

# **'A Christmas Carol' – Aim Higher – Wider Reading**

**Read the articles. Make notes of key ideas on this front page.**

**1) Charles Dickens and the Victorian Christmas Feast**

**2) Malthus and Scrooge: Dickens & Economics**

**3) Ghosts in 'A Christmas Carol'**

**4) The Origins of 'A Christmas Carol'**

**5) The 'Real' Reason Dickens wrote 'A Christmas Carol'**

## 1) Charles Dickens and the Victorian Christmas feast

Simon Callow explores Charles Dickens's depiction of the Christmas feast and investigates the origins of England's festive culinary traditions.

Charles Dickens's conception of Christmas is fundamentally connected to the idea of feasting, which is profoundly expressive of the human happiness that he believed the festival should promote. It plugs directly into the medieval and pagan idea of defying the evil forces apparently overtaking nature, as well as a storing-up of resources to face the wintery fight ahead.

For Dickens, it is the coming together of people around a table, the celebration of their humanity, the sharing of their bounty, the reward of indulgence (even if that is only once a year) that is the essence of the meal. For an abstemious man, his ability to render simple food and drink overwhelmingly desirable is astonishing. But behind the sensuality always lies the symbol. The preparation is as life-enhancing as the consumption. 'The party always takes place at uncle George's house', he writes in *A Christmas Dinner*, the first Christmas piece he wrote:

*...but grandmamma sends in most of the good things, and grandpapa always will toddle down, all the way to Newgate Market, to buy the turkey, which he engages a porter to bring home behind him in triumph, always insisting on the man's being rewarded with a glass of spirits, over and above his hire, to drink 'a merry Christmas' and 'a happy new year' to aunt George. As to grandmamma, she is very secret and mysterious for two or three days beforehand, but not sufficiently so to prevent rumours getting afloat that she has purchased a beautiful new cap with pink ribbons for each of the servants, together with sundry books, and pen knives, and pencil cases, for the younger branches; to say nothing of divers secret additions to the order originally given by- aunt George at the pastry cook's, such as another dozen of mince pies for the dinner, and a large plum cake for the children. On Christmas Eve, grandmamma is always in excellent spirits, and after employing all the children, during the day, in stoning the plums, and all that, insists, regularly every year, on uncle George coming down into the kitchen, taking off his coat, and stirring the pudding for half an hour or so, which uncle George good-humouredly does, to the vociferous delight of the children and servants.*

The valiant struggle of the Cratchits (the impoverished hard-working family in Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*) to make their meagre ingredients feel like a feast is triumphantly successful, and one of the most affecting sections of the novel.

*There never was such a goose. Bob said he didn't believe there ever was such a goose cooked. Its tenderness and flavour, size and cheapness, were the themes of universal admiration. Eked out by apple-sauce and mashed potatoes, it was a sufficient dinner for the whole family; indeed, as Mrs Cratchit said with great delight (surveying one small atom of a bone upon the dish), they hadn't ate it all at last! Yet everyone had had enough, and the youngest Cratchits in particular, were steeped in sage and onion to the eyebrows! But now, the plates being changed by Miss Belinda, Mrs Cratchit left the room alone – too nervous to bear witnesses – to take the pudding up, and bring it in. Suppose it should not be done enough. Suppose it should break in turning out: Suppose somebody should have got over the wall of the back-yard, and stolen it, while they were merry with the goose: a supposition at which the two young Cratchits became livid: all sorts of horrors were supposed. Hallo! a great deal of steam! The pudding was out of the copper. A smell like a washing-day! That was the cloth. A smell like an eatinghouse and a pastry cook's next door to each other, with a laundress's next door to that! That was the pudding! In half a minute Mrs Cratchit entered: flushed, but smiling proudly: with the pudding, like a speckled cannon-ball, so hard and firm, blazing. In half of half-a-quarter of ignited brandy, and bedight with Christmas holly stuck into the top, 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.*

Bob and Martha Cratchit have somehow ensured that on the pitiful wages he has squeezed out of Scrooge, they have on their table – in reduced form, but still there – what every family in England expected to have on a Christmas Day.

## Goose and turkey

The goose had been established as Christmas fare since the time of Elizabeth I, although it was a luxury only affordable by a poor man if he belonged to a Goose Club, paying in so much a week, and, of course, being cheated along the way. The Temperance Movement waged a war against the consumption of alcohol and took aim at the Goose Clubs, which were often equivalent to pubs and which lured their members into spending their nugatory salaries on the demon drink.

A goose, like the Cratchits' would be cooked at the bakers; few working-class households had ovens, so the baker, for a small consideration, would leave his alight on Christmas Day. This is where the younger Cratchits go to fetch the goose. Thanks to the influx of poultry from France and Germany in the 1840s, geese became much more readily available. Turkey too, had a long tradition of Christmas consumption – since the 16th century when it was introduced to Europe by the conquistadors – and was being reared in ever greater quantities, mostly in Norfolk, Suffolk and Cambridge. It was a considerable task to get turkeys to the metropolis. The birds had to walk, their feet shod or wrapped in rags or coated with tar; the journey down could take weeks. Later, they were slaughtered on the farms and conveyed by coach, a three-day journey; with the development of railways they became more accessible to the general population. The poulterers stayed open on Christmas Day, which is how Scrooge was able to order one in the excitement of his new conversion. In some households – not the Cratchits', alas – the bird was surmounted by a string of sausages served up in a string; this was called the alderman's chain.

