tray of coffee and saffron buns.

December 16 opens the nine-day *Posada* season in Mexico. The *Posadas* re-enact the story of Mary and Joseph searching for shelter the night Christ was born. Singers/actors set out along the street to ask for shelter in various homes and finally find their kindly "inn-keeper" who invites them in to feast.

In Italy, the day of Epiphany (January 6) is the day of gift-giving. The "Befana," a benevolent old witch, comes down the chimney to fill children's shoes with "goodies" or, in retribution for some misdeed, a few pieces of charcoal.

Some festivals celebrate events other than Christmas. *Dewali* is a November Hindu festival. It is a week of festivities illuminated by lamps, fireworks and bonfires, and includes gifts and festive meals. Families clean their homes and draw elaborate designs (*alpanas*) on their floors with colored powder to welcome the Hindu goddess of wealth and prosperity. They set up little clay lamps (*diyas*) on courtyards, windows and roofs because *Lakshmi* won't bless a home that isn't lit up to greet her.

The Jewish *Hanukkah* is celebrated for eight days that fall somewhere between November 25 and December 26. *Hanukkah* commemorates the successful rebellion of the Jews against the Syrians in 162 BC. After their victory, they cleansed and rededicated the Temple in Jerusalem and re-lit the Holy Perpetual Light. There was only enough oil to keep

the lamp burning for one day and it would take eight days to get more. Miraculously, the oil lasted for the eight days. So, *Hanukkah* is also known as the Feast of Lights. It is celebrated by lighting a candelabrum called a *Menorah*, which holds eight candles, plus a ninth, the *shammash* or "server" used to light all the others. Gifts are given, especially to children.

The Chinese New Year begins in the 12th month of the Chinese year. A rigorous housecleaning is done both materially and spiritually. Dirt is thrown out the door and with it goes evil. The Chinese family celebrates the hearth god on the 24th day of the 12th month. The family gives him a farewell dinner so that he can only say good things about them to the other gods. His image is set upon a chair of bamboo stalks then set afire so that the god rides up to heaven. People buy each other the traditional New Year's gifts. The holiday ends with the Parade of the Golden Dragon, symbolizing strength that marks the end of one year and the beginning of another.

Kwanzaa was established in 1966 by Maulana Karenga. It is a time for African Americans to reaffirm their culture. *Kwanzaa* comes from a Swahili word meaning "first." Occurring annually from December 26 to January 1, *Kwanzaa* is a time of fasting, feasting and self-examination. It is celebrated with the other seasonal holidays.

The celebration of *Kwanzaa* is guided by the *Nguzo Saba* or Seven Principles: unity, self-determination, collective work and responsibility, cooperative economics, purpose, creativity and faith. The symbols are fruits and vegetables, the placemat on which they are arranged and the seven branched candlestick that holds the red, black and green candles that are lit each evening. There are also the ears of corn representing each child in the home, the communal chalice from which a ceremonial libation is poured, and the gifts. It is a family holiday where one is free to improvise on the music, food and language.

The winter observances described above, have in common a rededication celebrated with light, food and gifts during the dark time of the northern hemisphere; these signify an end of the year and a rebirth or new beginning.

Activities

Winter Solstice

The earth orbits the sun in one year. In fact, this rotation around the sun defines our year. The seasons are caused by the tilt of the earth to the plane of its orbit. The earth is tilted about 23 degrees on its axis so that sometimes during its rotation around the sun, the North Pole is tipped toward the sun and at other times the South Pole is tipped more toward the sun. On earth, this means the sun seems to move north and south about 46 degrees over the course of a year. In the summer, the sun is very high in the sky but in the winter it never gets as high. Now imagine breaking up the sun's 46-degree up-and-down yearly swing into one-day intervals. Start at the top; then three months later it is midway between extremes and heading south, then three months after that it is at the lowest point (six months after the peak). After that, it starts heading back up; three months later it is at the midway point again and on its way up. A full year after we start, it is back at the top of its journey. We have names for these four times; in order, they are the Summer Solstice, the Autumnal (or fall) Equinox, the Winter Solstice, and the Vernal (or spring) Equinox. The Northern Hemisphere's Winter Solstice (December 22) has the shortest period of daylight during the year.

Research:

How did ancient civilizations interpret the Winter Solstice?

