

## A CHRISTMAS CAROL: A STORY OF GRACE, CONVERSION, HOPE AND LOVE

- I. Despite his limited education, Charles Dickens was able to combine his writing abilities and experience with uncertain economic times to rise to the top level of British novelists.
- A. Born in 1812, Charles Dickens grew up mostly in London as the eldest son of a middle class family. The extremely varied economic situation gave him a limited formal education, but a great deal of experience upon which to draw for his later novels.
1. Charles Dickens' father John Dickens was a clerk with the British Navy; and thus the family was able to give Charles an education until the age of 12. However, in 1824, his father defaulted on debts and was sent to debtor's prison. Charles was forced to work in a factory to support himself and the family.
  2. Due to an inheritance, John Dickens was able to get out of prison; and Charles returned to school until the age of 15. But he then had to work again to support himself. And so he worked for a law firm for about a year, and then as a journalist.
- B. Charles Dickens was able to go from a journalist to an essayist and a novelist, and quickly gained notoriety with his early works.
1. Charles Dickens spent a lot of working time covering the Parliament. In his free time, he frequently saw plays and read extensively.
  2. In 1833, he contributed fictional short stories about common people for a local journal. In 1836, these stories were published as Sketches by Boz, to popular acclaim. In the same year, he married Catherine Hogarth, the daughter of one of his editors. There would be 10 children born of this marriage. Sadly, however, the stress of writing and touring led to its breakup in later years.
  3. In 1836, Charles Dickens also wrote his first book The Pickwick Papers, a comical description of the adventures and misadventures of a group of Londoners. In 1837, he followed those successes up with the classic Oliver Twist, in which he pioneered the idea of a serious story about children. With these novels, he rose to the center of British literary society.
  4. From 1838 – 1841, he founded a magazine Household Words and wrote three more books, Nickolas Nickelby, The Old Curiosity Shop and Barnaby Rudge. The first of these books, which featured an abusive boarding school, led to a call for reform in that area. The second book featured the tragedy of addictive gambling, and the third described the anti-Catholic riots of 1780 and a caution against demagoguery.
  5. After a tour of America, he wrote American Notes and Martin Chuzzlewit, both of which were poorly received.
- C. In late 1843, he was eager to recover from the recent disappointments after his American tour. He soon thought of writing a story for Christmas, composed it in a few weeks' time, and published the story in serial form in the weeks leading up to

Christmas. That story, which he called A Christmas Carol, received mostly favorable literary acclaim, and a very enthusiastic reception by the public.

1. Over the next five years, Charles Dickens published four more Christmas stories, some of which are very poignant. However, none of them received the acclaim of A Christmas Carol.
2. A Christmas Carol remains to this day possibly the most popular Christmas fictional work, and has become more recognizable in popular culture than any other of Dickens' works.

D. In the 1840s and 1850s, Charles Dickens would continue publishing, giving speaking tours and editing.

1. In 1849 – 50, he drew upon his own experiences as a child to write the classic David Copperfield, the title character of which Dickens would describe as his favorite.
2. In 1852 – 1854, he published Bleak House and Hard Times, the former of which sharply criticized the legal system and the latter an overly industrial educational system.
3. In 1859 and 1861, his writing reached the very heights of prose literature with Great Expectations and Tale of Two Cities.
4. However, the extensive writing, editing and touring also caused a strain on his health, a more depressive spirit, and eventually the separation from his wife.
5. He continued travelling extensively in the 1860s including a favorably received second tour of America. However, his health continued declining; and he died in 1869 at the age of 57, while working on his final book The Mystery of Edward Drood.

E. Charles Dickens and Jane Austin are probably the most famous British novelists. They both emphasized writing even fiction realistically. Charles Dickens, however, emphasized the dramatic contrast between good and evil, whereas Jane Austin more described the subtleties of human nature.

1. Charles Dickens described in great detail the harsh conditions that people often lived in, but also had a hope that things could be better. In all of his novels, the human spirit perseveres against and even overcome the injustices of society.
2. The novels of Charles Dickens feature dramatic contrasts between the good and evil characters (e.g., Dr. Manet and Madame DeFarge in A Tale of Two Cities, and Joe and Miss Havershaw in Great Expectations.)
3. Although condemnatory of social injustices, Charles Dickens was not a political revolutionary, as The Tale of Two Cities indicates. Rather he believed that with good will societal conditions could change for the better.

