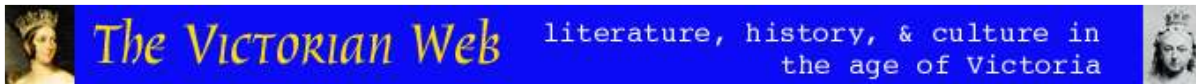


Scrooge

Richard Kelly, Lindsay Young Professor of English at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville



[[Home](#) → [Authors](#) → [Charles Dickens](#) → [Works](#) → [A Christmas Carol](#) → [Literary Relations](#) → [Theme and Subject](#)]

This essay comes from the author's 2003 [Broadview Press](#) edition of *A Christmas Carol*, which contains, in addition to the text and an introduction, selections from relevant writings by Dickens, contemporary reviews, and other materials. (The preceding link contains the full table of contents.)



Scrooge is one of the great characters of English literature. A complex version of the stage villain of [Victorian melodrama](#), he arouses a curious ambiguity in the reader's attitude towards him. How is it that this cruel, selfish old man has such a dynamic appeal to one's sympathy? Is it simply that he is transformed into a generous man at the story's end? Dickens manages the daunting task of presenting his hero in a manner that allows the reader to hiss the villain and relish his presence at the same time. He accomplishes this through the ingenious voice of the narrator. As Michael Slater has observed, *A Christmas Carol* is "first and foremost a triumph of tone" (*Christmas Books*, vol.1, p. xi.).

The narrator opens his tale with the rather enigmatic sentence: "Marley was dead: to begin with." Shortly thereafter he begins to reinforce his opening comment: "The mention of Marley's funeral brings me back to the point I started from. There is no doubt that Marley was dead. This must distinctly be understood, or nothing wonderful can come of the story I am going to relate." Early on, then, the narrator makes it clear that this knowledge is prerequisite to a wondrous outcome of some sort. Like Mr. Wardle in *Pickwick Papers*, the narrator comes across as a genial, avuncular person eager to entertain his audience with a Christmas ghost story. He goes so far as to assert his own ghostly presence near the reader. Upon being visited by the Ghost of Christmas Past, who draws aside Scrooge's bed curtains, Scrooge "found himself face to face with the unearthly visitor who drew them: as close to it as I am now to you, and I am standing in the spirit at your elbow."

After engaging the reader with his personal charm and colloquial tone, the narrator begins to work his magic in presenting the character of Scrooge: "Oh! but he was a tight-fisted hand at the grindstone, Scrooge! a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous old sinner! Hard and sharp as flint, from which no steel had ever struck out generous fire; secret, and self-contained, and solitary as an oyster." There is a narrative joy in the excess outpouring of exclamations and hyperbole in this and other passages describing Scrooge. Even the simile "solitary as an oyster" lightens the tone and makes clear that yes, here is a villain, but one the reader is going to enjoy. Scrooge is shown to be so predictably miserly as to be comic. As Henri Bergson notes, in his essay "Laughter," humor arises when a person acts with a consistent machine-like predictability instead of with an uncalculated human suppleness. Mention Christmas to Scrooge and the predicted response will be "Bah, humbug!" It is only later in the story that the reader is allowed to see the more supple, human side of Scrooge that is elicited by the three Christmas spirits.

Scrooge's own dialogue frequently modulates the tone of the narrative. When he dismisses his genial nephew Fred with a brief condemnation of Christmas, he concludes with a spirited salvo of invective: "If I could work my will . . . 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!" Articulate and grimly humorous, Scrooge maintains an equally imaginative and buoyant tone when he first meets Marley's ghost and explains why he doubts his senses: "Because . . . a little thing affects them. A slight disorder of the stomach makes them cheats. You may be and undigested bit of beef, a blot of mustard, a crumb of cheese, a fragment of an underdone potato. There's more of gravy than of grave about you, whatever you are!"