What traditions, customs, or legends evolved around the Winter Solstice?

Describe a Winter Solstice celebration and its traditions. Do any of them sound familiar?

Why was the evergreen tree an important symbol of the Winter Solstice?

A Primitive Society

You are a member of a primitive society. After the warm time, it becomes dark and cold. The daylight hours are very short. There is privation and a lack of warmth and light. It is a fearful time. Fire is relatively new to your group and your group's fire is kept burning all the time. It is a source of warmth and light. It is also guarded. Being a guardian of the group's fire is a position of trust and enormous responsibility.

Your small family group has joined other groups for protection and mutual aid. The combination of groups is beginning to form a rudimentary society. All of your people wish to survive the dark and cold times and to ensure the warm and bright times' return. Your old, wise members have tracked the light and warm times and the dark and cold times with marks. They know that the warm and bright times have returned before, after many marks have been made. Your community has a spoken but not a written language. Counting is not known. Information is passed orally from one person to another. You are the guardian of the fire and so you are a leader in your society and know what the wise people know. No one understands why the light and heat recede or why the cold and dark come. You do know, however, that to survive the society must prepare for these times; they must know how to live during these times and children must grow up understanding what is required to survive.

Create a story or fable that will teach children one of the following lessons: that they should listen to the lessons of their parents and elders; that they understand the dangers that lurk around them and that hungry animals may come close to their camp; that they understand

Activities

(con't)

how to judge the light in the sky so they return to the safety of the camp before dark; that they know when and how to seek shelter and safety in an emergency; that they know when and how to save food for the harder times; that they understand the community must stay together to survive. (To help in this exercise read a fable. Fables teach people how they should live. They are highly condensed lessons in morality. Most fables tell stories about animals and then state a moral at the end.)

In addition to lessons, the people of your community want to understand the reasons for what happens around them. The myth was used to explain events to people before there were scientific explanations. People have always wanted to know the “why” of events in the world. Myths symbolically illustrate and explain the outlines or patterns of existence including: life and death, the great forces of nature, cosmic phenomena and the beginning of civilization. They are closely related to sacred beliefs and filled with supernatural beings that behave a lot like humans. Read a myth and try to understand what it explains.

Create a myth for your society. It may explain: the cold, the dark, the reasons for seasonal changes or other natural phenomena that your community has experienced, life and death, the stars, the sun, the moon, the clouds, the beginning and ending of life.

Extension: Decorate a dowel about the size of a baton. This is a story stick and is used when the class creates a group story. Whoever holds the story stick may speak and add to the story. When they have finished their part of the story, the stick is passed to another person whose turn it is to add to the story. Use this process to create a myth.

Create the traditions that celebrate and rec-

ognize the special times experienced by your community. These may include: the beginning of the warm times or the brightest and warmest day, the beginning of the cold times or the darkest and coldest day, the point when a child is considered an adult, the recognition of a marriage or pairing of two adults, the welcome of a newborn or saying goodbye to someone who has died.

Midwinter Comparison

Identify how cultures other than our own celebrate midwinter. Identify any similarities in the traditions.

The Christmas Tree

Trace the evolution of the Christmas tree:

Why is it an evergreen tree?

What does it symbolize?

Which countries celebrate Christmas with an evergreen tree? What other trees are used?

Why?

Create an International Christmas Tree:

Research as a class or individually the manner in which other countries decorate their Christmas trees. Ask the students to make an ornament that they have found in their research for an international tree. Ask the class to try to recreate as many international ornaments as there are members of the class. Decorate your class tree.

Answer the following questions:

How does the country you researched celebrate the season or the holiday?

Is there any special significance in the materials used for the ornaments or are the materials native to the country researched?

What new Christmas customs and traditions of the lands that you researched did you discover?

What legends or legendary holiday characters did you discover in your research?

Extension: Make a traditional holiday food from the country you studied and bring it to class to celebrate the completion of the tree.

Activities

(con't)

This Tree is for the Birds!

A custom of northern European countries that adds great charm to Christmas is the special attention given to animals and birds during this time of darkness and cold. Traditionally, sheaves of grain, suet, bread, and corn are put out for the animals for their holiday repast. Ideas for your bird tree:

Popcorn Strings: With heavy-duty thread, string popcorn in 24" lengths. Tie the ends together and hang vertically in 12" loops on tree.