## The Christmas pudding and mince pies

The Christmas pudding, that was such a feature of the Cratchits' Christmas, was on every menu, and the making of it was a central event of the holiday period. 'In a household where there are five or six children, the eldest not above ten or eleven, the making of the pudding is indeed an event', reported the *Illustrated London News* in 1848:

*It is thought of days, if not weeks, before. To be allowed to share in the noble work, is a prize for young ambition... Lo! the lid is raised, curiosity stands on tip-toe, eyes sparkle with anticipation, little hands are clapped in extasy, almost too great to find expression in words. The hour arrives – the moment wished and feared – wished, oh! How intensely; feared, not in the event, but lest envious fate should not allow it to be an event, and mar the glorious Concoction in its very birth. And then when it is dished, when all fears of this kind are over, when the roast beef has been removed, when the pudding, in all the glory of its own splendour, shines upon the table, how eager is the anticipation of the near delight! How beautifully it steams! How delicious it smells! How round it is! A kiss is round, the horizon is round, the earth is round, the moon is round, the sun and stars, and all the host of heaven are round. So is plum pudding.*

The same paper regarded British prowess in this area as a matter of patriotic pride: 'the French have no idea how to make a plum pudding, but some friendly genius instructed the English in the art ... the plum pudding symbolises so much English antiquity – English superstition – English enterprise – English generosity – and above all, English taste'. It was generally regarded as something of a marvel. The Cratchits' pudding – prepared in their copper washing tub – was accompanied by a wave of excitement:

*Hallo! a great deal of steam! The pudding was out of the copper. A smell like a washing-day That was the cloth. A smell like an eating house and a pastry cook's next door to each other, with a laundress's next door to that! That was the pudding! In half a minute Mrs Cratchit entered: flushed, but smiling proudly: with the pudding, like a speckled cannon-ball, so hard and firm, blazing. In half of half-a-quarter of ignited brandy, and bedight with Christmas holly stuck into the top, 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.*

In Boz's early sketch describing a Christmas dinner, there is a similar level of excitement:

*when, at last, a stout servant staggers in with a gigantic pudding, with a sprig of holly in the top, there is such a laughing, and shouting, and clapping of little chubby hands, and kicking up of fat dumpy legs, as can only be equalled by the applause with which the astonishing feat of pouring lighted brandy into mince pies is received by the younger visitors. Then the dessert! and the wine!*

Like mince pies, which were originally made with shredded meat, the plum pudding had contained boiled beef and mutton, and was actually a form of frumenty (a thick wheat porridge popular in medieval Europe), containing in addition raisins, currants, prunes, wines and spices. It became plum pudding – plum because of the prunes which were used in its making before the use of raisins – when it was thickened with eggs, breadcrumbs, dried fruit, ale and spirits. The Puritans of course banned it – far too many enjoyable ingredients – and it was not restored till the reign of George I. The Church decreed that puddings should be made on the 25th Sunday after Trinity, and prepared with 13 ingredients to represent Christ and the 12 Apostles; it was to be stirred by every family member in turn from east to west, in honour of the Wise Men and their supposed journey in that direction. Mince pies seem to have had their origin in a representation of Christ's manger; they were oblong, and in-side was a pastry baby. According to tradition, if one ate a mince pie on each of the 12 days of Christmas, one would have twelve days of happiness, which was, in a sense, what the whole feast was about: enjoying oneself so much that it would last the year until it returned.

### **Mulled wine**

The mulled wine offered immediate gratification. The Cratchits' was, like everything else at their feast, cheaply made:

*Bob, turning up his cuffs – as if, poor fellow, they were capable of being made more shabby – compounded some hot mixture in a jug with gin and lemons, and stirred it round and round and put it on the hob to simmer.*

But it is sufficient to its purpose.

*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 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 crackled noisily. Then Bob proposed: 'A Merry Christmas to us all, my dears. God bless us!'*

When Scrooge – who is shortly, if reluctantly, to be toasted by the Cratchits, or at least some of them – in his reformed state wants to sit and talk to Bob about his plans for Bob's future, he does so over a smoking bishop – which is made by pouring red wine (so much more expensive than the gin which Bob uses) – over bitter oranges and mulling the liquid in a vessel with a long funnel, after which sugar and spices are added. The purple hue resulting from this process gives it its association with bishops.

