

Charles Dickens, A Christmas Carol

English Literature, Level II

🕒 20



Dickens | Scrooge | christmas12



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How has A Christmas Carol contributed to Christmas as we know it today?

Brief

Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* (1843) not only revived contemporary interest in Christmas but helped elevate the holiday to its pre-eminent position as a commercial, family-centred festival of good will.

A Christmas Carol has been adapted for film and television more than any other literary text. We examine how Dickens fused elements of humanism, paganism and Christianity into a compact and enduring message of hope.



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CHARLES DICKENS AND THE INVENTION OF CHRISTMAS



A Christmas Carol had an enduring impact on the way the Victorians viewed Christmas. Today, readers still recognise its evocation of food, family, and generosity as the quintessential elements of Christmas. The story's continued popularity also reflects the way in which it downplays religious observance, instead speaking to modern, secular ideas of “good will”.

The Invention of Tradition

Dickens grew up during the Regency (formally, c.1811-1820), when Twelfth Night (January 6th), not Christmas Day, was the focus for celebrations and gifts. Christmas became a Bank Holiday in 1834, but was not a *paid* holiday until 1871 — which explains why Scrooge threatens to dock Cratchit's pay for spending Christmas with his family.



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In 1833, the antiquarian William Sandys published his *Selection of Christmas Carols, Ancient and Modern*, which contributed to a wider movement to restore the prominence of Christmas Day. When Victoria came to the throne in 1837, her German husband Prince Albert introduced Yule traditions like the Christmas tree. Many middle-class Victorians were soon imitating the royal family.



Queen Victoria and family – the image that popularised the tradition of the Christmas tree. Dickens caught this wave of enthusiasm in *A Christmas Carol*. Many new Victorian ‘traditions’ appear in the story, including carols, presents, turkey and Christmas pudding. The emphasis on family is expressed through the Cratchits, who gather lovingly around the fire:

“A Merry Christmas to us all, my dears. God bless us!”

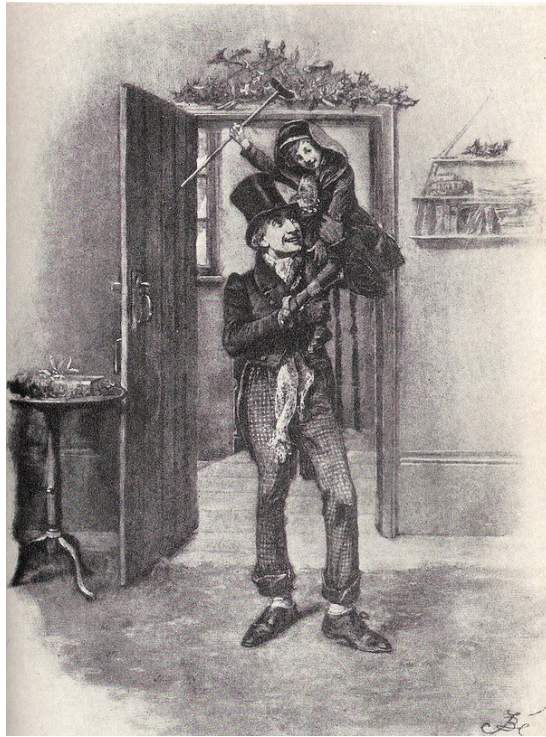
Which all the family re-echoed.

“God bless us every one!” said Tiny Tim, the last of all.

“God bless us every one!” (repeated at the novella’s end) is the antidote to Scrooge’s equally famous utterance, “Bah! Humbug!” Coming from a fragile,



disabled child, this central message of universal inclusion is powerful. Dickens is sometimes criticised for sentimentality, but Tiny Tim packs a big cathartic punch. His premature death, the consequence of poverty, is shown by The Ghost of Christmas Yet To Come. Yet Dickens pulls off the trick of having Tim die, only to live again. Christmas morning becomes Easter too: Scrooge's transformation resurrects the child: "to Tiny Tim, who did NOT die, he was a second father."



Bob Cratchit carrying Tiny Tim by Frederick Barnard

Christmas without Christ?

A *Christmas Carol* exploits religious sensation without enlisting doctrine. Scrooge begins the story "an old sinner" and ends up attending church, yet his conversion is not strictly Christian. His visitations from ghosts coloured by paganism and gothic supernaturalism, rather than from angels. The message they impart is humanist — that each of us can change our lives. In a sense, the ghosts dramatise the secular ritual of New Year, when we look both behind and ahead, reflecting on how we could do better.



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Janus, Roman god of beginnings, gates and transitions, and associated with New Year, bears comparison to the Ghosts of past, present and future.