Marshmallow Stick: String six marshmallows on small-sized wire. Tie a bow of red ribbon at the bottom and hang vertically on tree.

Doughnuts: Decorate doughnuts with a sprig of red-berried holly. Loop a red ribbon through hole in doughnut and hang it on tree.

Cranberry Rings: String cranberries on wire strong enough to hold its shape when drawn into a circle. Tie cranberries into a 4-inch circle, leaving enough wire for hanging.

Orange Basket: Make three holes equidistant around the edge of half an orange shell. Push ends of a 12-inch pipe cleaner through two of the holes. Push the end of another pipe cleaner through the third hole and twist it around the center of the first pipe cleaner. Leave the remaining 6 inches for a hanger. Fill with nuts and cranberries.

Peanut Butter Pinecones: Twist florist wire around pinecone and fasten, leaving a length for hanging. Spread peanut butter on crevices of pinecones and wire to the tree.

Dried Apple Rings: Core an apple and cut into rings, let dry. Tie the apple rings in clusters with red yarn and hang on tree.

FOR THE STAR: Mount a 6-inch Styrofoam ball on a 3-foot dowel that is one half inch in diameter. Push wire through peanut shells using eight to twelve peanuts. Glue around the wire where it goes into the ball. Force stalks of millet and sorghum into Styrofoam ball.

Cover the ball with gumdrops by using toothpicks. Wire the dowel to top of the tree so that the ornament centers on the top.

Games

Sharing

You will need:

Treats for the class—but only half as many as you normally need—and napkins.

To Start:

Have children wash their hands. Choose a helper to pass out napkins. Choose another child to pass out the food. Ask children to wait until every thing has been passed out. Have the children suggest solutions when it is discovered there isn't enough to go around. Listen to all the possible solutions; then encourage the group to decide on the best idea. Praise the class for their resolution and willingness to share.

Variation: Pass out a sheet of paper and one crayon to each child. Ask them to draw a picture. Explain that they may use their crayon or trade with friends. When the children have finished, let them show their pictures. Talk about how colorful their pictures are because they learned to share.

Pass the Parcel

This is a game English children play.

You will need:

A small box, tape, tissue paper or comics from the newspaper, one sticker or other treat for each child, music. Put the treats in the box and wrap a layer of tissue paper or funny papers around it. Continue wrapping more layers around the box. (Ten layers work well. Or make enough layers so each child in the room can unwrap the package.)

To start:

Have the children sit in a circle and explain that this is a game that children in England like to play at parties. It's called "Pass the Parcel" because in England people call a package a "parcel." The game is played by passing the package around the circle while music plays. When the music stops, whoever is hold-

Activities

(con't)

ing the parcel may unwrap one layer. When the music starts, they must continue passing the parcel. (If it stops at a child who has already unwrapped a layer, then the package is passed to the next child who has not had a turn.) Play the game until the last layer is unwrapped. The person holding the box may then pass out the treats to the rest of the class.

Ask: "How do you think children in England are like you? What game would you like to teach children in England?"

Variations: Let the children wrap the package for the game. Wrap a book, puzzle or new toy the whole class can enjoy.

Detective Work

I. Answer the following questions about Scrooge as if he lived now.

favorite TV show _____
movie or author _____
expression _____
color _____
weather _____
sport _____
smell _____
food _____
biggest pet peeve _____
political affiliation _____

If he were a member of a musical group, what would be its name?

II. Now anonymously answer the same questions of yourself.

favorite TV show _____
movie or author _____
expression _____
color _____
weather _____
sport _____
smell _____

food _____
biggest pet peeve _____
political affiliation _____

If you were a member of a musical group, what would its name be? _____

After 15 minutes collect the questionnaires, mix them up and redistribute one to each student, checking that students do not get their own.

Instruction to students: you have been given some information about a classmate. Use that information to make some inferences about that person as you answer the following questions. Draw the best conclusions you can and state the reason(s) for your conclusions. Some conclusions you will feel more certain of than others, but make your best guess.

What is your classmate's favorite subject in school? Why do you think so?

What is your classmate's favorite fast food? How did you decide this?

Describe his/her favorite activities.

How would his/her room be decorated?