### **Rich and poor**

Dickens had great faith in the humanising power of the Christmas feast. He was thinking, as always, principally of the poor, and in his next Christmas book he positively attacks the rich, not so much for their wealth as for their indifference to the suffering of others. But the idea of marking Christmas with abundance runs through his writings. Despite David Copperfield's dismal Christmas dinner with a cowed Joe Gargery and an implacable Mrs Joe, and notwithstanding his setting of the murder in *Edwin Drood* on Christmas Day, he happily sketches in a scene of Christmas contentment in the story which he read to such powerful sentimental effect, 'Dr Marigold'. At the climax of the story, the travelling salesman settles into his cart for Christmas:

*I had had a first rate autumn of it, and on the twenty-third of December, one thousand eight hundred and sixty-four, I found myself at Uxbridge, Middlesex, clean sold out. So I jogged up to London with the old horse, light and easy, to have my Christmas Eve and Christmas Day alone by the fire in the Library Cart, and then to buy a regular new stock of goods all round, to sell 'em again and get the money. I am a neat hand at cookery, and I'll tell you that I knocked up for my Christmas Eve dinner in the Library Cart. I knocked up a beefsteak pudding for one, with two kidneys, a dozen oysters, and a couple of mushrooms, thrown in. It's a pudding to put a man in good humour with everything, except the two bottom buttons of his waistcoat.*

## 2) Malthus and Scrooge: How Charles Dickens Put Holly Branch Through The Heart Of The Worst Economics Ever

*Since you ask me what I wish, gentlemen, that is my answer. I don't make merry myself at Christmas and I can't afford to make idle people merry. I help to support the establishments I have mentioned: they cost enough: and those who are badly off must go there." "Many can't go there; and many would rather die." "If they would rather die," said Scrooge, "they had better do it, and decrease the surplus population."*

That phrase--surplus population--is what first tipped me off to Dickens' philosophical agenda. He's taking aim at the father of the zero-growth philosophy, Thomas Malthus. Malthus' ideas were still current in British intellectual life at the time *A Christmas Carol* was written. Malthus, himself, had joined the surplus generation only nine years before. But his ideas have proved more durable.

What was Dickens really doing when he wrote *A Christmas Carol*? Answer: He was weighing in on one of the central economic debates of his time, the one that raged between Thomas Malthus and one of the disciples of Adam Smith.

Malthus famously argued that in a world in which economies grew arithmetically and population grew geometrically, mass want would be inevitable. His *Essay on Population* created a school of thought which continues to this day under the banners of Zero Population Growth and Sustainability. The threat of a "population bomb" under which my generation lived was Paul Ehrlich's modern rehashing of the Malthusian argument about the inability of productivity to keep pace with, let alone exceed, population growth.

Jean Baptiste Say, Smith's most influential disciple, argued on the other hand, as had his mentor, that the gains from global population growth, spread over vast expanses of trading, trigger gains from a division of labor which exceed those ever thought possible before the rise of the market order.

Guess whose ideas Charles Dickens put into the mouth of his antagonist Ebenezer Scrooge.

"And the Union workhouses?" demanded Scrooge. "Are they still in operation? ... If they would rather die," said Scrooge, "they had better do it, and decrease the surplus population."

Interesting, isn't it? Later in the story, the Ghost of Christmas Present reminds Scrooge of his earlier words and then adds about Tiny Tim:

"What then? If he be like to die, he had better do it, and decrease the surplus population." Scrooge hung his head to hear his own words quoted by the Spirit, and was overcome with penitence and grief.

"Man," said the Ghost, "if man you be in heart, not adamant, forbear that wicked cant until you have discovered What the surplus is, and Where it is. Will you decide what men shall live, what men shall die? It may be, that in the sight of Heaven, you are more worthless and less fit to live than millions like this poor man's child. Oh God! To hear the Insect on the leaf pronouncing on the too much life among his hungry brothers in the dust."

Interesting also, that Ehrlich was not an economist, agronomist or even demographer but rather an etymologist, an expert in insect biology. Malthusianism is, indeed, the philosophy of the bug heap, of man as devouring swarm rather than ennobling angel.

The Ghost of Christmas Present is the key to understanding Dickens' political and economic philosophy. He is the symbol of abundance. He literally and figuratively holds a cornucopia, a horn of plenty. While he wears a scabbard at his side, it is bereft of sword and neglected in care. Peace and plenty.

When Scrooge asks him how many brothers he has, the ghost replies "More than 1,800." When Scrooge declares that this is a 'tremendous family to provide for,' the ghost rises in anger. And then he takes Scrooge where? To the university economics department? To the socialist meeting house? No, he takes Scrooge to the market, and shows him the abundance there, especially the fruits (sometimes literal) of foreign trade:

"There were great, round, pot-bellied baskets of chestnuts, shaped like the waistcoats of jolly old gentlemen, lolling at the doors, and tumbling out into the street in their apoplectic opulence. There were ruddy, brown-faced, broad-girthed Spanish Friars... There were pears and apples, clustered high in blooming pyramids; there were bunches of grapes, made, in the shopkeepers' benevolence to dangle from conspicuous hooks, ... there were piles of filberts, mossy and brown, ... there were Norfolk Biffins, squab and swarthy, setting off the yellow of the oranges and lemons, and, in the great compactness of their juicy persons, urgently entreating and beseeching to be carried home in paper bags and eaten after dinner."