At the end of Stave Three, however, the narrator adopts the sledge hammer tone of Dickens himself, as the Ghost of Christmas Present opens his robe and reveals the two children huddled beneath it. He addresses both Scrooge and all mankind in his speech: "They were a boy and a girl. Yellow, meagre, ragged, scowling, wolfish; but prostrate, too, in their humility. Where graceful youth should have filled their features out, and touched them with its freshest tints, a stale and shrivelled hand, like that of age, had pinched, and twisted them, and pulled them into shreds." The Ghost then issues his dreadful warning: "They are Man's . . . This boy is Ignorance. This girl is Want. Beware them both, and all of their degree, but more of all beware this boy, for on his brow I see that written which is Doom, unless the writing be erased." The ghastly apparitions in this somber passage appear to arise from the depths of Dickens's own unhappy childhood and his intimate knowledge of the Ragged Schools and the government reports on the [abuse of children in the factories and mines](#).

In addition to his skillful modulation of the narrative tone, Dickens shapes the character of Scrooge by gradually unfolding details of his inner life. In Stave One he appears as a two-dimensional figure, a cold-hearted, selfish old man isolated from everyone around him. The sudden appearance of Jacob Marley, however, introduces a cautionary tale: Scrooge witnesses the horrid results of a life dedicated to money when he faces his alter-ego in the person of Jacob Marley, his old partner. The shock and fear that this visits instills in him lay the groundwork for the softer emotions that follow upon his journey into the past.

The Ghost of Christmas Past serves as the catalyst that awakens Scrooge's childhood memories, conjuring up scenes that he had long suppressed through his single-minded devotion to money. As Edgar Johnson points out, these scenes further build the foundation for Scrooge's final redemption: "There have been readers who objected to Scrooge's conversion as too sudden and radical to be psychologically convincing. But this is to mistake a semi-serious fantasy for a piece of prosaic realism. Even so, the emotions in Scrooge to which the Ghosts appeal are no unsound means to the intended end: the awakened memories of a past when he had known gentler and warmer ties than any of his later years, the realization of his exclusion from all kindness and affection in others now, the fears of the future when he may be lonelier and more unloved still" (Johnson, vol. 1, p. 488).

Scrooge's memory of his early education reveals him to be a lonely child whose only companions appear to be characters from his favorite books (Dickens's childhood favorites, too): such as *The Arabian Nights*, and *Robinson Crusoe*. When Scrooge sees this solitary boy reading near a feeble fire, he sits down near him and wept to see his poor forgotten self as he had used to be." The next scene shows him alone again after all the other school children had gone home to enjoy the Christmas holidays. His young sister, Fan, however, comes to take him home, declaring "Home, for good and all. Home for ever and ever. Father is so much kinder than he used to be, that home's like Heaven!" The following scene features Scrooge's former employer, Mr. Fezziwig and his wondrous Christmas party. As Scrooge watches the dancing and singing and games "his heart and soul were in the scene, and with his former self. He corroborated everything, remembered everything, enjoyed everything, and underwent the strangest agitation." The final memory Scrooge must face is that of Belle, the woman whose love he discarded in favor of financial gain. Intent on showing how Scrooge missed an opportunity of becoming a happily married man, Dickens presents a scene that clearly lies outside Scrooge's memory. The time is that of Christmas and Belle is married and has several children. As her husband returns home laden with Christmas presents, the children set upon him with glee and the domestic scene vibrates with good feeling. As he views the family that might have been his, Scrooge hears Belle's husband say that he looked into Scrooge's office earlier that day: "His partner lies upon the point of death, I hear; and there he sat alone. Quite alone in the world, I do believe." The pain of loss overcomes Scrooge and he attempts to extinguish the light of memory that the Ghost has shown over the past. He presses the extinguisher-cap down upon the head of the Ghost, darkens the scene, but fails to hide the light, which streamed from under it.