4. Charles Dickens also sometimes described dramatic conversions, such as the drunkard Sidney Carton in A Tale of Two Cities, the spendthrift Mr. Micawber in David Copperfield, and the vengeful Miss Haversham and Estella, as well as the main character Pip in Great Expectations.
- F. Charles Dickens was raised in the Church of England and remained a member all of his life. He did not describe organized religion much in his writings, but rather focused on a lived faith.
1. His views toward the Catholic Church are mixed. There is some criticism of the church at the beginning of A Tale of Two Cities. However, Barnaby Rudge and to some extent also A Tale of Two Cities also describes the dangers of anti-Catholic prejudice.
  2. He was critical of showiness in religion or faith that does not manifest itself in good works. He considered a good will to be more important than doctrinal matters. Thus, for example, in Bleak House, the urchin Jo comes across as a faithful Christian, who in fact dies praying the Our Father, although he knows almost nothing about Christian doctrine.
- G. A Christmas Carol is Charles Dickens' most extensive story about conversion and about a religious feast.
1. Ebenezer Scrooge dominates the action. He is in a way the opposite of a Macbeth. At first, he is a totally unsympathetic figure. But gradually, we gain more sympathy for him as he comes around.
  2. The book emphasizes the ability to convert with help from other people, both in this world and the next.
  3. It is separated into five "staves," which implies the verses of a poem. The first staves give an introduction, describing the situation and the burden of sin. The next three staves focus on aspects of conversion, honesty with the past, the reality of joy and struggles in the present, and the prospect of death in the future. Paradoxically, that reality of death brings about the final stage of conversion, which in turn leads to joy.

II. The first "stave" gives a dramatic contrast between the burden of sin and the potential of the human spirit to overcome the situation and engage in joy. Christmas is seen as the time of year in which the joy of heaven breaks through most of all.

- A. The story begins with a reflection upon death and the analogy of door nails, which is a hint of both a theme of the book (the reality of death) and of the motif of doorknobs, in which Marley will appear, and which can be locked against the joy of heaven. See Rev. 3:20.
- B. The book then proceeds to a vivid picture of Scrooge, with the analogy of coldness about him. The idea is that there is an atmosphere of good and evil that surround a person. Scrooge has made himself impervious to outside influence; we will learn that the fear of being hurt by outside forces is one of the things that led to his greed. There is one thing about Scrooge, however, that is attractive, and even somewhat humorous, one thing that will make him open to conversion, i.e., there is no hypocrisy about him. He is completely

honest about his beliefs and lives in accord with them, as the opening paragraph makes clear.

- C. The story then proceeds to a description of the overall weather in London on Christmas Eve, which is also cold and dismal. However, that very description will provide the background against which the human spirit can prevail .
- D. Scrooge's nephew Fred then comes by, personifying the warmth of generosity and openness that prevails against the environment.
  - 1. The environment is better for Scrooge than Fred, but Fred's approach to it makes him cheerful.
  - 2. Fred can celebrate Christmas particularly well because he is generous of heart generally. But it is also a time when that joy can convert anyone who is willing.
  - 3. Fred is Christian, for he believes in the divine origin of Christmas. But he also sees the season as one for everyone to be generous and kind.
  - 4. Paradoxically, the mutual love is based partially upon realizing that all of us are' really "fellow passengers to the grave." Here again, there is a defiant joy that can look death squarely and not be afraid. People who are not generous or joyful are ignoring that reality.
  - 5. The joy is infectious for the clerk Bob Cratchitt, but it does not yet affect Scrooge. Dickens may have identified with Bob Cratchitt, who makes 15 shillings a week, the same wage that Dickens was making before his fame increased.
- E. We then see again the joy of generosity and nobility in the two gentlemen who are collecting money for the poor.
  - 1. They assume that Scrooge will be generous, but he refers only to institutions such as prisons and the workhouse and the "surplus population," a phrase that was coming into usage with Malthusian economics.
  - 2. Scrooge's vision is limited, thinking only of his business.
  - 3. This confrontation, like the previous one, demonstrates the sorrow, and the lack of joy that sin brings, along with a hostility toward the light. Sin brings its own punishment.
- F. Meanwhile, the story likewise describes again the harsh environment outside, but also the cheerfulness of people despite it. A caroler stops by and likewise is cheerful and mocking of Scrooge's lack of joy
- G. Scrooge then goes to the loneliness of the tavern and then his apartment. Reading newspapers seems to be his one delight. For newspapers, and now the internet, does not bring human interaction.
- H. Then Marley comes to him to begin the conversion with a description of the burden of sin.

