

# A CHRISTMAS CAROL

A GHOST STORY OF CHRISTMAS

BY  
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ADAPTED AND  
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# STUDY GUIDE OBJECTIVES

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This study guide serves as a classroom tool for teachers and students, and addresses the following Common Core Standards and Connecticut State Arts Standards:

## COMMON CORE STANDARDS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS

### Reading Literature: *Key Ideas and Details*

- **Grade 5:** Determine a theme of a story, drama, or poem from details in the text, including how characters in a story or drama respond to challenges.
- **Grades 6-8:** Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including its relationship to the characters, setting, and plot; provide an objective summary of the text.
- **Grades 9-10:** Analyze how complex characters (e.g. those with multiple or conflicting motivations) develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the themes.

### Reading Literature: *Craft and Structure*

- **Grades 9-10:** Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure a text, order events within it (e.g., parallel plots), and manipulate time (e.g., pacing, flashbacks) create such effects as mystery, tension, or surprise.

## NATIONAL CORE ARTS STANDARDS

- **HS Advanced TH:Re9.1.III. c.** Compare and debate the connection between a drama/theatre work and contemporary issues that may impact audiences.
- **HS Proficient TH:Cn11.2.I. b.** Use basic theatre research methods to better understand the social and cultural background of a drama/theatre work.

# GUIDELINES FOR ATTENDING THE THEATRE

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Attending live theatre is a unique experience with many valuable educational and social benefits. To ensure that all audience members are able to enjoy the performance, please take a few minutes to discuss the following audience etiquette topics with your students before you come to Hartford Stage.

- How is attending the theatre similar to and different from going to the movies? What behaviors are and are not appropriate when seeing a play? Why?
  - › Remind students that because the performance is live, the audience can affect what kind of performance the actors give. No two audiences are exactly the same and no two performances are exactly the same—this is part of what makes theatre so special! Students' behavior should reflect the level of performance they wish to see.
- Theatre should be an enjoyable experience for the audience. Audience members are more than welcome to applaud when appropriate and laugh at the funny moments. Talking and calling out during the performance, however, are not allowed. Why might this be?
  - › Be sure to mention that not only would the people seated around them be able to hear their conversation, but the actors on stage could hear them, too. Theatres are constructed to carry sound efficiently!
- Any noise or light can be a distraction, so please remind students to make sure their cell phones are turned off. Texting, photography, and video recording are prohibited. Food and gum should not be taken into the theatre.
- Students should sit with their group as seated by the Front of House staff and should not leave their seats once the performance has begun. If possible, restrooms should be used only during intermission.

# Charles Dickens

Charles Dickens was, in his own lifetime, a literary superstar—with throngs of fans attending his public readings and lectures and welcomed at towns across the globe (Hartford included) as if he were royalty. “If we see him,” wrote novelist Jane Smiley, “as a man whose work made him rich and famous, as close to a household name as any movie star is today—then we can also see him as the first person to become a ‘name brand.’”

The rise of Charles Dickens to brand name status is a rags-to-riches story. Charles John Huffman Dickens was born February 7, 1812, near Portsmouth, England, the second of John and Elizabeth Dickens’s eight children. His father was employed as a clerk for the Naval Pay Office, requiring the family to move frequently. Despite his job security, John Dickens found it difficult to support his growing family. The family of ten was habitually on the edge of financial ruin as John’s careless spending left them constantly in the clutches of creditors, a crime in Victorian England.

Charles Dickens was an intelligent and naturally inquisitive boy that discovered a love for books during his years at the Chatham School. His delight in education was cut short at the age of 10 when his father was transferred to London and Charles was sent to work at the Warren Blacking Company, putting labels on bottles of shoe polish, to help support the family. Two days after Charles’s twelfth birthday, John’s financial floundering caught up with him. John Dickens and the remaining family members were thrown into a debtor’s prison to work off the huge debt amassed. Abandoned, neglected, and ill-treated by factory overseers, Charles worked 12 to 16 hour days, then trekked three miles to his squalid lodgings in Camden town. These years profoundly influenced Charles’s later writing career; themes of abandonment, abuse, and ignorance permeate his work. The shame of his circumstances and the anger at his lack of education compelled the young Dickens to succeed through hard work and determination. Through his life and work he would be a constant champion of children, the poor and a well-regulated legal system. An unexpected inheritance allowed John Dickens to pay off his debt and Charles was reunited with his family. Charles continued his education at the Wellington House Academy until at age 15, his family could no longer afford his tuition. He began a series of odd jobs, including work as an office boy in a law firm and a stint as a county reporter covering Parliamentary debates for *The Morning Chronicle* in 1835.

Charles Dickens’s first fictional works to gain notoriety, the satirical *Sketches by Boz* (1833-35), were presented in serial form, followed by *The Pickwick Papers* (1836-37), making the 24-year-old Dickens a famous and successful author. With his novel *Oliver Twist* (1839), Dickens sealed his popularity and announced some of the continuing themes of his work: an indictment of a society that mistreated the poor, a condemnation of the wrongs inflicted on children by adults, and a denunciation of corruption and decay in politics and government.

Of all of Dickens’s works, none has entered the consciousness and become a “brand name” in its own right as *A Christmas Carol*. Though he was a quite popular author by that time, his publishers were threatening to lower his payment. Concerned over his own financial problems, and trying to avoid having to lease out his London home, Dickens thought he might have hit upon a profitable story with his tale of Ebenezer Scrooge and his nocturnal visitations. He wrote *A Christmas Carol* after the summer of 1843, which he spent teaching in a program that provided basic instruction to poor children. Barely clothed, hungry and already turning to a life of thievery, these children would inspire a central image in *A Christmas Carol*: the two children, Ignorance and Want. Dickens announced the story would hit his readers over the head like a “sledge-hammer.” Though only one in ten people in Victorian England could read, legend has it that each person who read *A Christmas Carol* went out and read it to many other anxious listeners. These retellings became the first adaptations of the beloved story.