All of these details of Scrooge's past elevate him from the level of the stage villain of the opening pages and show him to possess an emotional depth, a sadness for lost opportunities, and a loneliness that stems from his childhood. When Fan comes to take him home for Christmas, her comment that "Father is so much kinder than he used to be" suggests that Scrooge's home life certainly was not the "heaven" that his sister now promises him. And so, the boy appears as something of a castaway, a lonely child whose only friends are the fictional characters from *The Arabian Nights* and *Robinson Crusoe*. Like Crusoe, Scrooge must create out of his isolation a small world for himself, his only tool being his imagination. In a sense, one might see Scrooge as the author of his own destiny. Out of the vivid memories of his past, a mixture of great sadness contrasted with moments of nostalgic happiness, Scrooge recreates himself in the present. In watching the loving Cratchit family gather for their Christmas meal Scrooge's torment is to feel his exclusion from warm familial ties. Fan is long dead, and his only lifeline is her son, Fred, whose gracious Christmas invitations Scrooge has loudly rejected season after season. As the past and present intermingle, Scrooge's final vision, that of his own death, shapes the final chapter of his emotional life. As Tennyson wrote several years later, "Men may rise on stepping-stones of their dead selves to higher things."

A Christmas Carol is built upon numerous contrasts: rich and poor, warmth and cold, plenty and hunger, family and loneliness, generosity and miserliness, affection and cruelty, dream and reality, freedom and compulsion, past and present, and present and future. Most of these opposing forces are recapitulated within the character of Scrooge himself. The cold-hearted, compulsive, lonely, miserly man, who eats his abstemious meal in the shadows, emerges from his dreams, memories, and fears, into a generous, fun-loving, warm, caring fatherly man. The texture of the story, rich with contrasting imagery, prepares the reader for Scrooge's conversion well in advance of the concluding chapter. True, this is hardly a realistic tale — indeed, it resembles a fable with its cautionary note about human behavior — but it renders a powerful psychological account of the fruits of introspection.

The three stages of Scrooge's conversion—the detailed memories of a lonely childhood, an awakened vision of the suffering and joys of those presently around him, and his fear of future loneliness and an awareness of his own mortality — combine to change him into a decent man, one who goes on to earn from those who knew him this crowning accolade: "it was always said of him, that he knew how to keep Christmas well, if any man alive possessed the knowledge." The reformation of Scrooge's character highlights one of the persistent themes in Dickens's novels. As George Orwell observes, "There is no clear sign that [Dickens] wants the existing order to be

overthrown, or believes that it would make very much difference if it were overthrown. For in reality his target is not so much society as "human nature." He goes on to argue that Dickens was not a politician but a moralist: "He has no constructive suggestions, not even a clear grasp of the nature of the society he is attacking, only an emotional perception that something is wrong. All he can finally say is, 'Behave decently,' which, as I suggested earlier, is not necessarily so shallow as it seems" (Orwell, 5, 71).

Dickens the moralist can be heard most clearly through the voices of Marley and the Ghost of Christmas Present. When Scrooge attempts to compliment Marley by declaring him "a good man of business," the Ghost cries out, "Business! . . . Mankind was my business. The common welfare was my business; charity, mercy, forbearance, and benevolence, were, all, my business. The dealings of my trade were but a drop of water in the comprehensive ocean of my business!" Later, when Scrooge and the Ghost of Christmas Present watch the Cratchit family at their meal, the Ghost reminds Scrooge of his earlier [Malthusian](#) remark that by dying the poor will help to reduce the surplus population: "'Man,' said the Ghost, 'if man you be in heart, not adamant, forbear that wicked cant until you have discovered What the surplus is, and Where it is. Will you decide what men shall live, what men shall die? It may be, that in the sight of Heaven, you are more worthless and less fit to live than millions like this poor man's child. Oh God! to hear the insect on the leaf pronouncing on the too much life among his hungry brothers in the dust!'"

References

Bergson, Henri. "Laughter," in *Comedy*, introd. by Wylie Sypher. New York: Doubleday, 1956.

Dickens, Charles. *A Christmas Carol*. Ed. Richard Kelley. Broadview Press, 2002.

Dickens, Charles. *The Christmas Books*. ed. Michael Slater. London: Penguin, 1985.

Johnson, Edgar. *Charles Dickens: His Triumph and Tragedy*. 2 vols.

Orwell, George. *Dickens, Dali & Others*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1946.



Last Modified 7 March 2008