1. Scrooge first sees him in the doorknob (a reminder from the beginning of death) and likewise, there is a vision of a hearse. The reality of death will be paradoxically the beginning of conversion.
2. Then Marley comes to him in the guise of a dead bell come to life. The bell is that symbol of announcement, of someone at the door. Scrooge had tried to keep the reality of others away, but it comes all the same.
3. And then Marley arrives, recognizable, but without a corporeal body. His greed has bound him with sin. And his gaping mouth reflects the ravenousness of greed.
4. Marley describes sin, in this case greed, as itself a burden. The idea is that sin contains its own punishment by weighing down the soul. He also describes himself as no longer really Marley, for he has lost part of his identity.
  - Charles Dickens believed strongly in free will, and Marley confirms (p. 49) that he created the burden of his sins of his own free will.
  - He likewise describes even the living, including Scrooge, as under the same burden.
5. He goes on then to describe the limited vision that sin brings, for his spirit never went beyond the counting house.
6. He describes this life as a short time that is the beginning of the development of humanity and the soul. This life is too short, but we must begin. If one does not begin in this life, one is in ignorance of reality and cannot do good afterward.
7. In talking about business, Marley likewise describes the limited vision that sin brings. For in this life he focused only on that small business that he knew, rather than the vastness of humanity
8. It is noteworthy that he does have a real concern for Scrooge and wants him to change. It is not thus clear whether he is in hell or a sort of purgatory. And it is ironic that he describes his worst punishment as not being able to do good, when he is at that moment doing Scrooge the greatest good he can, initiating his conversion.
9. There is a final vision of the greedy, who are burdened with sin. They want to help others, but are now unable to do so. The fire of charity does not die completely, but becomes a burden.

III. The second stave describes the need to be honest with the past as a part of conversion. Well before Sigmund Freud and his theory of the subconscious, Charles Dickens realized that past experiences can lead to current anxieties and limitations and that an honest appraisal of the past can lead to freedom.

- A. The stave begins with time seemingly going backward, from two to twelve, an indication of what is coming up, a reflection upon the past. For memory does in some sense make time go backward.

- Amusingly, his vision is still so limited that the first effect he thinks about is the effect on his securities.

B. The Ghost of Christmas future demonstrates attributes of memory.

1. She (or he, it is not clear) has the white hair of age, the face of a child, strong legs, and yet delicate arms, seemingly present and yet also distant. The idea is that memory is of times past, and yet is recalled presently, it is powerful to come and yet delicate insofar as we can ignore it. It is present to us, even though far away.
2. There is also a passing comment that he (Charles Dickens) is likewise as a spirit at our elbow.
3. The ghost also radiates a light that shines forth upon her, but can also be extinguished. If not extinguished, it shines on one part then another at different times, and yet all are there. Likewise, one's memory is at times focused on one aspect of another, and yet is also aware of the broad compass of reality. One can let the light of knowledge shine on it or not.

C. The Ghost then reminds Scrooge of the past, his own joys and sorrows, and the fear that led him to become greedy. The idea is that an honest recollection of one's past is essential to moving forward.

D. First Scrooge sees two images of his childhood, in which there was a desire for love, but also a sense of abandonment by others.