Onions from Spain, grapes from the Mediterranean and citrus from the equatorial regions. How else could one eat oranges in England in winter? At the end of their Christmas feast, the poor Cratchits eat, yes, oranges. How else, other than through international trade, could the poor afford oranges? Surely, Christmas Present, and his creator Mr. Dickens, and his teacher Mr. Say, are true disciples of Mr. Smith.

Ironically, this made Scrooge a much less wealthy man than he could have been. He was a miser, not an entrepreneur, because his economic philosophy was a miserly one, not an entrepreneurial one. Look at Scrooge's mentor Fezziwig, who had two apprentices and dozens of employees.

By contrast Scrooge, even as an old man, had no apprentices and only one employee, a low wage and low skilled one at that. Where was Scrooge's ambition? What was his plan for expansion?

Michael Dell is reported to have started his dream with an image of a large building filled with employees with a flag pole outside. But Scrooge didn't even update his Scrooge and Marley sign upon the death of his partner seven years after the event, preferring to let rust simply erase the latter's name. What entrepreneur thinks that way? Scrooge and Marley is basically a collection agency micro-business, whose proprietor did not even make the Forbes 15 List of Wealthiest Fictional Characters.

When Scrooge's nephew Fred presses his uncle to reveal the cause of their alienation, Scrooge exclaims "Why did you marry?" This is not a change of subject; it is another bitter fruit of the old man's anti-natal philosophy. Small wonder then, that after Scrooge's conversion he spends Christmas day with his nephew's family and cheerfully watches Topper court Fred's wife's "plump sister."

If Scrooge has modern counterparts, they're more likely to be found among those sad, self-sterilizing minimizers of carbon footprints than in the circles of supply-side entrepreneurs. Who, after all, could claim to a smaller carbon footprint than the man who tried to heat his office with a single piece of coal?

The debate between Say and Malthus, between Scrooge and the Ghosts, continues to this day. Is the market economy a source of abundance or shortage? Is each new little boy or a girl mostly mouth, or mostly mind? Is it a Say/(Julian) Simon/Forbes/Wanniski/Gilder world, or is it a Keynes/Ehrlich/Krugman/Gore world?

Malthus taught the world to fear new people. An amateur economist, he created a theoretical model which allegedly proved that mass starvation was an inevitable result of population growth. Populations grow, he said, geometrically, but wealth only grows arithmetically. In other words, new people create more new people, but new food doesn't create new food.

Malthus' influence, unfortunately, grew geometrically and not arithmetically. His ideas provided fodder for Darwin, and Darwin's lesser mutations used the model to argue for the value of mass human extinction.

Hitler's hard eugenics and Sanger's (founder of Planned Parenthood) softer one, both owed a great debt of gratitude to Thomas Malthus. So do the zero-growth, sustainable-growth, right-to-die, duty-to-die, life boat bio-ethicists who dominate so much of our intellectual discussion. Malthus turned out to be, ironically, right in some sense. His prediction of mass death has taken place; not because he was right, but because he was believed.

In other words Malthusianism is a grizzly form of economic self-fulfilling prophecy. Dickens, I think, saw that first. Ebenezer Scrooge was clearly a Malthusian. When he turns away an opportunity for alms giving, he uses the zero growth rationale. When he meets the Ghost of Christmas Present, he reiterates it:

"You have never seen the like of me before!" exclaimed the Spirit.

"Never," Scrooge made answer to it.

"Have never walked forth with the younger members of my family; meaning (for I am very young) my elder brothers born in these later years?" pursued the Phantom.

"I don't think I have," said Scrooge. "I am afraid I have not. Have you had many brothers, Spirit?"

"More than eighteen hundred," said the Ghost.

"A tremendous family to provide for!" muttered Scrooge.

At this, the Ghost rose in indignation. Scrooge cowers and submits. Then the ghost raises his torch (in the shape of a cornucopia) and leads Scrooge to the public market, brimming with food from all around the world. Dickens especially

emphasizes the fruits of trade: almonds, Spanish onions and oranges (in winter, no less). The message is clear: Use your eyes, man, just look around and see that the dirge-ists of the day are wrong. England, even with its poor classes, is a prosperous society. The world is abundant. Rest is possible. So is generosity.

Scrooge's philosophy is not one based on the evidence; he ignores the evidence. He keeps setting aside the evidence of his senses with reference to the secular philosophy of his time. When he sees a spirit, he says that it's just a piece of undigested beef causing him to hallucinate. He denies the realm of the spirit until it becomes simply undeniable.

Scrooge is in need of all of this "reclamation" (to quote the Ghost of Christmas Past) partly because he grew up in an atmosphere of want. Dickens makes a point of describing not just the emotional deprivation of Scrooge's early life (made clear in all of the movies) but also the material deprivation of the boarding school in which he spent his formative years (not portrayed in film versions). "There was an earthy savor in the air, a chilly bareness in the place, which associated itself somehow with too much getting up by candlelight, and not too much to eat." Note that hunger specifically is mentioned.

