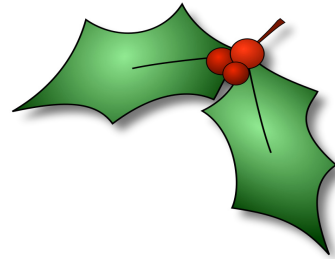


EDUCATIONAL MATERIALS FOR



A
CHRISTMAS
CAROL
FOR TWO ACTORS

BY CHARLES DICKENS

ADAPTED FOR THE STAGE BY GRANT MUDGE

SOUTHWEST
SHAKESPEARE
COMPANY

2024



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Composition: This Much Loved Tale of Page and Stage

- Written in six weeks in the late fall of 1843, while Dickens was also writing weekly installments of his latest novel, *Barnaby Rudge*.
- Cash-strapped Dickens needed the money, but even more he wanted to raise public awareness to the needs of poor children in Victorian England. Published just before Christmas Eve, the first two editions sold out within the week.
- Because this was prior to copyright laws, the tale was immediately pirated in print and for the stage, where it quickly profited others. Only twenty years later, when he began doing reading tours featuring excerpts from his works, especially *A Christmas Carol*, did Dickens see the sizeable profits he dreamt of in 1843.
- Today *A Christmas Carol* is firmly ensconced in many families' Christmas traditions—with good reason. It succeeds in reminding us of the holiday's true joys and adds a sprinkle of Christmas Present's gleam to our festivities, whichever winter holiday those might celebrate.



Marley and Scrooge (Arthur Rackham)

About This Adaptation

- Dickens would have loved this adaptation. He was an amateur actor long before he wrote his first novel. Here, two actors, a man and a woman, narrate and perform the play with dazzling character shifts amid its many roles, while the audience gets to fully engage its theatrical imagination.



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Author: About Charles Dickens (1812-1870)

- Victorian England's most prolific and popular novelist
- He did not reveal his own impoverished childhood and child labor experience until *David Copperfield* (1850)
- He began work as a court reporter/journalist until his first novel, *Pickwick Papers* (1836), gave him success
- He entertained his readers but also addressed social problems, promoted reforms, and satirized contemporary values
- Later toured widely reading from his works with flair



Charles Dickens in 1843, the year he wrote *A Christmas Carol*

Personal Links: Dickens' Life Parallels in *Carol*

Scrooge and Dickens

- Dickens' family moved from Chatham to London in 1822, leaving Dickens behind in school, where he read adventure stories.
- Dickens had a sister named Fan. She had one son, who was crippled and died at nine.
- Dickens loved holiday parties and games like those at Fred's house.

The Cratchits and Dickens

- Like the Cratchit children, Dickens knew poverty firsthand as a child. His father ended up in debtors' prison.
- The Cratchit family parallels the Dickens family, six children in each. Charles, like Peter Cratchit, was eldest son and was once sent to work in a shoe polish factory for long hours at very low pay.
- Dickens only saved Tiny Tim from death ("who did not die") in his last revision of the proofs. Dickens lost a younger brother and sister in infancy.



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Dickens' Earlier Christmas Narratives: Getting to the Carol

- Christmas filled Dickens' early writing. An essay in his first publication, the **1836 *Sketches by Boz*** [his reporter pseudonym], praised how old-time holiday family gatherings to “awaken the sympathies of every member of the party in behalf of his neighbor.”
- As he wrote his first novel, *Pickwick Papers*, later that year, he again had a chapter on Christmas, where, as of old, the residents, guests, and servants danced, played games, and ushered in the day, as the Fezziwig memory does in *Carol*.
- Also in *Pickwick*, someone tells a Christmas ghost story, “**The Goblins Who Stole a Sexton**” (illustration at right), a tale of visions on Christmas Eve as the goblins show the mean-spirited sexton how others celebrate, leaving him a changed man—the seeds of a foolproof Dickens narrative plan (borrowed from Washington Irving’s “Rip Van Winkle”). Plus a dramatic graveyard setting!



What *A Christmas Carol* Is:

- a story about a man who changes, or the story of three men, Scrooge, Marley, Cratchit, and three children, Want, Ignorance, and Tiny Tim
- a story about England’s social history—a story of a collective past and a more individualistic, money-centered present
- a story about the plight of others and of family love and fellow feeling



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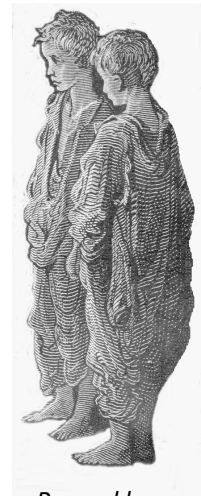
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The Inspiration for the Story: Victorian Social History