1. He sees the joy of those who were from his hometown. And seeing them again, he rejoices that he could be with them. There was all along a longing for their love that he hopes to have. He cannot have it now, but the desire will lead him to a better future.
2. We then see that he was put in a boarding school by his father, with his mother presumably dead. The others at the school also apparently ignored him, for he was alone. But he took refuge in literature, with Ali Babba and Robinson Crusoe and his companions there with him. There is also the story of Valentine and Orson, a medieval tale about twin brothers separated at birth, who grow up in a royal court and the wilderness respectively. There is a reflection here of the young Charles Dickens, who delighted in literature when his fortunes were poor. This memory of the joys of literature likewise brings Scrooge joy now and a sympathy for joys now. The book is giving an image of how literature can bring consolation and inspiration.
3. The scene then turns to Scrooge later in life, finally being able to return home, and invited by his beloved younger sister Fan, later to be the mother of Fred. There is the contrast with the overbearing and cheap master of the schoolhouse.
4. He then sees the image of his early adult years as a clerk with Fezziwig, and the joy of him and his wife, shared on Christmas Eve with others. The scene makes Scrooge want to join in and realize that the ability to make people happy does not need to cost much.

5. Then we see a sadder scene, Scrooge's fiancée' breaching the engagement broken off because Scrooge has formed his love for money. At this point, he is still a just man and is willing (and to some degree wants) to marry the woman he is engaged to. But the desire monetary profit has taken over. When more struggling, he formed a love for her. But now, he has turned to money to avoid the uncertainties of the world. He thinks of this change as making his wiser, for he thinks that it makes him less vulnerable to suffering.

- E. The ghost then shows him the joy of the woman's new family, which is of modest circumstances and rather chaotic, but is joyful in each other's presence. Dickens himself seems to be so caught up in the scene that he refers to his own feelings. The very uncertainty of life creates a joyfulness and charity that makes Scrooge realize what he has missed.
- F. Scrooge then feels this remorse and wants to get rid of it by extinguishing the light, but that light only spreads all the more, reflecting the memories how spreading throughout his mind. The memories are at the same time joyful, and yet also painful because of the remorse they bring.
- G. In this stave, Charles Dickens shows the effects of suppressed memories and the conversion that comes from confronting reality. In this aspect, he foreshadows Sigmund Freud; but unlike Freud, he believes that with grace, there is a solution.

IV. The Ghost of Christmas Present then brings about the aspect of conversion that results from a willingness to see reality as it is, and to be joyful in the midst of it.

- A. This spirit of Christmas present represents both joy and the challenges of reality. He does not come to Scrooge directly but rather invites him through the light. The light here reflects the light that the Ghost of Christmas present had left behind.
- B. The Ghost reflects the expansiveness and freedom of joy. The room that he occupies is likewise filled with delightful foods, reflecting the wisdom of heaven and the fulfillment of biblical prophesies. See, e.g., Proverbs 9:1; Is. 25:6; Joel 2:24-27; Amos 13:15.
- C. At this point he is young, but will be passing away as his younger brothers (the Christmas pasts) have done.
- D. As they venture into the city, once again the environment is a harsh one, but people are joyful all the same. The rich foods described here indicate the expansiveness of generosity.
- E. The Ghost's torch brings about a cheerfulness even to those who would be inclined to quarrel. The idea is that the grace from above brings about conversion of heart. And yet the person must be open to it. For it works, as the ghost says, for hearts "that are kindly given." And the poor receive it most because they are most in need.
- F. The joyfulness can accommodate itself to any condition, to any home.
- G. His sympathy for the poor and humble leads him to Bob Cratchit's home, which exemplifies the defiant joyfulness of a simple humble home.