What jobs or professions will your classmate have ten years from now? Why?

What will his/her home or apartment be like ten years from now?

The following day ask students to describe their classmate's responses to the first questionnaire and their own inferences, conclude by guessing who the classmate is; to maintain suspense, keep the real identities secret to the end.

Follow-up Discussion:

1. How hard was it to come up with these answers?
2. Can you get any kind of a picture of the individual from the information given?
3. How often do we make choices without realizing it and how often do the inferences upon which our choices are based turn out to be only partially correct?
4. How does this influence the way we communicate and relate to others?

Activities

(con't)

AFTER THE PLAY

Most of Dickens' novels are concerned with the social and political problems of Victorian England.

Questions

1. Do you think *A Christmas Carol* stimulated reform at the time in which it was first published?
2. How did you feel after the show?
3. Do you think Charles Dickens could have ended *A Christmas Carol* differently? If yes, how?
4. Who was your favorite character? Why?
5. Pretend it is one year later, after the story ends. What do you think will be different about Scrooge the next Christmas? What about Bob Cratchit? Mrs. Cratchit? Tiny Tim?
6. Write a short version of this story from another character's perspective. Pretend you are Mrs. Cratchit or Scrooge's nephew Fred. Tell the story as they might perceive it. How would they explain Scrooge's change of heart?
7. One facet of Dickens' genius was his talent for transforming the most ordinary people into memorable figures. Choose five characters from Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* and describe the devices he used to make these characters unforgettable.

Improv

For an improvised scene you need elements: Who—people in the scene, ages, relationships to one another, relevant background material. Names are used to distinguish characters of the same general type. The actors with audience support should develop a brief history for the characters and their previous interactions. What—actual content of the scene. Remember that each student approaches the “what” in terms of his/her own assigned “who.” Where—this is the suggested location in which

the scene takes place.

What would happen if—a list of questions that suggest variations on the “who,” “what” and “where” that you might want to try out.

Things to think about—a list of questions that help explore while working on the scene. The information might then be worked into the scene depending on the direction of the scene (i.e., if your group members are learning for themselves, sharing information with others, or both).

Identifying resources in your community that can respond to your questions is an important part of this process. New information becomes available almost daily in many of these topic areas, and your group will want and need to know it.

Scenario: The Soup Kitchen

Who—Perry is 17 years old and spends Monday nights helping in the soup kitchen at a local church. Reed is 15 years old and has not helped in the kitchen before.

What—Reed thought that working at the soup kitchen would be very sad. He is surprised by the joviality of the people and their diversity both racially and educationally. The scene starts as they are leaving.

Outside the church, in the evening.

What would happen if—

Reed has a negative attitude about some of the people who were at the kitchen?

Reed isn't sure how to react to some of the people with disabilities and asks Perry what to do?

Reed is surprised by how much he or she enjoyed working with the kitchen staff and wants to know how he or she can become a full-time volunteer?

Things to think about—

How would you react to working with the disabled?

What other types of community service are there in your community?

How does volunteering help your community?

How does it help you?

Activities

(con't)

Recommended Reading: The following works are recommended as “read-to’s,” “read-alongs” and “read-about’s” to extend the spirit of the holiday season.