- Through the Renaissance, England was largely a rural, agrarian society which slowly waned. The Industrial Revolution sealed its fate, as rural workers and families were forced to seek employment in mines or city factories—men, women, and children working six 12+-hour days a week for starvation wages. London's population 1801 to 1841 doubled to 2.25 million.
- **In 1842 the report from the Commission for Inquiring into the Employment and Condition of Children in Mines and Manufactures** appeared, documenting **the appalling conditions**. Horrified, Dickens went to Cornwall to verify it, then planned a pamphlet to England on behalf of the children.
- **In September, 1843, he visited some free “ragged schools” for children of the London poor** [“ragged” described their clothes] and reported, “I have very seldom seen ...anything so shocking as the dire neglect of soul and body exhibited in these children,” and he pursued an article on the subject.
- Then he was invited to speak at a fund-raiser for a charity serving the poor in Manchester on October 5, 1843, where he spoke about Ignorance and the need for education reform for the poor to warm applause. He had found an audience. **While there, he envisioned the plot of *A Christmas Carol*, and, once home, writing it possessed him. It was published December 19, 1843.**



Child workers in a mine



Ragged boys



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What Dickens Saw: Child Labor in 19th-Century England

- Victorian England's factory owners were more interested in profit than in promoting human welfare. Conditions were dire, pay meager, and the effect soul-stunting, as Dickens knew too well from personal experience from factory work during his own childhood.
- In many poor English families, everyone worked—men, women, children.

In 1802 the first child labor law decreed children could *only* work 12-hour shifts six days a week, so most worked 6 a.m. to 7 or 8 p.m. with short meal breaks.



Reforms in 1833 forbade employing children under nine in textile factories (due to many injuries) and otherwise limited them to a 54-hour work week (6 9-hour days). Older siblings still worked 12-hour days under difficult or dangerous conditions.

- **Even 6-year-olds worked in coal mine tunnels too small for adults, harnessed to carts, hauling coal in darkness for 12-hour shifts.** Younger siblings worked the flaps of the ventilation system. Even young girls worked with the men in the dark mines (with predictable consequences).
- **In cities, poor families could sell 4- or 5-year-old boys to chimney sweeps, who made them climb into narrow chimneys to remove the built-up (and carcinogenic) coal tar that might otherwise start a fire.** The boys worked until they died or were too large to fit the chimneys, when—uneducated and underfed—they were turned out onto the street. Reform efforts began in 1817 but never passed.



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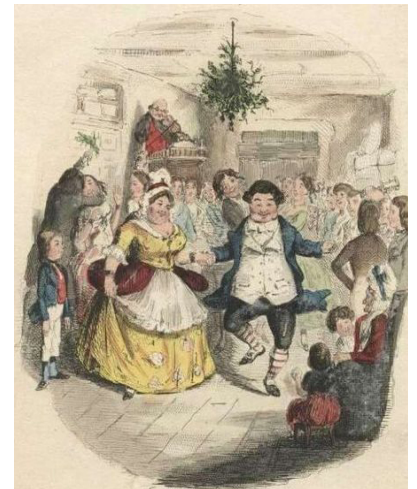
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Christmas in England: A Cultural History

Tiny Tim never hung a Christmas stocking. Santa never visited his house—or any house in England in 1843.

- In the 2nd century CE the Church chose the December date to celebrate Christmas as a way to replace Roman Saturnalia, the Druid holiday of Yule (with its burning of the Yule log), and the Saxon solstice feast for the sun's return. Evergreens—ancient symbol of nature's rebirth. The Romans brought holly to Briton. Mistletoe—sacred plant of the pagan world for peace and healing. The English invented kissing under it.
- Saint Nicholas was a 4th-century Turkish bishop. Santa Claus is American via Dutch settlers on Manhattan Island—later immortalized by Clement Clark Moore in “'Twas the night before Christmas” in 1822 and Santa's image by American cartoonist Thomas Nast in the 1860s. **The English figure is Old Father Christmas.** Christmas trees came to England via Queen Victoria's German husband Albert in 1841.



*The Fezziwig ball
(John Leech's
original frontispiece
for Christmas Carol)*

- **In England**, King Alfred proclaimed the Twelve Days of Christmas in 878 CE, a time of festivity when no one could be turned away. During the mid-17th-century Puritan Interregnum, however, Oliver Cromwell banned any observance of December 25th as a holy day, considering it a “pagan superstition.” Even after the Restoration in 1660, the tradition declined, and the Industrial Revolution killed the holiday, for December 25 was just another work day.

Dickens re-created it into the family celebration, the domestic festival we still recognize, and into a time for helping those less fortunate. We've perfected the merchandising of it.