Already an old man, when the story was set in the first half of the 18th century, Scrooge would have grown up before the triumph of the Smithian ideas and the repeal of the hunger-inducing, protectionist "corn laws." The psychology of the story is mixed with the economics and history of it.

Scrooge was a man whose present was distorted by his past. The old order, of monopoly and protection and tariff and hunger, gave him a nearly indelible sense of the inherent scarcity of the world. The only thing which rendered Malthus' ideas plausible to so many people was the shortage associated with command economies. Scrooge, the boy, because a victim of that, believed that want was an ontological necessity, rather than a tragic by-product of state planning.

Scrooge is not following reason; he's following trauma. His mother died when he was young. He was sent to a boarding home where he and the other children were poorly fed. By the time he was brought back from exile to his home (which his sister said is 'like heaven'), the damage to his core personality was done.

Dickens' message is clear enough: The Malthusians of his day did not need evidence (which they ignored every day in the marketplace) or reason. They needed conversion. They needed healing. They needed to be reminded on the day where the world celebrates the birth of a child whom Rome and Herod try to assign to the role of 'surplus population,' that the frightened men who rule the world in the name of scarcity should not be followed, but saved.

Post Script: As I put the final touches on the edit of the article above, with my play list running background music, Isaac Watts' Joy to the World just started playing. Written about a generation before Malthus was born, it captures what Malthus missed, because of his obsessive theological focus on the cursed state of mankind. He was a minister and he built his philosophy on the curse found in the book of Genesis, "cursed is the ground for your sake; in sorrow shall you eat of it all the days of your life; thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to you..." But the story doesn't end with a curse, with thorns and thistles. It moves forward to Christmas. This is why a Christmas Carol is a CHRISTMAS carol, why Dickens' most clear rebuke to Malthus and stagnation is set at Christmas, because Christmas is the reversal of the curse which Malthus could not see past.

*Joy to the World , the Lord is come!*

*Let earth receive her King...*

*No more let sins and sorrows grow,*

*Nor thorns infest the ground;*

*He comes to make His blessings flow*

*Far as the curse is found,*

*Far as the curse is found,*

*Far as, far as, the curse is found.*

### 3) Ghosts in *A Christmas Carol*

**The ghosts in *A Christmas Carol* are by turns comic, grotesque and allegorical. Professor John Mullan reflects on their essential role in developing the novel's meaning and structure.**

There had been ghosts in literature before the Victorians, but the ghost story as a distinct and popular genre was the invention of the Victorians. Charles Dickens was hugely influential in establishing the genre's popularity – not only as a writer but also as an editor: his journals *Household Words* and *All the Year Round* specialised in ghost stories, and other contemporary journals followed. Dickens's close friend and biographer John Forster said that the novelist had 'a hankering after ghosts'. Not that Dickens exactly believed in ghosts – but he was intrigued by our belief in them. In *A Christmas Carol* (1843), the first of his ghost stories, he harnesses that belief by making the supernatural a natural extension of the real world of Scrooge and his victims. This is a long way from the spectres of earlier Gothic fiction.

#### **The terrible and the comic**

The first strictly supernatural sight in the story is the door knocker on the outside door of Scrooge's chambers that metamorphoses, as the miser looks at it, into the face of his former partner, Jacob Marley, dead for seven years. 'The hair curiously stirred, as if by breath or hot-air; and though the eyes were wide open, they were perfectly motionless'. Yet Dickens's sense of fantasy brings the horrible and comic together: in the surrounding gloom, the face has 'a dismal light about it, like a bad lobster in a dark cellar'. The weird mix of the terrible and the comic is kept up when Marley's ghost finally appears carrying its chain of cash-boxes, keys, padlocks and the like. Like a parody ghost, its body is transparent, as Scrooge observes. 'Scrooge had often heard it said that Marley had no bowels, but he had never believed it until now' (Stave 1).

#### **City of spectres and animated objects**

On Christmas Eve the city is itself a place of spectres where 'it had not been light all day'. Outside Scrooge's counting house, the fog is so dense 'that although the court was of the narrowest, the houses opposite were mere phantoms'. The bell in a nearby church tower strikes the hours and quarters 'as if its teeth were chattering in its frozen head up there'. After Marley's Ghost has left him, Scrooge looks out of his window and sees 'the air filled with phantoms', many of them chained souls who had once been known to Scrooge (Stave 1). It is like a fantastic vision of the city that Scrooge already knows well. Like Macbeth, Scrooge, because of his sins, sees visions that are for him alone.

#### **Allegory and morality**

The apparitions are inescapable. 'Show me no more!' Scrooge cries to the Ghost of Christmas Past. What he sees is a punishment to him. 'But the relentless Ghost pinioned him in both his arms, and forced him to observe what happened next' (Stave 2). The phantom as literary device enables Dickens to explore the social and moral issues central to his fiction: – poverty, miserliness, guilt, redemption. The ghosts borrow in their appearance from a tradition of allegory. There is the strange child/old man that is Christmas Past, clutching a branch of holly yet trimmed with summer flowers. There is the large and avuncular Ghost of Christmas Present, tinged more and more with age as his visions draw to their close. And there is 'The Phantom' that is the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come, shrouded and 'stately' and mysterious. Their shapes tell you about author's moral design.