Victorian England was a Christian society divided as much as united by religion. Outside the Anglican majority (which included Dickens) were fervent non-conformists, some of whom feared pagan undercurrents in Christmas. The Hebrew name Ebenezer had been popular among Calvinists: Ebenezer Erskine, for example, founded the Presbyterian Church in 1733. Like a stern puritan, Scrooge is impatient with frivolity and excess.

But Dickens never explicitly pinpoints Scrooge's background. He hints at possible Jewishness — a former partner called Jacob, a money-lending business, hostility to Christmas — but we also see the younger Scrooge celebrating Christmas. Scrooge has the bitterness of Shylock and the meanness of a Sabbatarian, those pious killjoys, hated by Dickens, who opposed recreational activity on Sundays. Yet Scrooge sometimes seems closest to atheism — “I won't believe it!” — and his supernatural awakening is curiously pagan. The Ghost of Christmas Present, bedecked in fur with “genial face”, “sparkling eye” and “cheery voice” is part Dionysus, part Saturn, part



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Clement Moore's twinkling-eyed elf from his 1822 poem, 'The Night Before Christmas'.



Bacchus, also known as Dionysus, Greek god of wine and pleasure.

Beyond Religion

Although no Catholic, Dickens had a curious dream in Italy in 1844, in which he was visited by the spirit of his dead sister-in-law in the guise of the Virgin Mary. In his account of the dream, he asks a revealing question:

Do you think, as I do, that the form of religion does not greatly matter, if we try to do good?

This was a progressive idea for the time — that a greater ideal of human goodness exists beyond religion differences. Scrooge comes to embody this ideal:

He became as good a friend, as good a master, and as good a man, as the good old city knew, or any other good old city, town, or borough, in the good old world.

At the last, “good” — meaning generosity, not piety — radiates outwards from



Scrooge to make the whole world benign. If we remember the less fortunate on Christmas Day, as well as those we love, we continue to subscribe to the Dickens's vision of Christmas.

Dr Tessa Peres & Joe Francis



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There are **three** preparatory tasks (the third is optional):

1. Read this passage from *A Christmas Carol*, in which Bob Cratchit, Scrooge's underpaid clerk, celebrates Christmas with his family. What does the narrator imply about the Cratchits' Christmas pudding?

Oh, a wonderful pudding! Bob Cratchit said, and calmly too, that he regarded it as the greatest success achieved by Mrs. Cratchit since their marriage. Mrs. Cratchit said that now the weight was off her mind, she would confess she had had her doubts about the quantity of flour. Everybody had something to say about it, but nobody said or thought it was at all a small pudding for a large family. It would have been flat heresy to do so. Any Cratchit would have blushed to hint at such a thing. At last the dinner was all done, the cloth was cleared, the hearth swept, and the fire made up. The compound* in the jug being tasted, and considered perfect, apples and oranges were put upon the table, and a shovel-full of chestnuts on the fire. Then all the Cratchit family drew round the hearth, in what Bob Cratchit called a circle, meaning half a one; and at Bob Cratchit's elbow stood the family display of glass. Two



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tumblers, and a custard-cup without a handle.

These held the hot stuff from the jug, however, as well as golden goblets would have done; and Bob served it out with beaming looks, while the chestnuts on the fire sputtered and cracked noisily. Then Bob proposed: “A Merry Christmas to us all, my dears. God bless us!”

Which all the family re-echoed.

“God bless us every one!” said Tiny Tim, the last of all.

*compound: the Cratchits are drinking a warm punch containing gin and lemon.

2. Watch this video in which actor Simon Callow discusses Dickens’ motivations for writing *A Christmas Carol*. Why did Dickens make so little money from such a successful publication?



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<https://youtu.be/OJ7qLW0VYhA>

3. (Optional) An entire Wikipedia page is devoted to Adaptations of *A Christmas Carol*, whether for stage, cinema, TV, radio, or even opera and ballet. Glance at it to get a sense of the scale of the Scrooge industry. Which adaptations have you encountered?

Adaptations of A Christmas Carol - Wikipedia

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A Christmas Carol, the popular 1843 novella by Charles Dickens (1812–1870), is one of the British author's best-known works. It is the story of Ebenezer Scrooge, a greedy miser who hates Christmas, but is transformed into a caring, kindly person through the visitations of four ghosts (Jacob Marley and the ghosts of Christmas past, present, and future). The classic work has been dramatised and adapted countless times for virtually every medium and performance genre, and new versions appear regularly.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adaptations_of_A_Christmas_Carol



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