Above: photograph of Charles Dickens, circa 1852.  
Below: photograph of Charles Dickens, taken by Jeremiah Gurney & Son, New York, 1867.



**February 7, 1812**

Charles Dickens is born near Portsmouth, England.

**September 15, 1830**

The Liverpool and Manchester Railway opens. It is the world's first intercity railway operated by steam locomotives.

**October 1831**

The first cholera epidemic in England begins in Sunderland, an industrial city in northeast England.

**1832**

The first Reform Act is passed, granting voting rights to members of the industrial middle class by reapportioning representation in Parliament to better represent the rapidly growing northern cities. Any man owning a household worth at least £10 is permitted to vote, which makes one man out of every five a voter.

# THEMES FOR DISCUSSION

## Redemption and Free Will

“No. Spirit! Oh, no, no, no! Spirit tell me I may sponge away the writing on the gravestone,” Ebenezer Scrooge pleads with the Ghost of Christmas Future. “Why show me these things if I am beyond all hope? Good Spirit, I will change my life” (2.11). As a result of his experiences with the Ghosts of Christmas that evening, Scrooge knows that if he continues on his current path, only death and despair await. He is overwrought with fear that the fate shown to him by the Ghost of Christmas Future may not be escapable. His lack of compassion for his fellow man has isolated him from the affection of those around him. Scrooge sees the direct correlation between his past and present actions and the tragedy and abandonment prophesied for his future. It is only the possibility of free will to make different choices that may allow Scrooge to change his future and redeem himself from an uncaring past.



Bill Raymond as Ebenezer Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol*. Photo by T. Charles Erickson.

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- In the ghost of Jacob Marley, Scrooge has already seen what his own fate could potentially be, yet he remains skeptical of whether he really needs to change until he meets the Ghost of Christmas Future. What does the Ghost of Christmas Future show Scrooge that solidifies Scrooge’s desire for redemption? Why is this experience more impactful than simply seeing Jacob Marley’s ghost?
- Do you believe that you can shape your future with the choices you make today? Or do you believe that your fate is predetermined and everything will happen exactly as it was meant to? Why?

## Greed and Capitalism

Capitalism is an economic system in which goods and services are produced for profit and value is gained by the producing individual or organization. In Victorian England, the setting of *A Christmas Carol*, the industrial revolution partnered with capitalism to significantly change Britain’s economy as manufacturing and mining became the country’s major economic drivers and agriculture became more secondary. The reduced role of government regulation in the new capitalist economy allowed Britain to become an international financial leader. However, this same lack of regulation meant that worker abuses were rampant, safety provisions were unenforceable, and wages could be kept low, thus creating an impoverished, exploited workforce.

In *A Christmas Carol*, Ebenezer Scrooge represents the unscrupulous capitalist. His priority is to increase his profits, even if it is at the expense of the health and well-being of those less well-off. Scrooge’s greed permeates every facet of his life. He eats simple barley for breakfast rather than spend money on a full meal. He wears the same clothes repeatedly because to buy more would be wasteful. He refuses to make a donation in support of the poor because he believes that their survival is no one’s problem but their own. Scrooge’s greed is also evident in how he treats those who depend on him. Scrooge refuses to allow his

## February 1832

The second cholera epidemic spreads through London, where 6,536 people die. British colonialism is heavily criticized for contributing to the spread of the disease.

## August 29, 1833

Parliament passes the Factory Act, which makes it illegal to employ children younger than 9 years old and limits workers between the ages of 9 and 13 to nine hours of work per day.

## August 1, 1834

The Slavery Abolition Act of 1833 goes into effect, outlawing slavery in most of the British Empire.

## August 14, 1834

The Poor Law Amendment Act aims to transfer unemployed rural workers to urban areas where more jobs are available.

## 1835

The Municipal Corporations Bill gives 178 boroughs the right to form their own town councils to take control of local social services such as education, housing, and street lighting.

**“Why drink to the health of a brief life? A LONG AND PROFITABLE LIFE should be our toast.”**

—Ebenezer Scrooge (2.1)

employee, Bob Cratchit, to add coal to the fire on a frigid day. He is angered by Cratchit’s request for a paid day off for Christmas, saying “it’s not convenient, sir, and it’s not fair, sir! If I was to stop you half a crown for it, you’d think yourself ill-used, but you don’t think me ill-used when I pay a day’s wages for no work” (1.1). He mercilessly pursues the payments owed to him by the Doll, Cider, and Watchworks Vendors, and will not leave them until he has taken something from their stalls. In his day to day life, Scrooge’s desire to accumulate and possess wealth has taken priority over being a responsible member of society. It is only when the Ghosts of

Christmas force Scrooge to be a spectator of his own life that he can see that the reward for generosity and goodwill is greater than gold.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Even after the Ghosts of Christmas are done with him, Scrooge remains a capitalist—he hires someone (a young boy on the street) to do a service for him (buy a turkey for the Cratchit family’s Christmas dinner). Technically, Scrooge could go buy the turkey himself, but he has other things to do. How is the young boy’s brief experience as Scrooge’s employee different from Bob Cratchit’s experience as Scrooge’s employee? How do you predict Scrooge’s work relationship with Cratchit will change?
- Based on the plot of *A Christmas Carol*, how do you think Charles Dickens felt about the capitalist system?
- What are the chief criticisms of capitalism today? What are the arguments in its favor? Research the economic systems of Great Britain and the United States. Does either country adhere strictly to capitalist philosophy?

