



A Christmas Carol

Charles Dickens
(1843)

PLOT, SETTING AND CHARACTERS

The story takes place in London on Christmas Eve. The settings of the book include the protagonist's counting-house and his home.

Ebenezer Scrooge is a penny-pinching old man; he cares nothing for the people around him and thinks mankind exists only for the money that can be made through exploitation and intimidation. He particularly **detests Christmas** which he calls 'humbug' and considers as 'a time for finding yourself a year older, and not an hour richer'. On Christmas Eve, Scrooge is visited by the **ghost of his former business partner Jacob Marley**, who died seven Christmas Eves before. Marley hopes to help Scrooge avoid his miserable fate in the afterlife and predicts to him that he will be haunted by three spirits. These three spirits, **the Ghosts of Christmas Past, Present, and Future**, succeed in showing Scrooge the evils of his existence and giving him a chance to change his ways. The old man's transformation is complete when the following Christmas morning he decides to send a Christmas turkey to **his long-suffering clerk, Bob Cratchit**, and to spend Christmas Day in the company of **his own nephew, Fred**, whom he had earlier rejected. Scrooge's new-found redemption continues when he raises Cratchit's salary and vows to assist his family, which includes Bob's crippled son, Tiny Tim.

THEMES

A Christmas Carol is a story of **transformation and redemption**: Scrooge's transformation from a greedy, selfish person who states 'every idiot who goes about with "Merry Christmas" on his lips, should be boiled with his own pudding, and buried with a stake of holly through his heart' to the man who 'knew how to keep Christmas well'. Beyond merely urging his readers not to be miserly, Dickens seems to be reminding us of the importance in taking notice of the lives of those around us. Another important theme derives from Dickens's observations of the children of the poor. At that time there were **thousands of children living in appalling poverty, filth and disease**; those who survived grew up without education and virtually had no chance to escape poverty. In a later scene, when Scrooge is visited by the Ghost of Christmas Present, the miserly old man notices a pair of ragged and dirty children at the phantom's feet. When questioned about who they are, the ghost replies: 'This boy is Ignorance. This girl is Want' (→ Text Bank 49), referring to two of **the grim realities of Victorian society**. Dickens felt that the cycle of poverty could only be solved through education and became interested in the Ragged Schools in London, which were free schools run through charity in which the poorest children received religious instruction and a rudimentary education. Despite the availability of these schools, the poorest children remained uneducated due to the demand for child labour and the apathy of parents, poor and uneducated themselves.

Key idea

Dickens and Christmas

The title *A Christmas Carol* comes from a song or ballad of joy celebrating the birth of Christ. The term 'staves' used by Dickens for the chapters indicates an archaic form of stanza or the line of a song. Although Dickens celebrated the festival of Christ's birth in numerous works, it is *A Christmas Carol* that has preserved the Christmas customs of old England and fixed the image of the holiday season as one of wind, ice and snow, with hot turkey and cheerful family gatherings. At the beginning of the Victorian Age, the celebration of Christmas was in decline. The medieval Christmas traditions which

combined the celebration of the birth of Christ with the ancient Roman festival of Saturnalia, a pagan celebration for the Roman god of agriculture, and the Germanic winter festival of Yule, had been highly criticised by the Puritans. There was a romantic revival of Christmas traditions: Prince Albert brought the German custom of Christmas tree to England; the singing of Christmas carols, which had all but disappeared at the turn of the century, began to flourish again; the first Christmas cards appeared in the 1840s. But it was Dickens's Christmas stories, particularly his masterpiece *A Christmas Carol*, that promoted the joy of Christmas in Britain and America.

COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING INFORMATION

1 READ the texts and answer the following questions about *A Christmas Carol*.

- Where and when does the story take place?
- Who is the protagonist?
- Who are the other characters?
- What are the main themes developed?
- Why did Dickens call his novel *A Christmas Carol*?
- Who revived the celebration of Christmas in the Victorian Age?



Scrooge's transformation

The first part of the extract introduces the main character, Ebenezer Scrooge, with his negative attitude to Christmas and his refusal of all human warmth. The last paragraphs, which close the novel, present the old man completely transformed: he has woken up and come back to reality on Christmas day. He has understood that his visions were nothing but the dream of a night and that now he has time to redeem himself.