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Reviving Carols, Too: The Title

- Dickens' title for the story was **another conscious reclamation effort**, even dividing the tale into five "staves" or verses. Caroling has ancient roots (some point to the angel singing to the shepherds near Bethlehem) and were part of church celebrations by 129 CE.
- Door-to-door caroling was a widespread English medieval tradition—called wassailing, for the singers were then offered a spiced drink.
- Like the rest of Christmas tradition, **caroling had almost disappeared in the early 19th century, especially in London**, for in the 1650s Cromwell had also banned caroling. One music scholar began collecting carols before they vanished, publishing *Ancient Carols* in 1822. William Sandys published a larger collection in 1832 and wrote to Dickens: "In many [northern and western] parts of the kingdom, the festival is still kept up ... though its influence is on the wane even with them; **the genius of the present age requires work and no play, and since the commencement of the century a great change may be traced.**" In Dickens' time, caroling was just a means of holiday begging (as in illustration, 1836); the only carol known in cities was "God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen," which Dickens uses.



"The Goose!"—What's The Big Deal With That Goose?

The Cratchit children do seem goose-obsessed. Well they might be; **many of the poor in Victorian London could rarely afford any meat except at Christmas**, having saved all fall to be able to purchase the one probably small bird. Nor would they have an oven at home big enough to cook it in; it was prepared for them at the local baker's.



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Handout: A Day With a 19th-Century English Child Worker

from William Blake's *Songs of Innocence*
"The Chimney Sweep"

When my mother died I was very young,
And my father sold me while yet my tongue
Could scarcely cry "weep! 'weep! 'weep! 'weep!"
So your chimneys I sweep & in soot I sleep.

There's little Tom Dacre, who cried when his head
That curled like a lamb's back, was shaved, so I said,
"Hush, Tom! never mind it, for when your head's bare,
You know that the soot cannot spoil your white hair."

And so he was quiet, & that very night,
As Tom was a-sleeping he had such a sight!
That thousands of sweepers, Dick, Joe, Ned & Jack,
Were all of them locked up in coffins of black,

And by came an Angel who had a bright key,
And he opened the Coffins & set them all free,
Then down a green plain, leaping, laughing they run,
And wash in a river and shine in the Sun;

Then naked & white, all their bags left behind,
They rise upon clouds, and sport in the wind.
And the Angel told Tom, if he'd be a good boy,
He'd have God for his father & never want joy.

And so Tom awoke, and we rose in the dark
And got with our bags & our brushes to work.
Tho' the morning was cold, Tom was happy & warm;
So if all do their duty, they need not fear harm.

-
- Are there child workers today?
Who made your sneakers?

from *Songs of Experience* (both 1794)
"The Chimney Sweeper"

A little black thing among the snow:
Crying weep, weep, in notes of woe!
Where are thy father & mother? say?
They are both gone up to the church to pray.

Because I was happy upon the heath,
And smil'd among the winter's snow:
They clothed me in the clothes of death,
And taught me to sing the notes of woe.

And because I am happy & dance & sing,
They think they have done me no injury:
And are gone to praise God & his Priest & King,
Who make up a heaven of our misery.

Factory Report Testimony: Emily Pennington, 16

"Has been an apprentice as a milliner 2¾ years: is boarded and lodged: [family] paid a premium of 20 pounds for five years [of training] ...In winter season begins work half-past 7 a.m. and leaves off about 11 p.m. if they are not very busy: [at times] goes on till 12. In summer begins at half-past 6 a.m. and leaves off about 1 in the morning: has sat up till 2 or 3 ... Never works on Sunday: goes to church. In the winter busy season has breakfast at 7 a.m. for which a quarter of an hour is allowed; dinner at half-past 12, generally about a quarter of an hour; tea at 6, a quarter of an hour allowed; supper at 10, for which there is a quarter of an hour or 20 minutes ... If they sit up till 1 or 2 in the morning a cup of coffee is allowed, but nothing to eat....When she has sat up a long time has pain in the back, and the legs ache; has had swelling of the feet.... Had very good health before she came here, but since has been several times ill..."



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About the Adaptation

Southwest Shakespeare Company Executive Director Grant Mudge recalls the story of this adaptation:

“The roots of the play you are about to see began as a solo performance in front of an Arizona fireplace in the Mudge family living room, twenty-six years ago. I recall thinking that ‘people make things for gifts, don't they?’ And realized I knew what to give. I began performing a roughly hour-long version of *A Christmas Carol* for family and friends in 1997.

The following year the living room filled to the brim, and I had a realization: ‘... I should perhaps be selling tickets to this.’

Rather than perform it alone, I added a second actor, and produced it in the 1998 season for Richmond Shakespeare. The tradition was set. The company produced the piece for fourteen consecutive years, with me always as its curmudgeonly miser—and fifteen consecutive Christmases as Ebenezer Scrooge can give you a complex!”

Southwest Shakes has learned that for this year's opening night, some of the youngest friends and family who attended those first performances around the fireplace will return to see it—twenty-six years later in the beautiful Nesbitt/Elliott Playhouse at Mesa Arts Center—and now of course, all grown up!

The feeling of this story—and the play itself—as a gift was true all those years ago and remains just as true today.

At right: *Grant Mudge as Scrooge with Cynde Liffick as the Ghost of Christmas Future (2003). Liffick contributed to the original two-actor adaptation and performed in five of its thirteen years with Richmond Shakespeare.*