## Time

Time is of the essence in Charles Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol*. Bob Cratchit gently pleads for time off to spend with his family. Ebenezer Scrooge hassles his debtors about the lateness of their payments. The Doll Vendor sells “relics of the past” and the Watchworks Vendor hawks “the future of [the] entire nation” (1.2). When Jacob Marley foretells the coming of the three Ghosts of Christmas, Scrooge professes his doubts as to whether one night is enough time in which to accomplish such a feat. But by the end of the play, Scrooge’s skepticism is gone and in the final scenes, Scrooge begs to know if there is time left to right the wrongs he has done or whether the chiming of the clock signifies the end of more than just the hour.

Read the following quotes dealing with time from Michael Wilson’s adaptation of Charles Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol*:

**SCROOGE:** What’s Christmas-time to you but a time for paying bills without money. A time for finding yourself a year older, and not an hour richer (1.1).

**WATCHWORKS VENDOR:** Very well, your time will come, Mr. Scrooge (1.2).



Bill Raymond as Ebenezer Scrooge and Steve French as the Watchworks Vendor in *A Christmas Carol*. Photo by T. Charles Erickson.

## May 1838

The People's Charter is published by a committee of six members of Parliament and six working men, beginning the world's first working-class labor movement.

## July 1, 1837

The General Register Office begins formally keeping records of births, deaths, and marriages.

## June 20, 1836

King William IV dies. He has no legitimate children, so his niece, Princess Victoria of Kent, becomes Queen.

## 1836, continued

The Anti-Corn Law Association is established in London, aiming to repeal the Corn Laws of 1815, which forced people to pay high food prices to survive.

## 1836

The London Working Men's Association is formed.

**MARLEY'S GHOST:** I cannot rest, I cannot stay, I cannot linger anywhere...weary journeys lie before me.

**SCROOGE:** You must have been very slow about it, Jacob?

**MARLEY'S GHOST:** Slow!?

**SCROOGE:** Seven years dead, and travelling all the time?

**MARLEY'S GHOST:** The whole time. No rest, no peace, incessant torture of remorse (1.3).

**GHOST OF CHRISTMAS PRESENT:** I can see this drink is not for you, Ebenezer Scrooge! In the span of eternity man's life is not long, so each day, hour, and minute must be cherished. You cannot have a wonderous—and what you call—profitable life if you do not treasure its brevity (2.1).

**SCROOGE:** Lead on! Lead on! The night's waning fast, and it is precious time to me, I know (2.6).

**MARTHA:** And then, Peter will be keeping company with someone, and setting up house for himself.

**PETER:** Get along with you!

**CRATCHIT:** It's just as likely as not, one of these days; though there's plenty of time for that, my dear (2.10).

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- How does the treatment of time change from Act 1 to Act 2? How do you think the way in which time is discussed connects to the plot of each scene?
- What is the impact of the passage of time on Scrooge's character? How does he change from the past, to the present, to the future? How does each Ghost of Christmas use time as a tool in making its case to Scrooge?
- What is the significance of time in your own life? Are you always on time or always late? How does your demeanor change when you know you have a very limited amount of time in which to accomplish something versus when you have a lot of time? How has who you are changed over time, from the past to the present?

## NOTABLE WORKS BY CHARLES DICKENS

### *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club*

April 1836–November 1837  
Monthly serial

### *A Christmas Carol*

1843 | Novella

### *The Cricket of the Hearth*

1845 | Novella

### *David Copperfield*

May 1849–November 1850  
Monthly serial

### *Bleak House*

March 1852–September 1853  
Monthly serial

### *A Tale of Two Cities*

April 30, 1859–November 26, 1859  
Weekly serial in *All the Year Round*

### *Great Expectations*

December 1, 1860–August 3, 1861  
Weekly serial in *All the Year Round*

### *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*

April 1870–September 1870  
Monthly serial | Unfinished

# FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION

## Adaptation and Performance

The script of Hartford Stage's production of *A Christmas Carol* is an adaptation written by the theatre's former Artistic Director Michael Wilson. But Wilson was not the first person to adapt this story for the stage, nor will he be the last. Shortly after the novella's publishing in 1843, Dickens authorized a theatrical production that opened in London on February 5, 1844. Several unauthorized adaptations were developed

**September 17, 1838**

The London and Birmingham Railway opens.

**1839-1843**

The Rebecca Riots take place in South and Mid Wales, in which farmers and agricultural workers protest what they see as unfair taxation and tolls.

**1839**

The Anti-Corn Law Association is renamed the Anti-Corn-Law League (ACLL), advocating for free trade in Britain and overseas.

**July 4, 1839**

Chartists riot in Birmingham.

**November 4, 1839**

Coal miners from Newport, Monmouthshire, march in an attempt to free Chartist prisoners.

**January 10, 1840**

A uniform postage rate of one penny is established.

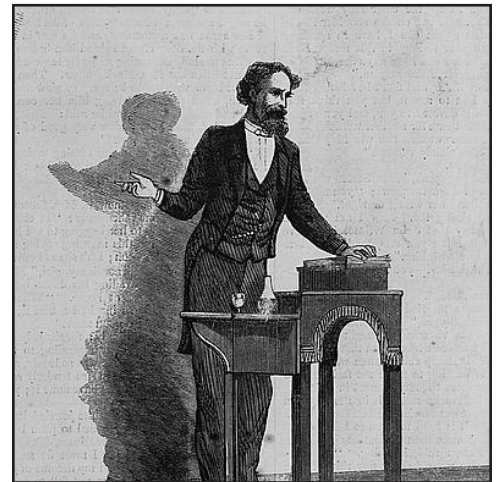
**April 15, 1840**

Kings College Hospital opens in London.

during the same time, and by the end of February, 1844, there were eight competing productions of Dickens's tale playing in the city. During the 1844 Christmas season, the version Dickens had authorized was produced at the Park Theatre in New York City and was also revived in London.