#### **Structure and time-consciousness**

The ghosts give the story its irresistibly logical structure, and make Scrooge think that he is prepared for each succeeding visitation. Preparing to meet the second of the three spirits, 'nothing between a baby and a rhinoceros would have astonished him very much' (Stave 3). But of course he is surprised. The Ghost of Christmas Present surprises him by showing him flashes of humour and happiness in the most unlikely of circumstances. And when Scrooge sees the visions revealed by the third of the spirits, he naturally fails to recognise what the reader knows from the first: that the dead man, abandoned after the scavengers have done with him, is himself. Marley's Ghost announces them. 'You will be haunted ... by Three Spirits' (Stave 1). Scrooge is even told at what times they will appear. The ghosts bring fatality to the narrative: Scrooge cannot resist the visions they set before him. He must awake at the destined times to encounter the world that he has made for himself. Time-consciousness is built into the narrative (those bells). The ghosts have only their allotted spans. 'My time is nearly gone,' says Marley's Ghost. 'My time grows short,' observes the first of the three spirits, 'quick!' (Stave 1; Stave 2). Chronology is of the essence: Christmas is a special day made all the more significant by the unfolding of these visions at their hours. On Christmas Eve Marley's Ghost tells Scrooge of three visits in three consecutive nights, but he wakes to find that it is Christmas Day. 'The Spirits have done it all in one night' – which means that he still has the day to redeem himself (Stave 5).

*A Christmas Carol* is a brilliant narrative success, and was a huge commercial coup. It forged the association between Christmas and ghost stories, and led Dickens to write a series of such tales for Christmas. It also showed how the genre worked best within limitations of time and length, so that the short story and the novella were best suited to ghostly tales. Dickens had set a new literary fashion in motion.



## 4) The origins of *A Christmas Carol*

**Professor John Sutherland considers how Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* engages with Victorian attitudes towards poverty, labour and the Christmas spirit.**

Prince Albert – the newly installed husband of Queen Victoria – is popularly associated with institutionalising the British family Christmas, an institution which is still with us. It was Albert, for example, who brought from his native Germany the tannenbaum, or Christmas Tree. 1841 is the normally given as the date for this happy importation. The Christmas tree replaced the traditional British 'yule log' – wood designed to give winter warmth, not something to deck with pretty lights, fairies, favours and (round its base) presents. Both the tannenbaum and the Yule log (along with mistletoe) were incorporated into Christian festivity from pre-Christian pagan rituals associated with the seasonal turn of the year – the rebirth of the land and the green gods. There is no Biblical warrant for Christ's day of birth being 25 December.

Shortly after the arrival of the Christmas tree into the British parlour, Dickens, with *A Christmas Carol*, institutionalised what one could call the modern 'spirit of Christmas'. Dickens subtitled his story 'A Ghost Story for Christmas'. The ghosts are imported from folklore and legend, not the Christian gospels. The famous spirit of Christmas designed by the artist John Leech for the first edition of *A Christmas Carol* clearly draws on classic pagan iconography.

Dickens had warm memories of his own childhood Christmases and, now the father of a young family (as was Prince Albert), made the annual event a merry holiday. Feasting, games, and domestic dramas were the order of the 'twelve days of Christmas' in the 1840s Dickens household.

### **Money lending, scratching pens and ghosts**

*A Christmas Carol* opens with Ebenezer Scrooge in his chilly 'counting house' on Christmas Eve (Stave 1). Outside London, the 'great wen' is shrouded in filthy brown fog. It is the 'hungry forties'. The 1840s saw huge distress among the working classes and mass starvation in Ireland. 'Chartism (a working-class reformist movement) raised the fearful possibility of revolution. It was a nervous time.

Since his partner Marley's death, seven years previously, Scrooge is the sole proprietor Scrooge & Marley. He is a money lender. He lends money, but he is not inclined to part with money. Two gentlemen, soliciting charitable donations, are dismissed with an angry 'Bah! Humbug!'. Another visitor, his nephew, injudiciously wishes his uncle a merry Christmas: 'Merry Christmas!', explodes Scrooge, 'every idiot who goes about with "Merry Christmas" on his lips should be boiled with his own pudding!' The nephew, like the two gentlemen, is 'humbugged' off (Stave 1). At the end of his 12-hour day Scrooge dismisses his clerk, Bob Cratchit. Cratchit – his name evokes a scratching pen – is a 'scrivener'. Before typewriters and photocopying machines, the necessary copying of business and legal documents was done long hand. The typewriter girl was 40 years in the future. Cratchit has one day's holiday a year, and earns 15 shillings (75p) per six-day week: half a crown a day. On it he supports a large, happy, but chronically hard-up family. The family favourite is Tiny Tim, a little 'cripple' boy.

