

Charles Dickens
“A Christmas Carol. In prose. Being a Ghost Story of Christmas”
A Christmas Carol and Other Christmas Writings, 1843

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The Victorian Age (1832-1900)

Victoria became queen in 1837 and died in 1901, but the Victorian age proper began spiritually with the passing of the Reform Bill in 1832. The Napoleonic Wars had left England in a deplorable state at home, which called for both political and social reforms. Therefore England preferred to avoid entanglements on the Continent in order to concentrate her efforts on home problems and the building up of her colonial empire.

In the 19th Century the Industrial Revolution was complete and the Great Exhibition in London in 1851 was at its highest point. Britain had become the ‘workshop of the world’: machines completely transformed industry and England was changed from an agricultural country into a manufacturing one. Many people abandoned farming in order to work in factories.

Large cities with crowded slums grew up. Poverty and discontent increased among the labouring classes. There was great urban poverty and social injustice, like the use of child labor in the coal mines and factories. Dickens wrote a lot about the cruel conditions to which pauper children were exposed and “Oliver Twist” is representative of the use of child labour in the coal mines and factories.

These conditions led to the Mines Act, in 1842, for forbidding children of under ten from going underground and the Factory Act, in 1847, in which hours of work per day were restricted to ten. During the Victorian Age education became universal in England.

Before the Romantic poets, childhood had not been an important literary theme in English literature. For the Romantic poet William Blake, who advocated the education of children through their natural impulses and interests, child represented ‘innocence’ and as more books were written through the 19th century to please children, childhood tended to become a symbol of nostalgic

retreat for adults unwilling to grow up (like Lewis Carroll "Alice in Wonderland" in 1865, Collodi "Pinocchio" in 1881).

During the Victorian age (1830-1900) childhood was dangerous and deadly: children were at risk of dying (bronchitis, pneumonia, diphtheria, tuberculosis, whooping cough...). Today we often associate death with old age but if we go back far in history we find that death was a common visitor to Victorian children. And though children died with frequent regularity during the 19th Century, a child's death was still seen as particularly tragic.

The same year of the publication of the Carol, 1843, the Parliament set up the Children's Employment Commission, a report of the dramatic situation of the young population in London's jails and the desperate need for educating the poor. Dickens wrote *the Carol* after witnessing the working conditions of children in the mines and visiting a school set up for London's street children.

Dickens's little book was produced as a Christmas gift book, price five shillings, with salmon-brown covers and wonderful illustrations by Dickens's friend artist John Leech.

Dickens's major Christmas theme of home and family love is prominent in his book and the use of the supernatural, an element he deemed so essential for the real Christmas tale. He defined the 'Christmas spirit' in 'What Christmas is as we grow older' as 'the spirit of active usefulness, perseverance, kindness, forgiveness, restitution, reconciliation, tenderness, the importance of the memory and imagination to the moral health of the individual. For Dickens Jesus was above all the greatest teacher who ever lived and for him we are closest to being like Jesus when we are children. So it is essential for our moral and spiritual health that we never lose touch with our childhood.

Charles Dickens

Charles Dickens was born at Portsmouth (Hampshire, England South Coast) on 1812, the second of eight children. He died suddenly on 1870 at the age of 58 because of a stroke, leaving unfinished his last novel 'The Mystery of Edwin Drood'. His writings have impacted readers for nearly two centuries. Dickens's novels have helped to shape the way many readers imagine Christmas, London, childhood, English society, the family and the modern industrial city and his novels are representatives of the best of the English literature.

Dickens wrote a lot about journalism, letters, he gave speeches and public readings, he traveled a lot and he always had, during his life, a deep sense of being strongly connected to the physical world and to the social problems of his time. In his novels (like *Oliver Twist*, *David Copperfield*, and *Bleak House*) which were published serially in weekly and monthly periodicals, he attacks the injustice of the inequalities between the rich and the poor.

Dickens's childhood experiences were similar to those depicted in *David Copperfield*, (1850). His father, who was a government clerk, was imprisoned for debt and Dickens was briefly sent to work in a blacking warehouse at the age of twelve, like David Copperfield: his "favourite child", as he wrote, through this hero Dickens draws openly on his own life, also a portrait of his own father who evokes the mixture of love, nostalgia and guilt.

The spaces of his life – the streets of London and Paris, the countryside of Kent, the fells of the Lake District – are part of his writings. First editions of Dickens's novels occupy shelf space in libraries from South Africa to Montreal. Fiction writers in 19th Century felt the influence of Dickens's novels from the Caribbean to Australia (beautiful example the Australian writer John George Lang and his "The Ghost upon the Rail", published in 1859).

A famous anecdote of Dickens biographers is one about a London girl who on 9 June 1870 exclaimed: "Dickens dead? Then will Father Christmas die too?"

This identification of Dickens with Christmas, so deeply inscribed in the popular culture of the English-speaking world, began when he was still a young man (he was 32 years old) but already firmly established as England's most loved novelist. England people looked upon him "as the spirit of Christmas incarnate", as being, in a word, Father Christmas himself.

His "*Christmas Book, a Christmas Carol. In prose. Being a Ghost Story of Christmas*" was first published on 17 December 1843 (so 176 years ago). This little book had already sold over 5.000 copies by Christmas Eve and its publishers, Chapman and Hall, were planning the first of many reprints. Since then the *Carol* has never been out of print, being usually available in a number of different editions, and it has become part of the furniture of the English and American shops, like Christmas trees and Christmas crafts. And what about the screen adaptations that have proliferated over the years, adaptations for the various

English and American stages, clearly responsive to changing and social conditions and also aspirations on both sides of the Atlantic ocean.