In the 168 years since it was published, *A Christmas Carol* has been staged all over the world. Since it was first staged in 1998, Hartford Stage's production has become an annual holiday tradition in Connecticut. Other theatres in the United States that annually produce an adaptation of *A Christmas Carol* include Trinity Repertory Company (Providence, RI), North Shore Music Theatre (Beverly, MA), the Goodman Theatre (Chicago, IL), the Guthrie Theatre (Minneapolis, MN), and many others.

Some of the earliest theatrical performances of the story, however, were not full-scale productions with actors, sets, and costumes. Charles Dickens adapted his story into a script for performance, and gave more than 120 public dramatic readings of it. In these readings, Dickens made edits to the text, rewording some sentences and cutting others all together. Dickens also altered his reading style to suit the demeanor of his audience, making changes on the spot that were sometimes surprising even to himself. His original prompt book contains a significant number of handwritten words and phrases in the margins, intended to remind him of the tone he should take on when reading a particular passage. Audiences at these readings reported that the first few minutes of the performances were somewhat dull and unenergetic, but that Dickens transformed when the character of Scrooge began to speak. They were amazed at his ability to transform himself into each of his characters. Dickens performed his readings of *A Christmas Carol* from 1853 until his death in 1870, but by that time, he was barely referring to his prompt book at all. As a result of his years of dramatic readings, he knew his original text and the performance variations so well that he only occasionally needed to consult it.



Above: "Charles Dickens as he appears when reading." Wood engraving from a sketch by Charles A. Barry. Illustration in *Harper's Weekly*, v. 11, no. 571, 7 December 1867, p. 777. Below: Bill Raymond as Ebenezer Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol*. Photo by T. Charles Erickson.

**QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

- Why do you think theatres choose to produce *A Christmas Carol* year after year? Why do audiences return to this story over and over again?
- Why would a writer choose to create an adaptation of *A Christmas Carol* when there are already so many out there?
- What qualities do great storytellers possess? Why would a writer like Charles Dickens choose to cut or change parts of his own story when reading it aloud?

**Ghostly Symbolism**

While contemporary audiences most often associate ghosts with Halloween, the cold and dark of winter was an ominous time full of mystery for the Victorians. The chilling winds and freezing temperatures were incredibly dangerous for the many impoverished people who lacked proper clothes and shelter. With cures for many common illnesses inaccessible or simply not yet discovered, winter was frequently accompanied by death. While efforts at holiday cheer brought some degree of warmth and festivity, the gray landscape

### July 20, 1840

The National Charter Association is formed to unite the local Chartist organizations.

### August 7, 1840

The Chimney Sweep Act prohibits the employment of those under the age of 21 as chimney sweeps.

### June 6, 1841

The United Kingdom conducts its first national census, totaling a population of 15.9 million in England and Wales, 8.2 million in Ireland, and 2.6 million in Scotland.

### 1842

An estimated one third of the underground workforce in British coal mines and one fourth in British metal mines is under the age of 18.

### May 4, 1842

A second Chartist petition is presented to Parliament. It is rejected by the House of Commons.

and quiet nights dominated the Victorian imagination. When he wrote *A Christmas Carol*, Dickens capitalized on this by using ghosts as impactful symbols to communicate his message and provoke changes in his characters and audiences alike. The resulting tale is a powerful “ghost story of Christmas,” the original text of which Dickens prefaced in December 1843: “I have endeavored in this Ghostly little book, to raise the Ghost of an Idea, which shall not put my readers out of humour with themselves, with each other, with the season, or with me. May it haunt their houses pleasantly, and no one wish to lay it.”

### MARLEY’S CHAIN

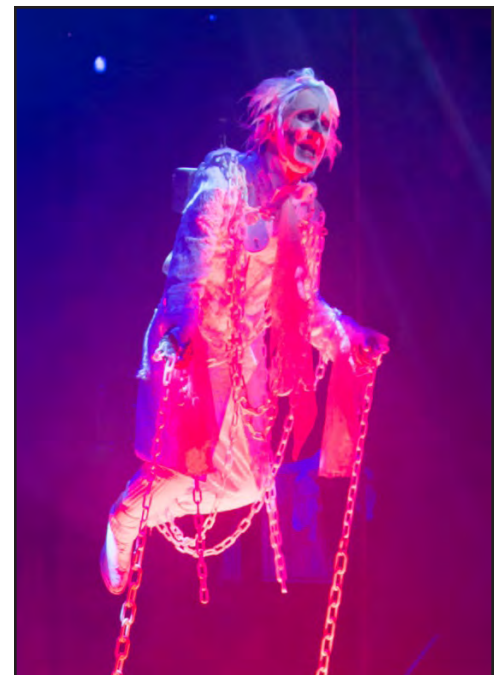
The chain carried by the ghost of Jacob Marley is one of the most conspicuous symbols in the play. “I wear the chain I forged in life,” Marley tells Scrooge in Act 1, Scene 3. “I made it link by link, and yard by yard.” When he was alive, Marley spent his time in the pursuit of wealth rather than doing good for his fellow human beings. His actions forged an invisible chain meant to bind his soul to the earth, and the greedier he became, the longer and heavier the chain grew. Now dead for seven years, Marley warns Scrooge that a similar fate (and a longer, heavier chain) awaits him if he does not change his ways. “Is [this chain’s] pattern strange to you? Or would you know the weight and length of the strong coil you bear yourself? It was as heavy and as long as this seven Christmas Eves ago. You have labored in it since. It is a ponderous chain” (1.3).

### THE THREE GHOSTS OF CHRISTMAS

**The Ghost of Christmas Past** represents memory. She shows Scrooge events from his past in hopes of shedding light on how Scrooge became bitter and miserly and to remind him that he was not always that way. If the Ghost can help Scrooge remember who he once was, there may still be hope for him.