That Christmas Eve Scrooge, alone in his cold empty house is destined to be haunted. First by his partner, Marley, doomed to wander forever as penance for his hard-heartedness. Then, overnight, the miser is visited by three spirits of Christmas Past, Present, and Future. In the last visitation, Scrooge is shown his own gravestone and realises the worthlessness of a life devoted to money-grubbing. Scrooge wakes up – it is Christmas morning and he is a changed man. From now on he will be good-hearted: good-hearted most of all to the Cratchit family and Tiny Tim, to whom he will be a year-round Father Christmas.

### **How a society treats its children**

How a society treats its children, Dickens believed, is the true test of that society's moral worth. His religious beliefs were complicated, as are most people's. But very simply, he favoured the New Testament over the Old. He wrote a version of the gospels for his own children, *The Life of our Lord*, four years after *A Christmas Carol*. Dickens, we can assume from the centrality of childish innocence in his fiction, was particularly moved by Christ's injunction: 'Except ye ... become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven'. Christmas celebrates the birth of a child. So does all Dickens's great fiction: not least *A Christmas Carol*.

The first stirrings of the tale can be found in a visit Dickens made to Manchester a month before he began writing. One of the great orators of his time (only fragments of his eloquence, alas, survive) he spoke at the city's Athenaeum on 5 October. It was a memorable evening for those present, and those who read accounts of the speech in the next day's papers. As Dickens's biographer, Michael Slater, describes:

*Dickens dwelt on the terrible sights he had seen among the juvenile population in London's jails and doss-houses and stressed the desperate need for educating the poor. This occasion seems to have put into his mind the idea for a [Christmas Eve tale] which should help to open the hearts of the prosperous and powerful towards the poor and powerless but which should also bring centrally into play the theme of memory that, as we have seen, was always so strongly associated with Christmas for him.*

The Athenaeum speech was also an opening shot in his campaign, which bore fruit eight years later, to get a public library for the adult working classes in the city. Nor were children forgotten. They too needed the printed word. In the early 1840s Dickens took a particular interest in 'ragged schools'. As he described them, in an article in 1846: *The name implies the purpose. They who are too ragged, wretched, filthy, and forlorn, to enter any other place: who could gain admission into no charity school, and who would be driven from any church door; are invited to come in here, and find some people not depraved, willing to teach them something, and show them some sympathy, and stretch a hand out, which is not the iron hand of Law, for their correction.*

### **Industry, poverty and utilitarianism**

Manchester – the 'workshop of the world' – was famous not merely for its industry but the utilitarian philosophy that drove it. It may not be clear what Scrooge's line of business is. But his beliefs, before his change of heart, are crystal clear – pure Manchester.

'Are there no workhouses?' he asks, when the two gentleman ask for a charitable donation. If the poor die (like the poor woman outside his house) it will, he says, solve 'the surplus population' problem (Stave 3; Stave 1). Concern with over-population had been stimulated by the stern philosophy of Thomas Robert Malthus who foresaw catastrophe for England if its masses were not 'checked' by famine, war, or disease. For the more thoughtful, the anxiety was fostered by the census which, since 1821, had been counting how many inhabitants there were in the country. In 1841 the figure was approaching 29 million – there were serious doubts as to whether British agriculture could feed them, something which led to the repeal of the Corn Laws, in 1846, allowing cereals to be imported from the New World.

The 1840s were not merely 'hungry' but hard hearted. It was a philosophy embodied in Ebenezer Scrooge – not merely a solitary miser but the 'spirit of the age' in human (and, arguably, inhuman) form. Hard heads, hard hearts, good business. Soft heads and soft hearts lead to the bankruptcy court, Scrooge would have said. Dickens disagreed. Children worked, like slaves, in Manchester factories (as Michael Slater points out, the chimneys in the background of John Leech's illustration of the destitute children 'Ignorance and Want' are more reminiscent of Manchester's industrial landscape than of London streets). Six months after *A Christmas Carol* was published the 1844 Factories Act decreed, however, that 9–13 year olds could only work nine hours a day, six days a week. This was regarded as a humane reform.

Why were they wanted for this work? Children were cheap labour but, more importantly, their fingers were small and dexterous. But the machines were dangerous. There were crippled Tiny Tims by the hundred in Manchester. The modern reader – of whatever age – is less sensitive to sentimentality than our Victorian forebears. At Dickens's readings from his novels, audiences would regularly be moved to open tears by, for example, the death of Little Nell in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, or the murder of Nancy in *Oliver Twist*. One suspects that many Victorian tears were shed over the foreseen (but happily forestalled) death of Tiny Tim.

Dickens designed the externals of his book with the meticulous care he applied to its contents. It would be, he instructed his publishers, a handsome five-shilling production: 'Brown-salmon fine-ribbed cloth, blocked in blind and gold on front; in gold on the spine ... all edges gilt'. Dickens spared no expense. John Leech's half-dozen illustrations should be coloured, he instructed. The result was a book whose production costs, and relatively high price (five shillings), meant that this most popular of works returned, on its first 5,000-copy print run, small profit for Dickens. The first edition shot off the bookshop shelves even before Christmas Day 1843. And *A Christmas Carol* has sold massively ever since. It is the most filmed, and TV-adapted of his works. And, one suspects, as long as there is Christmas, there will be Dickens's wonderful tale alongside it and Tiny Tim's benediction, 'God Bless Us, Everyone'.