1. The book describes the use of ribbons as “brave,” that is creating a beauty that defies poverty.
  2. Peter take a simple delight at being able to take a greater place in society with his father’s suit.
  3. There is also the simple delight at the oldest daughter Martha being able to take time off to be with the family.
  4. And then, there is the simple joke played upon Bob, pretending that Martha cannot be there.
  5. We then are introduced to Tiny Tim, the physically sickly but spiritually great son of Bob and Mrs. Cratchitt. Tiny Tim is even able to see the hand of God at work in his handicap, for it will help others know what it was like for Jesus to cure the lame.
  6. The family then gives great thanks for the turkey and then the pudding, expressing that they were the best ever. The material food may be modest, but it was prepared with great love, which makes it better than even the best food given without love. That is what makes family meals so much better than others.
  7. The hot drink was served with simple wares but that seem as golden goblets.
  8. This joyfulness of the family, and especially the example of Tiny Tim, brings Scrooge to compassion. The Ghost of Christmas Present prophesies that Tiny Tim will die, if the “shadows remain unaltered.” He then reminds Scrooge of his recent miserliness and references to the prisons, the workhouse, and the surplus population. For the joy of Christmas brings about a sense of shame at past sins. But Scrooge is willing to be repentant.
  9. Scrooge then hears the good wishes of Bob, but also the rightful view of the family towards him, namely that he is greedy and oppressive. He takes this criticism honestly and humbly, however, and is thus on the path to repentance.
- H. We then turns to people delighted to see each other in their homes, which are built up as cheerful places. But even in the coal mines, the lighthouses, and the ships, the Christmas joy can come with the grace given by that Ghost of Christmas Present.
- I. The scene then turns to Fred and his family.
1. The scene begins with a laugh from Fred, showing his joyfulness in all situations. The laughter puts darkness to flight. It turns out that he finds his uncle Ebenezer funny. That notion that he was the subject of a joke would have angered the previous Scrooge; but here he listens to the reality.
  2. Fred, like Bob, sees the potential for goodness in Scrooge; and will witness to the truth.
  3. Once again, we see the joyfulness of music and simple games.



4. Scrooge is once again drawn in the scene of the reality of joy present in those humble circumstances.
  5. Even when they play the game of Yes and No, which uses Scrooge as the target, he is joyful with them.
- J. The Ghost of Christmas Present then brings joy to all places, “where man in his brief little authority had not made fast the door.” The idea is that joy is always available if one does not bar the door.
- K. Then, however, the Ghost of Christmas Present become like an Old Testament prophet and reveals the need to confront want and ignorance.
1. Suddenly two terrifying children show up from the ghost’s robes, the starved wolfish boy and girl who are Ignorance and Want. The cheerfulness of the previous scenes makes the horror of these terrible and yet heart-wrenching figures all the more dramatic.
  2. They are paradoxically with the Ghost of Christmas Present, even though he did not create them, because the joy he represents is available only if one is willing to confront that reality of human suffering; and the joy will bring one in confront and try to change that reality, as well as recognize the reality that the present is ever aging.
  3. The Ghost of Christmas Present then condemns those who would either try to silence the prophetic voice that makes poverty and ignorance clear or who make it work only for their factious purpose (i.e., use it for political advantage or for violence) and thus make it worse. He then turns to Scrooge to rebuke him with his past miserliness again. But here Scrooge takes the lesson.
- V. The Ghost of Things to Come (only specifically identified with Christmas towards the end) then comes as the angel of death to bring about conversion.
- A. The Ghost, here called a Phantom, comes immediately, for the future is always coming. This figure is dark, for the future is mysterious, and also brings inevitable death.
  - B. Nevertheless, the Phantom is willing to answer yes or no questions in his own way, and really does care about Scrooge.
  - C. The Phantom then leads Scrooge to an unpleasant group of men whom Scrooge knows. They are talking about someone who has died, but whom they really do not care about. They will go to the funeral if lunch is provided. We see here the lack of any real love in the face of death. Paradoxically, they would be happier if they were sorrowful at death.
  - D. Likewise, Scrooge sees another couple of men whom he knows, and who likewise do not care about another man’s death. We are meant to sense the banality of this world (exemplified by them going right from talking about death to talking about skating) without any real concern for others.
  - E. The scene then turns fouler as we get to a filthy shop that buys and sells used goods. The scene is meant to be revolting, and the people even more so. There is a sense of those who

care about no one but themselves and put a price on everything, even stealing goods from the dead. The injustice to the dead is a symptom that there is a complete meaninglessness of life. Scrooge is revolted by them, but also wondering about this man who plainly died alone. He takes in this much of the lesson, that he will end the same way if he does not repent; he does not realize that the dead man is himself.