**The Ghost of Christmas Present** represents generosity and good will. He shows Scrooge scenes of people sharing what they have with each other, even if they have very little. This Ghost seeks to show Scrooge that the true meaning of the holiday is found in the joy that comes from giving to others and celebrating together. If Scrooge is to change his life, there is no better time to start than Christmas.

**The Ghost of Christmas Future** represents fear of death. This Ghost intends to show Scrooge that if he continues in his current fashion, there is a reckoning that awaits him. In death, Jacob Marley paid for his actions on Earth. If he does not change, Scrooge will suffer the same fate. The affection the Cratchits hold for one another in the wake of Tiny Tim’s death stands in stark contrast to the predictions for Scrooge’s future, and pushes Scrooge to make a choice.



Above: Noble Shropshire as Jacob Marley in *A Christmas Carol*. Below: Bill Raymond as Scrooge and Hartt School actors as Ghostly Apparitions in *A Christmas Carol*. Photos by T. Charles Erickson.



### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Read the opening stage directions for the prologue of Michael Wilson’s adaptation of *A Christmas Carol* on the next page. What elements of this description are similar to those you find in other ghost stories? How do these elements set a tone of tension, fear, and mystery?



### June 1842

The first peacetime income tax is collected. Incomes of £150 per year are taxed 3 pence per pound, a rate that exempts virtually all working classes.

### Summer 1842

The General Strike, also known as the Plug Plot Riots, takes place in northern England and Scotland, demanding that recent pay cuts be reversed and the Charter become law.

### August 1842

The Mines Act prohibits women and children from working in mines.

### August 7-27, 1842

Riots erupt in and around Lancashire, protesting the Corn Laws and supporting Chartists.

### December 1843

The world's first Christmas cards are sent.

### December 19, 1843

Charles Dickens publishes *A Christmas Carol*.

*Outside Marley's house, where Scrooge now lives. Music. GHOSTLY APPARITIONS emerge and dance in a haunted, tormented fashion. THEY exit. A great thunderstorm begins to rage. Lightning strikes. Church bells toll the hour—seven. MRS. DILBER, Scrooge's housekeeper, enters, bearing a breakfast tray. The tray holds a bowl, with a single lit candle. She stops when she sees the disheveled room.*

- At the end of Act 2, Scene 5, the Ghost of Christmas Present shows Scrooge the figures of Ignorance and Want, which are portrayed by two children. “They are man’s,” the Ghost says. “And they cling to me, appealing from their fathers. This boy is Ignorance. This girl is Want. Beware them both, but most of all beware this boy, for on his brow I see that written which is Doom, unless the writing be erased.” What do the words “ignorance” and “want” mean? What is their significance in the story of *A Christmas Carol*? When the ghost says that “they are man’s,” what does he mean? Why do you think Dickens decided to use children to represent these concepts? How can Scrooge erase the “Doom” written on Ignorance’s brow?
- What are some commonly used symbols at Christmastime? What do they represent?

## The Industrial Revolution in Victorian England

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The Victorian Era (1837–1901) is defined by the reign of Queen Victoria, who ascended to the throne at the age of 18 and ruled during the industrialization of England, encouraging tremendous change and expansive growth in England’s domestic and foreign power. The Victorian period in England’s history is a case study in stark contrasts: the beauty and richness of the aristocracy versus the poverty and depression of the poor working class. The middle class was essentially nonexistent, but the Industrial Revolution meant that the balance of power shifted from the aristocracy, whose position and wealth was based on land, to the newly rich business leaders. The new aristocracy became one of wealth, not land, and often bought themselves titles, which remained important in British society.

Until the reign of Queen Victoria, England’s populace was primarily rural. The explosion of the Industrial Revolution accelerated the migration of the population from the country to the city. The result of this movement was the development of horrifying slums and cramped row housing in the overcrowded cities. By 1900, 80% of the population lived in cities. These cities were “organized” into geographical zones based on social class—the poor in the inner city, with the more fortunate living further away from the city core.

In an age of burgeoning technology and industry, the common working man suffered what to the modern reader would seem brutal, degrading, and almost unimaginable conditions with a patient resignation and the sense that survival is its own end. Industrial workers labored from 6 a.m. to 9 p.m. daily, without health benefits, bonuses, or vacation. Adult factory workers were forced to leave their children with little to no supervision in drafty homes with inadequate septic systems, no running water nor toilets, and little ventilation. Half of all children died before the age of five due to neglect and malnourishment. By 1839, nearly half of all funerals were for children under the age of ten.

The overcrowded shanty homes were built within walking distance of the factories. The houses were “back to backs,” often sharing a wall without windows in the front of the homes, and no backyards. In London and other large towns, the waste from houses drained into the sewers that ran down the center of the street, tainting the air with the smell of human and animal waste. Due to these conditions and mountains of animal filth and feces that filled the London streets, disease ran rampant, quickly sweeping through neighborhoods and factories. More than 31,000 people died from an outbreak of cholera in 1832; typhus, smallpox, and dysentery were also common diseases.

The Victorian Age was characterized by rapid change and developments in nearly every sphere—

### June 15, 1844

The Factory Act imposes a maximum twelve-hour work-day for women and a maximum six-hour work-day for children ages 6-13.

### August 9, 1844

England abolished imprisonment for debt.

### 1845-1849

The Irish Potato Famine breaks out.

### May 16, 1846

Parliament repeals the Corn Laws and introduces Free Trade.

### March 5, 1847

73 coal miners are killed in an explosion in Yorkshire.

### June 8, 1847

The Factory Act establishes a ten-hour maximum workday for women and for boys ages 13-18.