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Staves I and V

STAVE I

Oh! But he was a tight-fisted¹ hand at the grindstone², Scrooge! a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous³ old sinner! Hard and sharp as flint⁴, from which no steel had ever struck out generous fire; secret, and self-contained, and solitary as an oyster. The cold within him froze his old features, nipped⁵ his pointed nose, shrivelled⁶ his cheek, stiffened his gait⁷; made his eyes red, his thin lips blue; and spoke out shrewdly⁸ in his grating⁹ voice. A frosty rime⁹ was on his head, and on his eyebrows, and his wiry¹⁰ chin. He carried his own low temperature always about with him; he iced his office in the dog-days¹¹; and didn't thaw¹² it one degree at Christmas.

External heat and cold had little influence on Scrooge. No warmth could warm, no wintry weather chill him. No wind that blew was bitterer than he, no falling snow was more intent upon its purpose, no pelting¹³ rain less open to entreaty¹⁴. Foul weather didn't know where to have him. The heaviest rain, and snow, and hail, and sleet¹⁵, could boast of the advantage over him in only one respect. They often 'came down' handsomely, and Scrooge never did.

Nobody ever stopped him in the street to say, with gladsome looks, 'My dear Scrooge, how are you? When will you come to see me?' No beggars implored him to bestow a trifle¹⁶, no children asked him what it was o'clock, no man or woman ever once in all his life inquired the way to such and such a place, of Scrooge. Even the blind men's dogs appeared to know him; and when they saw him coming on, would tug¹⁷ their owners into doorways and up courts; and then would wag¹⁸ their tails as though they said, 'No eye at all is better than an evil eye, dark master!'

But what did Scrooge care? It was the very thing he liked. To edge¹⁹ his way along the crowded paths of life, warning all human sympathy to keep its distance, was what the knowing ones call 'nuts'²⁰ to Scrooge.

Once upon a time – of all the good days in the year, on Christmas Eve – old Scrooge sat busy in his counting-house. It was cold, bleak²¹, biting weather: foggy withal²²; and he could hear the people in the court outside, go wheezing up and down²³, beating their hands upon their breasts, and stamping their feet upon the pavement stones to warm them. The city clocks had only just gone three, but it was quite dark already: it had not been light all day: and candles were flaring in the windows of the neighbouring offices, like ruddy smears²⁴ upon the palpable brown air. The fog came pouring in at every chink²⁵ and keyhole, and was so dense without, that although the court was of the narrowest, the houses opposite were mere phantoms. To see the dingy²⁶ cloud come drooping down²⁷, obscuring everything, one might have thought that Nature lived hard by, and was brewing²⁸ on a large scale.

The door of Scrooge's counting-house was open that he might keep his eye upon his clerk, who in a dismal²⁹ little cell beyond, a sort of tank³⁰, was copying letters. Scrooge had a very small fire, but the clerk's fire was so very much smaller that it looked like one coal. But he couldn't replenish it, for Scrooge kept the coal-box in his own room; and so surely as the clerk came in with the shovel³¹, the master predicted that it would be necessary for them to part. Wherefore the clerk put on his white comforter³², and tried to warm himself at the candle; in which effort, not being a man of a strong imagination, he failed.

- 1 tight-fisted. Dal pugno serrato; qui: severa.
- 2 grindstone. Mola; qui: lavoro duro e noioso.
- 3 squeezing ... covetous. Che spremeva, torceva, afferrava, grattava, accumulava, avido.
- 4 flint. Pietra focaia.
- 5 nipped. Lett: mordeva.
- 6 shrivelled. Raggrinziva.
- 7 stiffened his gait. Irrigidiva la sua andatura.
- 8 shrewdly. In modo pungente.
- 9 A frosty rime. Una brina ghiacciata.
- 10 wiry. Aguzzo.
- 11 dog-days. La canicola.
- 12 didn't thaw. Non disgelava.
- 13 pelting. Scrosciante.
- 14 entreaty. Supplica.
- 15 hail, and sleet. Grandine e nevischio.
- 16 bestow a trifle. Concedere un po' di spiccioli.
- 17 would tug. Trascinavano.
- 18 would wag. Agitavano.
- 19 To edge. Limitare.
- 20 'nuts'. Piaceri.
- 21 bleak. Tetto.
- 22 withal. Anche.
- 23 go wheezing up and down. Procedere respirando a fatica su e giù.
- 24 ruddy smears. Macchie rosse.
- 25 chink. Crepa.
- 26 dingy. Scura.
- 27 come drooping down. Che calava.
- 28 was brewing. Si stava addensando.
- 29 dismal. Cupa.
- 30 tank. Cisterna.
- 31 shovel. Pala.
- 32 comforter. Scialle.



45 'A merry Christmas, uncle! God save you!' cried a cheerful voice. It was the voice of Scrooge's nephew, who came upon him so quickly that this was the first intimation he had of his approach.