## 5) The Real Reason Charles Dickens Wrote *A Christmas Carol*

After a particularly bleak year, millions in the English-speaking world and beyond will seek some comfort by watching a converted miser in a nightshirt, skipping about as light as a feather. “Whoop! Hallo! ...What’s today my fine fellow?”

Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol* was an instant bestseller, followed by countless print, stage and screen productions. Victorians called it “a new gospel,” and reading or watching it became a sacred ritual for many, without which the Christmas season cannot materialize.

But *A Christmas Carol*’s seemingly timeless transcendence hides the fact that it was very much the product of a particular moment in history, its author meaning to weigh in on specific issues of the day. Dickens first conceived of his project as a pamphlet, which he planned on calling, “An Appeal to the People of England on behalf of the Poor Man’s Child.” But in less than a week of thinking about it, he decided instead to embody his arguments in a story, with a main character of pitiable depth. So what might have been a polemic to harangue, instead became a story for which audiences hungered.

Dickens set out to write his pamphlet-turned-book in spring 1843, having just read government report on child labor in the United Kingdom. The report took the form of a compilation of interviews with children—compiled by a journalist friend of Dickens—that detailed their crushing labors.

Dickens read the testimony of girls who sewed dresses for the expanding market of middle class consumers; they regularly worked 16 hours a day, six days a week, rooming—like Martha Cratchit—above the factory floor. He read of 8-year-old children who dragged coal carts through tiny subterranean passages over a standard 11-hour workday. These were not exceptional stories, but ordinary. Dickens wrote to one of the government investigators that the descriptions left him “stricken.”

This new, brutal reality of child labor was the result of revolutionary changes in British society. The population of England had grown 64% between Dickens’ birth in 1812 and the year of the child labor report. Workers were leaving the countryside to crowd into new manufacturing centers and cities. Meanwhile, there was a revolution in the way goods were manufactured: cottage industry was upended by a trend towards workers serving as unskilled cogs laboring in the pre-cursor of the assembly line, hammering the same nail or gluing the same piece—as an 11-year-old Dickens had to do—hour after hour, day after day.

More and more, employers thought of their workers as tools as interchangeable as any nail or gluepot. Workers were becoming like commodities: not individual humans, but mere resources, their value measured to the ha-penny by how many nails they could hammer in an hour. But in a time of dearth—the 1840s earned the nickname “The Hungry ‘40s”—the poor took what work they could arrange. And who worked for the lowest wages? Children.

Popular theories about how—or whether—to help the poor often made things worse. The first was the widespread sense that poor people tended to be so because they were lazy and immoral, and that helping them would only encourage their malingering. If they were to be helped, it should be under conditions so awful as to discouraged people from seeking that help. The new workhouses were seen as the perfect solution—where families were split up, food was minimal and work painful. “Those who are badly off,” says the unreformed Scrooge, “must go there.”

Associated with this concept were the ideas of Rev. Thomas Malthus, who cautioned against intervening when people were hungry because it would only lead to an untenable population size. Better that the poor should starve and thus “decrease the surplus population.”

If Dickens found these solutions cruel, what did he offer? Friedrich Engels read the same report on child labor that Dickens did and, with his collaborator Karl Marx, envisioned an eventual revolution. Dickens was very much an anti-revolutionary. In fact, he implied that revolutionary was the fearsome consequence of not solving the problem some other way. “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.” Thomas Paine, in the foregoing generation, had argued in *Rights of Man* for a kind of system of welfare, including tax credits for help raising children, old age pensions and national disability insurance. But Dickens wasn’t a “systems” thinker, nor was he proto-socialist.

Yet what Dickens did propose in *A Christmas Carol*, which he scribbled out in less than two months in the fall of 1843—intending it, in his words, as a “sledge hammer” blow—was still radical, in that it rejected the “modern” ideas about work and the economy.

What he wrote was that employers are responsible for the well-being of their employees. Their workers are not of value only to the extent to which they contribute to a product for the cheapest possible labor cost. They are of value as “fellow-passengers to the grave,” in the words of Scrooge’s nephew, “and not another race of creatures bound on other journeys.” Employers owe their employees as human beings—no better, but no worse, than themselves.

And, yes, that might mean “a prize Turkey” at Christmas. (Dickens could not resist a description of food in sensuous detail.) But the real salvation that Scrooge gives to the Cratchit family is a raise.

As Scrooge and the Ghost of Christmas Past watch Tim, his father holding his lame hand, the miser pleads, “say he will be spared.” The ghost reminds readers of Scrooge’s Malthusian quote. “If he be like to die, he had better do it, and decrease the surplus population.”

“Oh God!” the ghost growls, “to hear the Insect on the leaf pronouncing on the too much life among his hungry brothers in the dust!” In other words, Dickens reminded his 19th-century readers—and today’s—not to mistake their good fortune of landing in a high place for their worth.