### 1848-1849

Another cholera epidemic sweeps through industrial cities in Great Britain, killing approximately 15,000 people in London alone.

from advances in medical, scientific and technological knowledge to changes in population growth and location. Over time, this rapid transformation deeply affected the country's mood: an age that began with a confidence and optimism eventually gave way to uncertainty and doubt and grievous conditions for the common man.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What were Great Britain's primary imports and exports during the Industrial Revolution? What laws regulated the import and export of goods? Have any of Victorian England's major industries survived to today?
- How were the lifestyles of Victorian England's wealthy citizens different from those who lived in poverty? How are the differences in economic class depicted in *A Christmas Carol*? What do you think Dickens was trying to say about the lives of the rich and the poor in Victorian society?

**“Steam is CHANGING our entire way of life. Making travel FASTER, output GREATER, precision FINER.”**

—Watchworks Vendor (1.2)

## Child Labor

The burgeoning industrialization of Great Britain required a large and cheap workforce. Lenient labor laws made children a prime source of workers, and by 1830, children made up 50% of the workforce. Children with parents began their work between the ages of nine and 14, while orphans could be put to work as young as four. Children worked excessively long hours at the lowest possible rates, earning as little as one-eighth the salary of their adult counterparts. Since many parents would not allow their young children to work in the new textile factories, orphans and extremely impoverished children were purchased by factory owners and required to sign contracts indenting them until the age of 21. Children were forced to work 12 to 16-hour days, living in overcrowded, filthy buildings on the factory property. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, these “pauper apprentices” made up about a third of the cotton industry.

The youngest children in cotton and textile factories were used as scavengers and piecers. Scavengers had the extremely dangerous job of picking up the loose cotton from under the machinery while the machines were still working. Piecers were required to lean over the spinning machine to repair threads. Older children were employed to operate and repair heavy machinery and cotton spinning wheels because of their small size and maneuverability. They were often trapped for 12 to 16 hours in cramped rooms with coal fuel machines and little to no ventilation. The children often ate within the dust and debris-infested factories, which increased upper respiratory diseases. Accidents were common; children in textile factories were frequently scalped, maimed, crushed and killed when falling asleep at the machines.

In the coal mines, boys and girls as young as five were put to work in the shafts because of their small bodies. Stripped of most of their clothes and chained to their coal carts, they did dangerous and grueling work underneath the earth. Children also occupied the role of trappers, who sat in a hole holding a string attached to the mine door. When they heard the coal wagons, they were responsible for pulling and holding the heavy doors open. In match factories, children were used to dip matches in phosphorous, which caused their teeth to rot and brought death to those who inhaled too much of the toxic substance. Children were also used as chimney sweepers and chain gang day laborers in the fields.

In 1833, the first Factory Act was passed to establish a 15-hour workday. Over the next 30 years, legislators would fight to pass six other acts to improve the working conditions for children.

### April 10, 1848

Approximately 150,000 people attend a Chartist rally in Kennington Park, London, and present a petition to Parliament.

### July 1848

Parliament aims to reduce death rates by passing legislation to improve urban health conditions.

### 1854

Another cholera epidemic sweeps through industrial cities in Great Britain.

### 1854

Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* is published.

### 1867

Another cholera epidemic sweeps through industrial cities in Great Britain.

### 1864

The Corn Laws are repealed.

### June 9, 1870

Charles Dickens dies.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

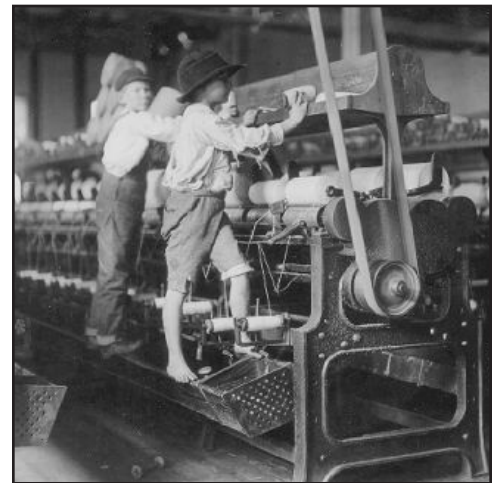
- Research today's child labor laws in the United States and Great Britain. What is the minimum age a person must now be to have a job? What restrictions and guidelines exist for employers wishing to hire young people? Are there age requirements to do particular kinds of work?
- How do other countries handle child labor today? Where in the world do young children still work in dangerous situations? Compare and contrast the working conditions and types of work done by children in Victorian England with those doing hazardous work today. What economic and social factors contributed to the institution of child labor in both settings? What efforts are being made to protect child workers?

## Tiny Tim and Polio

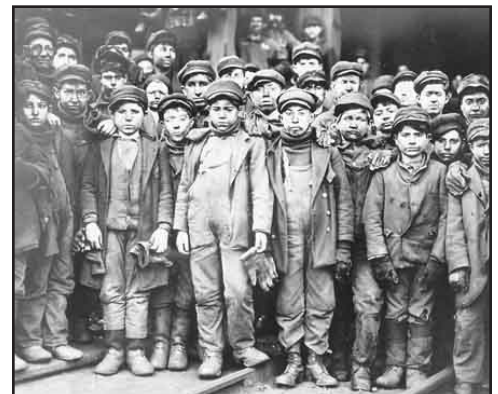
Polio, or poliomyelitis, is a viral disease in which the infection enters the blood stream through the digestive tract, then spreads through the lymph system and can attack the nerves. Children are now routinely immunized against the disease (the vaccine became widely available in 1955) and it has been completely eliminated in many countries, but from the 1840s through the 1950s, polio was a worldwide epidemic.

In about 95% of polio cases, the infection is asymptomatic, meaning it produces no symptoms at all. But in the 4-8% of cases that do produce symptoms, there are three different forms. In subclinical polio, the person experiences flu-like symptoms, including fever, sore throat, headache, and vomiting, but no long-term effects. Nonparalytic polio is associated with aseptic meningitis and includes symptoms such as neck stiffness and sensitivity to light. The third form, paralytic polio, is the rarest form (occurring in only 0.1-2% of cases) but is the form most commonly thought of in association with the disease, as it is a severe, debilitating illness that results in muscular paralysis and sometimes death. Once in the body, the paralytic form of polio could produce the same physical symptoms displayed by Tiny Tim. Polio was eliminated in the United States by 1979 and in the Western Hemisphere by 1991.