'Bah!' said Scrooge, 'Humbug³³!'

50 He had so heated himself with rapid walking in the fog and frost, this nephew of Scrooge's, that he was all in a glow³⁴; his face was ruddy and handsome; his eyes sparkled³⁵, and his breath smoked again.

'Christmas a humbug, uncle!' said Scrooge's nephew. 'You don't mean that, I am sure?'

'I do,' said Scrooge. 'Merry Christmas! What right have you to be merry? What reason have you to be merry? You're poor enough.'

55 'Come, then,' returned the nephew gaily. 'What right have you to be dismal? What reason have you to be morose³⁶? You're rich enough.'

Scrooge having no better answer ready on the spur of the moment³⁷, said, 'Bah!' again; and followed it up with 'Humbug!'

'Don't be cross³⁸, uncle,' said the nephew.

60 'What else can I be,' returned the uncle, 'when I live in such a world of fools as this? Merry Christmas! Out upon merry Christmas. What's Christmas time to you but a time for paying bills without money; a time for finding yourself a year older, but not an hour richer; a time for **balancing your books** and having every item in them through a round dozen of months presented dead against you? If I could work my will,' said Scrooge
65 indignantly, 'every idiot who goes about with "Merry Christmas" on his lips, should be boiled with his own pudding, and buried with a **stake of holly** through his heart. He should!'

'Uncle!' pleaded³⁹ the nephew.

70 'Nephew!' returned the uncle, sternly⁴⁰, 'keep Christmas in your own way, and let me keep it in mine.' [...]

STAVE V

Scrooge was better than his word. He did it all, and infinitely more; and to Tiny Tim, who did not die, he was a second father. He became as good a friend, as good a master, and as good a man, as the good old city knew, or any other good old city, town, or borough, in the good old world. Some people laughed to see the alteration in him,
75 but he let them laugh, and little heeded⁴¹ them; for he was wise enough to know that nothing ever happened on this globe, for good, at which some people did not have their fill of laughter in the outset⁴²; and knowing that such as these would be blind anyway, he thought it quite as well that they should wrinkle up⁴³ their eyes in grins⁴⁴, as have the malady in less attractive forms. His own heart laughed: and that was quite enough for
80 him.

He had no further **intercourse** with Spirits, but lived upon the Total Abstinence Principle, ever afterwards; and it was always said of him, that 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!

33 **Humbug.** Sciocchezze.

34 **in a glow.** Surriscaldato.

35 **sparkled.** Brillavano.

36 **morose.** Imbronciato.

37 **on the spur of the moment.**
Su due piedi.

38 **cross.** Adirato.

39 **pleaded.** Protestò.

40 **sternly.** Severamente.

41 **heeded.** Badava.

42 **in the outset.** All'inizio.

43 **wrinkle up.** Corrugare.

44 **in grins.** In un ghigno.

**LITERARY COMPETENCE****> VOCABULARY**

1 READ the text and match the highlighted words with their Italian translation.

- | | | | |
|---|--------------------|----|-------------------|
| 1 | terribile | 7 | sforzo |
| 2 | alimentare | 8 | roca |
| 3 | pungente | 9 | agrifoglio |
| 4 | palo | 10 | raffreddare |
| 5 | fare bilanci | 11 | gioiose |
| 6 | incontro | 12 | acciaio |

> COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING A TEXT

2 READ the extract from Stave I and answer the following questions.

- 1 How is Scrooge described? What is he compared to?
- 2 What is his counting-house characterised by?
- 3 What is the relationship between Scrooge and the weather?
- 4 Does he have many friends?
- 5 What does he care?
- 6 What atmosphere is conveyed by the description of the weather?
- 7 What is Scrooge's clerk doing? How is he treated by his master?
- 8 Who arrives at the office all of a sudden?
- 9 What is Scrooge's attitude to Christmas?
- 10 What do you think makes Christmas a good time for Scrooge's nephew?

3 READ the extract from Stave V and note down

- 1 Scrooge's transformation;
- 2 what people say of him.

> COMPETENCE: ANALYSING AND INTERPRETING A TEXT

4 CONCENTRATE on the narrator.

- 1 Decide who tells the story.
- 2 Find where he openly turns to the reader.
- 3 What does the correspondence between the weather and the main character create in the reader?
- 4 Indicate the tone adopted by the narrator.

5 IDENTIFY the contrasts the extract from Stave I is built upon. Then state their function.

6 DISCUSS. Can you consider Scrooge a flat or a round character? Why?

7 IDENTIFY the theme of the text.