- Bolton, Philip H. *Dickens Dramatized*. Boston, MA: Mansell, 1987. Dramatizations of Dickens’ work.
- Briggs, Raymond. *Father Christmas*. New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, 1973. British writer/illustrator, Briggs tweaks the reader’s nose as he gives us his version of Santa Claus grumbling his way (“Blooming soot!” “Blooming chimneys!” “Blooming snow!”) through his beloved labor. A hilarious glimpse, vibrantly illustrated, of the right jolly old elf.
- Dickens, Charles. A Christmas Carol in *The Christmas Books, vol. I*. New York: Penguin, 1984. This story exists in many editions, but its original version is as fresh and touching today as when it was written nearly 150 years ago.
- Dickens, Charles. “The Story of the Goblins Who Stole a Sexton” in the *Complete Ghost Stories of Charles Dickens*. Edited by Peter Haining. CT: Franklin Watts, 1983. Dickens, who loved to tell and write ghost stories, also gave the world the story of stingy, ill-humored Gabriel Grub, sexton and grave-digger, years before he wrote *A Christmas Carol*. The goblins, offended by the way Grub “keeps Christmas,” decide to “show the man of misery and gloom a few pictures from (their) own great storehouse,” which make him a changed man. Much shorter than *A Christmas Carol*, this story lends itself well to dramatization and is a good example of Dickens’ writing.
- Fraser, James Howard. *Las Posadas; A Christmas Story*. Illus. Nick Degrazia. MI: Northland Press, 1963. A Mexican Christmas story with wonderful illustrations for children.
- Harris, Jessica B. *A Kwanzaa Keepsake: Celebrating the Holiday with New Traditions and Feasts*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995. A book containing social life, customs and cookery of African Americans celebrating this holiday.
- Johnson, Barbara. *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*. New York: Harper & Row, 1972. Excellent modern portrayal of the real meaning of Christmas. The horrible Herdsman children, “absolutely the worst kids in the history of the world...lied and stole and smoked cigars (even the girls) and talked dirty and hit little kids and cussed their teachers,” are cast as the leads into the holiday show at school.
- Lane, Julie. *The Life and Adventures of Santa Claus*. New York: Equity Publishing Corp., 1932; reprinted, 1979. In this story of Nicholas the Wandering Orphan, the author unifies all the different cultural traditions into one story: gift-giving, toy-making, prancing reindeer, stocking-filling, the first tree decorating, coming down the chimney and finally how Nicholas came to be known as “Saint Nicholas” and “Santa Claus.”
- Madhubuti, Safisha L. *The Story of Kwanzaa*. Chicago: Third World Press, 1989. Contains the story of the holiday and material about African folklore.
- Moeri, Louise. *Star Mother’s Youngest Child*. Illus. by Trina Schart. Boston: Hyman, Houghton Mifflin, 1975. The life of a grumpy old woman who had never properly celebrated Christmas is changed the year that the Star Mother’s youngest child comes to earth to find out what Christmas is all about.
- Moore, Clement C. *The Night Before Christmas*. Illus. by Grandma Moses. New York: Random House, 1961. This enduring poem is in an oversized book and is a treasure to share.
- Seuss, Dr. *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*. New York: Random House, 1957. A modern children’s classic.
- Van Allsburg, Chris. *The Polar Express*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1985. Another delightful Christmas story for children.

Activities

(con't)

The Following Colorado Model Content Standards are used in the Activities

Students apply knowledge of the past to analyze present-day issues and events from multiple, historically objective perspectives.

Colorado Model Content Standard: History #2.3

Students understand that societies are diverse and have changed over time.

Colorado Model Content Standard: History #3

Students know that religious and philosophical ideas have been powerful forces throughout history.

Colorado Model Content Standard: History #6

Students apply thinking skills to their reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing.

Colorado Model Content Standard: Reading and Writing #4

Students read to locate, select, and make use of relevant information from a variety of media, reference, and technological sources.

Colorado Model Content Standard: Reading and Writing #5

Bibliography

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Did you know that Dickens was nearly bankrupted by the publication of *A Christmas Carol*? Did you know that Dickens is responsible for the way we celebrate a modern Christmas? Learn about these things and more in this charming book.

Watch! *Christmas Unwrapped: The History of Christmas* (The History Channel, 1998)

Christmas as we know it is not a terribly old tradition. This documentary explores the various traditional winter festivals that inform and inspire the ways in which we celebrate Christmas today, here and around the world.

Listen! *The Music of Dickens and His Time* by The Seven Dials Band

The Seven Dials Band presents renditions of such Victorian favorites as “The Ratcatcher’s Daughter” and “Home, Sweet Home,” but the fun doesn’t stop there! Also included are songs written by Dickens himself: “The Ivy Green” and “Mr. Wardle’s Carol” from *The Pickwick Papers* and pieces from his comic operetta, *The Village Coquette*.

Download! *Holidays on Ice* by David Sedaris

Sometimes you need a break from holly and mistletoe, so rest assured that you can turn to ex-Macy’s Elf David Sedaris to offer some reprieve. This collection of essays is a wonderful alternative holiday read. With tongue in cheek humor and a wry attention to detail, Sedaris transforms an otherwise austere holiday into a ribald and funny look at modern life. This title is available for download as an eBook as well as Audio eBook in the David Sedaris Box Set.



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