In *A Christmas Carol*, Charles Dickens never specifically identifies Tiny Tim's ailment, but polio is one of the most common theories. The lack of proper sanitation in Victorian London, combined with poor hygiene and the Victorians' lack of knowledge about germs as a source for illness, resulted in living conditions that were ideal for the spread of the disease. Polio is transmitted from person-to-person, primarily through contact with infected mucus, phlegm, or feces. Residents of industrial cities in the 19<sup>th</sup> century came into contact with all three on a daily basis, as indoor plumbing was rare, and the streets contained a blend of mud, factory pollution, rotten food, and sewage. Bathing was a luxury afforded only by the wealthy, and impoverished people like the Cratchits would have washed themselves with a cloth and cold water, if they washed at all. In addition to polio, diseases like cholera and tuberculosis were rampant, and families like the Cratchits had little to no access to what limited, but potentially life-saving, medical treatments existed for these diseases. Tiny Tim's apparent contraction of polio, exemplified by his paralyzed legs and general



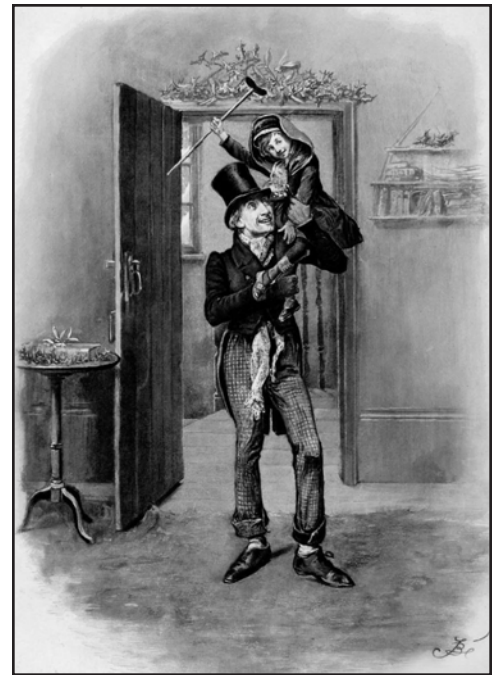
Above: children spinning cotton in a Victorian textile factory.  
Below: young miners in Victorian England.



weakness, would truly have been a death sentence without the intervention of a wealthy benefactor such as Mr. Scrooge.

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- In 1858, the “Great Stink” of London prompted Parliament to reform the Metropolitan Sewer Commission, construct new sewage systems in the city, and build the Embankment along the Thames River to improve the flow of water and traffic. What other measures did Parliament take in the decades that followed to improve the cleanliness of England’s industrial cities and the health of the people who lived there? How did these measures impact the different economic classes?
- What illnesses commonly affect children today? How are they treated and prevented?
- The spread of Zika virus in 2016 is considered an epidemic. What demographics are most affected by Zika? What are its symptoms? What measures are governments and healthcare providers taking to lessen the impact? How is this modern epidemic similar to and different from the epidemics of diseases like polio and cholera in the 19<sup>th</sup> century?



A frontispiece to Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*.  
By Frederick Barnard, circa 1870.

## SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

### Creative Writing: Ghost Stories

*A Christmas Carol* is Charles Dickens’s most well-known ghost story of Christmas, but he included ghostly elements in several of his other stories, too. Examine the excerpts from some of Dickens’s other Christmas ghost stories below. Consider the following:

- What elements do they have in common with each other and with *A Christmas Carol*? Think about characters, setting, and plot. How are they similar to other ghost stories you have heard?
- What makes a ghost story successful? How do authors of ghost stories hope their audience will react to their work?
- Today, most people associate ghost stories with Halloween. Why would Dickens’s Victorian audience have associated ghost stories with Christmastime? What aspects of Christmastime make it a good setting for a ghost story?

Choose characters, a Christmas setting, and a conflict that you think would make a good ghost story, and use them to write your own ghost story of Christmas.

#### **THE CHIMES**

He saw the tower, whither his charmed footsteps had brought him, swarming with dwarf phantoms, spirits, elfin creatures of the Bells. He saw creatures of the Bells. He saw them leaping, flying, dropping, pouring from the Bells without a pause. He saw them, round him on the ground; above him, in the air, clambering from him, by the ropes below; looking down upon him from the massive iron-girded beams...

#### **THE PICKWICK PAPERS**

“What do you do here on Christmas eve?” said the goblin sternly.

“I came to dig a grave, sir,” stammered Gabriel Grub.

“What man wanders among graves and churchyards on such a night as this?” cried the goblin.

“Gabriel Grub! Gabriel Grub!” screamed a wild chorus of voices that seemed to fill the churchyard. Gabriel looked fearfully round—nothing was to be seen.

#### **THE HAUNTED MAN AND THE GHOST’S BARGAIN**

Who had seen him there, upon a winter night, alone...pondering in his chair before the rusted grate and red flame, moving his thin mouth as if in speech, but silent as the dead, would not have said that the man seemed haunted, and the chamber too?

You should have seen him in his dwelling about twilight, in the dead winter-time. When the wind was blowing shrill and shrewd, with the going down of the blurred sun. When it was just so dark as that the forms of things were indistinct and big—but not wholly lost. When sitters by the fire began to see wild faces and figures, mountains and abysses, ambuscades and armies, in the coals.

When twilight everywhere released the shadows, prisoned up all day that now closed in and gathered like mustering swarms of ghosts. When they stood lowering in corners of the rooms, and frowned out from behind half-opened doors. When they had full possession of unoccupied apartments. When they had danced upon the floors, and walls, and ceilings of uninhabited chambers while the fire was low.