In the Pictorial Times review on December 23rd 1843 Dickens wrote:

“At this joyous season of dinners and laughing faces, it becomes to think of the poor. While the fire blazes on our hearth and the tables are covered so plenteously, let us think of the poor in their chilly houses with bare tables, and let us think of the houseless wanderers in the streets...”

Such exhortations as this could be found in many articles written by Dickens at that time: it was after all the ‘Hungry Forties’ of the 19th century in England, a period of economic hardship and social distress. Dickens wanted his readers to pay attention to what he used to call the *“Christmas of the heart”* and to *“Give, give to the poor”*, to *“Clothing the naked and feeding the hungry”*. Dickens was convinced that his writings could have an impact on the readers more than a sermon in a church: he was convinced that he could, with his words, encourage more positive acts of beneficence and that he could foster more kindly feelings.

The revival of interest in Christmas traditions that developed among the literati during the 1820s and 1830s was not primarily inspired by zeal for promoting the Christian charity. It related more to the growth of a taste for the picturesque and a nostalgia for the *“good old days”* of a more settled state of society and class harmony.

In all Dickens’s Christmas writings there is the theme of painful memories, attention to people who had suffered personal sorrows and misfortunes, like the death of a beloved one, often children.

The Carol – The story

In five little chapters, it tells the story of Ebenezer Scrooge, a miserly man who lives alone and only cares about making and hoarding his money. Through the course of three supernatural visits that occur the night of Christmas Eve, Scrooge learns the true meaning of life and Christmas.

The story opens with Ebenezer Scrooge sitting in his office. The chief interest of the story of the Carol is centered on the figure of Scrooge, evoking the sense both of ‘screw’ and of ‘gouge’.

It is Christmas Eve but he isn't in the Christmas spirit. He is visited by his nephew Fred, a lovely happy young boy, but refuses the invitation to attend Christmas dinner at Fred's house the next day.

"A merry Christmas uncle" cried the boy. It was Scrooge's nephew who came upon him.

"Merry Christmas? Said Scrooge. What right have you to be merry? What reason have you to be merry? You are poor enough".

"Come then" replied the boy "And you, what right have you to be sad? What reason have you to be morose? You are rich enough".

Scrooge also turns away two men looking for donations for the poor and later only grudgingly grants his employee, Bob Cratchit, the day off for Christmas to spend with his family. That man, whose name is Scrooge, is a misanthrope.

When Scrooge arrives home later that evening, he senses that someone is in his house. He is visited by a ghostly specter that turns out to be his deceased business partner, Jacob Marley. Marley is wrapped in chains entwined with moneyboxes. He tells Scrooge that he is doomed to roam earth in the heavy chains as punishment for his greed.

The first spirit to visit Scrooge is the Ghost of Christmas Past. He takes Scrooge back to the more innocent days of his youth: his lonely childhood, his love for her sister Fan who died soon, his love for a young girl, Belle and her happy family.

The second spirit to visit Scrooge is the Ghost of Christmas Present. He takes Scrooge to pay attention to his employee Bob Cratchit and his poor modest home, his dying little boy Tiny Tim.

The third and final spirit to visit Scrooge is the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come. This silent spirit takes Scrooge to see the loss of Cratchit's family, the death of Tiny Tim. Scrooge's heart is dry but Scrooge's horror only grows as the spirit finally leads him to his grave and he discovers his own name on the headstone. Scrooge finally begs the spirit to return him to his life so that he can change his ways and avoid this terrible bleak dark future.

Once returned to life, Scrooge is happy and delighted to find that it is Christmas morning. He spends the day with his family and sends a turkey to Bob Cratchit's family anonymously. The next day he increases Bob's pay and he becomes as a second father to Tiny Tim.

From then on, Scrooge displays kindness and generosity to everyone he meets and he definitely embodies the true spirit of Christmas.

“Scrooge was better than his words. And for Tiny Tim, who did not die, he was like a second father. He became a good friend, a good master, a good man. His heart laughed and that was quite good for him.

He had no further intercourse with Spirits and he knew how to keep Christmas well, if any man alive possessed the knowledge. May that be truly said of us, and all of us! And so, as Tiny Tim observed, God bless Us, Every One!”

Open discussion

The major theme of this novella is redemption. Self-reflection enables Scrooge to transform from a lonely, sad man to a generous, benefactor man, greatly improving the quality of his life.

Dickens’ social critic of Victorian England in *A Christmas Carol* is expressed through Scrooge: he is only interested in himself. Dickens himself was forced into early work due to his father’s debts and his childhood experience left him a changed person.

There are people who will tell you that Christmas is not to them what it used to be and that the present only serves to remind them adversity, misfortune and sad memories. This is not good.

Reflect upon your present blessings and not on your past misfortunes, of which all man have some. Fill your glass again, with a merry face and a happy heart and make your Christmas a merry Christmas and your new year a happy one with talking, laughing and merriment.

Dickens wrote: *“Who can be insensible to the good feeling which abound at this season of the year? There seems to be something magic in the very name of Christmas. Discords, prejudices and animosities which deform our better nature are forgotten: happiness, kindness, benevolence and cordial embrace are welcome and all the children look forward to it for some two months beforehand in a fever of anticipation”*.