- F. The scene then changes to death itself as Scrooge sees the dead man, abandoned by all. But then things turn around and there is a reflection upon how death has no power over the open, generous and true man. For even if dies, his good deeds and love will spread to all of the world. Those who have no love are already dead; but those who die in love will live forever. See Matt. 10:39; Mark 8:35; Luke 17:33. John 12:25. There is a message of hope beyond death.
- G. The Phantom is now referred to as a Ghost, like the others. He shows them a good young couple, with their children, who will benefit from the man's death because they will have time to pay a debt they owe him. They feel glad at the development, but are good enough people to feel guilty at that response.
- H. The scene then moves to the Cratchitts, where it becomes clear that Tiny Tim has died, but that his goodness continues to bring love to the family.
  - 1. Peter is reading the passage of the Bible in which Jesus teaches a lesson in humility through a child. See Matt 18:1-6. They speak of Bob and his love for Tiny Tim.
  - 2. Then Bob himself arrives and is both joyful and sorrowful. The two emotions are not contrary to each other. There is the joy of his love and the sorrow at loss. He and the family are the opposite of those that the Ghost of Christmas Present condemned for having neither the joy of love nor the sorrow of compassion. They are willing to live in reality and are thus blessed.
  - 3. Bob appreciates the kindness of Fred, even though so far Fred has been unable to find Peter a position. The effort is important, but what is most important is the love behind it.
- I. The Ghost then shows him a future but without Scrooge seemingly present. The effect of greed is that one is no longer effective in the world; one is easily forgotten.
- J. And then there is the final graveyard scene, which shows the end of life. But there is also a hopeful note at the end.
  - 1. Before realizing that the dead man is him, Scrooge asks the critical question: can the future be changed. The Spirit only points to the grave. Scrooge must learn the reality before his question is answered.
  - 2. Scrooge then sees the reality of his own grave and implores twice more for the question of whether he can change his future.
  - 3. At his pleas, even the spirit's "kind hand trembled." Even death itself is willing to listen to the plea of repentance.

4. Scrooge then makes his resolution to change but still awaits the answer.

- V. Upon awaking the next morning, the joy on Scrooge's heart tells him the answer. Time is still his to change his future, and he is determined to do so. There is joy at conversion and freedom from sin.
- A. He awakens to the lesson that the remaining time does belong to him in which he can repent and make amends.
  - B. This knowledge that he can change, and his resolution to do so fills him with a great joy. For repentance does lead to joy and delight.
  - C. He then learns that even the current Christmas is still his. And he immediately changes, both in commending the boy, who only using common sense, and in the delight at sending a turkey to Bob Cratchitt without his knowing where it came from.
  - D. Even the knocker, when had been a reminder of death, is now a relic of veneration, for it brought him the message of conversion.
  - E. The environment around him has even changed such that people notice the difference immediately.
  - F. When he meets one of the fellows whom he had turned away earlier, there is the sorrow of contrition, but also a bold resolution to take it on and make amends. He is then thankful to the man for the opportunity to repent and be generous. Those who are in need have play a crucial role in society; for they enable us to be more generous and kind.
  - G. The smallest acts of kindness are able to bring him great joy.
  - H. He then reconciles with Fred and the family, and brings joy to them as well. He has exceeded even Fred's expectations
  - I. The next day, when he shows kindness to Bob, at the moment that Bob thinks, he will be criticized again. When he sees the change Bob at first thinks that Scrooge might be insane, so surprising is the conversion. Scrooge's greed was dull; his repentance shakes up the world. That is an image of all sin and repentance. Sin is repetitive, predictable and dull. Repentance leads to love, which is fascinating and adventurous.
  - J. The answer to Scrooge's desperate question to the Ghost of Christmas Future comes at the end. The future can be changed, and even Tiny Tim's life was spared.
  - K. Some mocked him for his conversion. The fear of such mockery may be a common reason why people do not change for the better. However, here Scrooge realizes that they are blind, and thus that their opinion should not affect them. He even sees their mockery of him as diverting perhaps their blindness from a worse direction.
  - L. The Total Abstinence Principle is a pun here. That principle was a pledge to refrain from alcoholic spirits; here the reference is to spirit as in ghosts. He no longer needed visions of these spirits, for they had accomplished their effects by transforming his life to one in which the joy of heaven is continuously lived. And that is a common experience. Visions are given to bring about conversion; once this conversion has occurred, then we are called

to live out this devout and charitable life. Providing us the grace of conversion and love is the most important work of heaven.