## Creative Writing: Social Issues

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Charles Dickens wrote stories that depicted the lives of the poor and working class people of England. He felt that the issues facing them, particularly as a result of the Poor Laws, were important and wanted to draw attention to them. Consider what social issues impact your life and community and answer the following questions:

- What real-life examples have you seen of the impact of laws, government regulations, or economic policies? How does this issue connect to you and your life?
- Who are the people (characters) involved? What stories are they living? What are the conflicts in their lives? Are there any recurring themes or symbols?

Choose an issue that is important to you that you think attention should be drawn to. Identify the characters, setting, and conflict that best exemplify the issue's impact. Write a short story that shows how people's lives are being affected by this issue.

## Victorian Parlor Games

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In the time before television, radio, and the internet, people often amused themselves indoors by playing games. It was common for Victorians to play a variety of parlor games with friends and family, both in and out of the holiday season. The following common games can be played at home or in the classroom.

### YES AND NO

In *A Christmas Carol*, Fred, his wife, and their friends play the game “Yes and No” at their holiday party. In this game, the first player chooses something and commits it to memory. The other players then, one at a time, ask yes or no questions to try to determine what the first player is thinking. When a player thinks they know the answer, they can make a guess on their turn, but should only do so if they are very certain they know the answer. When a guess is made, the game ends, even if the guess is incorrect.

### BLIND MAN'S BLUFF

One player is blindfolded and all other players scatter around the room. The blindfolded player must move around the room trying to capture other players. Once they have caught someone, the blindfolded player must try to guess who the person is. If they guess wrong, the captured player is released and the blindfolded player must continue until they can correctly identify the person they have caught.

### LOOKABOUT

The first player shows the group a small object. The group then leaves the room while the first player hides it. When the group returns, they search for the item until they find it. When a player finds the object, they sit down. Continue until all players have found the object.

*TIP: The game is harder if the players continue to “search” the room for a few moments after they have found the object!*



The cast of *A Christmas Carol*. Photo by T. Charles Erickson.

# Oral Interpretation

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Oral interpretation is the vocal expression of a literary work. Charles Dickens was the first to interpret *A Christmas Carol* in this way when, starting in 1853—ten years after the novella’s publishing—he began regularly performing public dramatic readings of *A Christmas Carol*. These readings were initially done as fundraisers for various charities, but Dickens soon began offering paid performances.

The interpreter of a piece of literature serves as a liaison between the author and the audience. Interpreters use facial expressions, gestures, and vocal qualities to bring the literature to life, but do not use staging or wear costumes. The focus of the performance is on the literature itself, not on the interpreter as an actor or impersonator. The goal is to use these tools to communicate the mood, meaning, and implications of the text.

Choose a selection from the original text of *A Christmas Carol* to orally interpret. Before reading the selection to the class, consider the following:

- Think about the meaning of the words. Which words are the most active?
- What message is each sentence trying to convey? How does the tone shift from paragraph to paragraph?
- Experiment with your voice. How does varying the rate, pitch, and volume of your voice impact the reading?
- Mark up your script. Use symbols, notes, underlines, highlights, etc. to remind yourself of how you’ve decided to read a particular segment.
- Make eye contact with the audience. Practice so that you are familiar enough with the text to be able to look up at the audience and make them feel a connection to you and to what you are reading.

## VOCABULARY

### ACT 1

**HUMBUG:** nonsense; something devoid of meaning.

**LIBERALITY:** the quality of being generous or bountiful.

**DESTITUTE:** without means of subsistence; lacking food, clothing, or shelter.

**WORKHOUSE:** an institution maintained at public expense in which the very poor did unpaid work in exchange for food and shelter.

**SURPLUS:** an amount greater than what is needed.

**RELIC:** an object from the past.

**UNDERTAKER:** a person who oversees the burial of the dead.

**APPARITION:** a supernatural appearance of a person or thing; a ghost.

**FETTERED:** shackled; restrained.

**CHARITY:** generous actions or donations given to those in need; goodwill or kindly feelings towards those in need.

**MERCY:** an act of kindness or compassion towards someone who has committed an offense.

**FORBEARANCE:** holding back from enforcing a right.

**BENEVOLENCE:** the desire to do good for others; an act of kindness or charitable gift.

**RECLAMATION:** the act of reclaiming something; taking back something useful.

**APPRENTICE:** a person who works for someone else to learn a trade or receive specialized training.

**IDOL:** a person or thing regarded with unconditional, blind admiration and adoration.

### ACT 2

**FORTIFIED:** protected or strengthened against attack.

**QUARREL:** a fight or argument.

**TARRY:** to delay or be late.

**PALTRY:** insultingly small.

**GULLIBLE:** easily tricked or deceived.

**ODIOUS:** deserving of hatred or dislike; highly offensive.

**STINGY:** reluctant to give; not generous.

**PENURY:** extreme poverty.

**BACHELOR:** an unmarried man.

**CANTANKEROUS:** disagreeable; difficult to deal with.

**DAFT:** senseless; foolish; crazy.

**IGNORANCE:** a lack of knowledge or learning.

**REFUGE:** shelter or protection from danger and trouble.

**SPECTER:** a visible spirit, particularly a frightening one.

**GUMPTION:** courage; initiative; resourcefulness.

**FARTHING:** a former coin of Britain worth one-fourth of a penny; a very small amount.

**MUNIFICENCE:** the quality of showing unusual generosity.

**TEMERITY:** reckless boldness.

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The cast of *A Christmas Carol*. Photo by T. Charles Erickson.

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## HARTFORD STAGE EDUCATION PROGRAMS ARE SUPPORTED BY

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Cover photo: Bill Raymond in *A Christmas Carol* by T. Charles Erickson.