

A Study Guide for Students and Educators

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Study Guide

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A Christmas Carol

Researched and designed by the Education Department at Milwaukee Repertory Theater, this study guide is intended to prepare you for your visit. It contains biographical and historical information that will deepen your understanding of and appreciation for the production. We've also included questions and activities for you to explore before and after our performance of

A Christmas Carol

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About the Author

On the night before Charles Dickens was born, his affectionate but often impractical mother went dancing. Despite what must have been an un-

usual night, Charles Dickens was born without complication in Portsmouth, England on February 7, 1812.



Charles Dickens, 1812-1870

His father, John Dickens, worked as a clerk in the Navy Pay Office, which meant the family moved whenever and wherever the Navy demanded. At the age of

five, the Dickens family moved to Chatham where they would remain for six years. During this time, Charles shared his parents' home with five other brothers and sisters. This was a period Charles would always refer to as "a time to be remembered like a happy dream through all our life after."

Among the joys of this time was being cared for by a woman named Mary Weller who often read stories to the children. Charles suffered from seizures which often kept him from going outside to play, so he poured his energy into reading and acting.

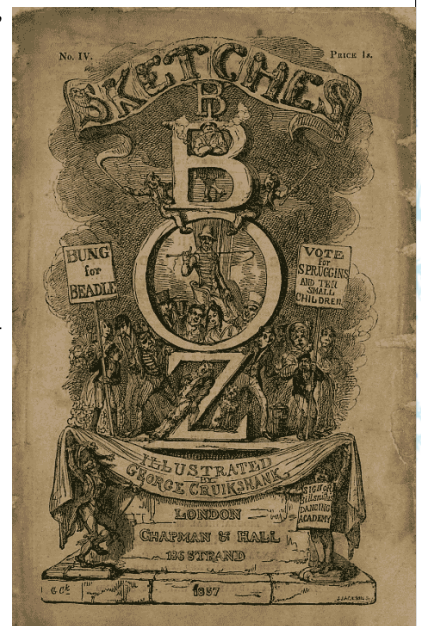
Unfortunately, this period of happiness ended quite abruptly in 1823. Unable to pay his debts, Charles' father was arrested and taken to a debtors' prison. With his father in jail, Charles could not go to school because he was expected to make money to feed his family. Two days after his twelfth birthday, Charles was sent to work at a factory. The rest of Charles' family, excluding him and his sister Fanny, went to live with his father at the prison. Charles continued working and living alone near the factory and Fanny attended the Royal Academy of Music on scholarship. Both went to visit their family every Sunday. It was during

this time that Charles was able to see the disgusting conditions in which the poor people of London were forced to live.

Upon his father's release from debtors' prison, Charles went to school at Wellington Academy and, in 1827, became a clerk at a legal firm. Charles developed excellent shorthand skills at the legal firm and quickly landed a job at the Doctors' Commons. This was where all the legal offices and courts were located. While Charles was reporting on what was happening in the courts, he learned of all the problems in the British legal system. Charles would use what he had seen and heard in the courts to criticize them in his later novels.

Charles liked journalism, but he also enjoyed acting. It has been argued that the only reason Charles became a great novelist was because on the night of a big audition, he got sick and was unable to perform. Only a year after this disappointing experience, in 1833, Charles saw his first story published in "Monthly Magazine". The magazine immediately wanted more stories, and Dickens' pen name, Boz, soon became known throughout England and the United States.

Charles married Catherine Hogarth in 1836, the same year he began his first novel *The Pickwick Papers*. This book, written originally in segments for a magazine, would become the national favorite. Writing for a magazine was a way in which many people published books at this time. They would print chapters in each publication, so people would keep buy-



Cover of *Sketches by Boz*, the first published collection of Dickens' work



ing the magazine in order to finish the story. In fact, many of Dickens' successful novels, such as *Oliver Twist*, *Nicholas Nickleby*, *Great Expectations* and *A Tale of Two Cities*, began as magazine installments.

Dickens had many fans in America, so in 1841 he and his wife decided to brave the Atlantic and take the long and dangerous journey to the United States. Dickens was not accustomed to the roughness of American society: for example, spittoons and chewing tobacco were unknown in England. He was especially horrified by slavery. The longer he spent in America, the more he wanted to go home.

Soon after returning to England in 1843, Charles Dickens began work on the first of five books he wanted published at Christmas. During his careful writing of *A Christmas Carol*, Dickens reported that he "wept and laughed and wept again". The book was immediately popular, but Dickens received very little money due to poor contract arrangements.

He followed up on the success of this holiday book with another called *The Chimes*. He was eager to complete the book, claiming to have worked himself into a "regular ferocious excitement" about it. Upon its completion, he reported, "I have had a good cry. I am worn to death. I was obliged to lock myself in yesterday, for my face was swollen for the time to twice its proper size . . ." When Charles performed a reading of the book for a few close friends in 1844, a career of oral interpretation was born. Dickens performed public readings for charity and pleasure for most of the remainder of his life.

Dickens' career would soon take two more interesting turns. In 1848, Dickens organized an amateur theater company. During their ten years of operation, they gave over sixty performances for charity in London. Dickens himself served as manager, producer and frequently as an actor. During this time, he realized what he had frequently referred to as his fondest daydream, "to settle down for the remainder of my life within easy distance of a great

theater in which I should hold supreme authority."

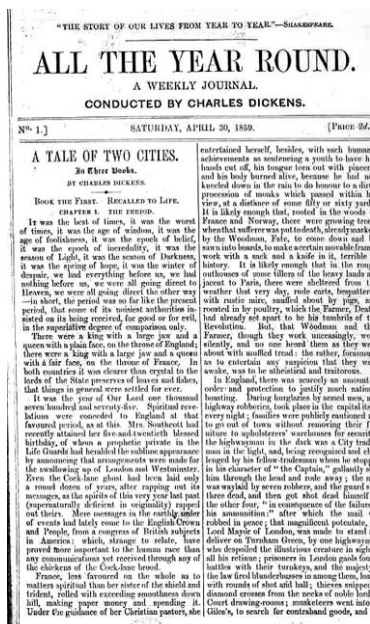
In 1858, after separating from his wife, he began his own magazine called "All The Year Round" which featured weekly installments of his new book, *A Tale of Two Cities*. Following the book's completion in 1860, Charles began work on *Great Expectations*.

While writing, Dickens continued to do public readings of his works. They were very popular throughout London; unfortunately, they were also extremely draining. Five years later, in 1865, Dickens was involved in a train wreck. After the accident, he experienced dizzy spells, arthritis, gout, and swelling of his left foot which further complicated his already failing health.

On June 8, 1870, Dickens wrote all day, which was unusual for him. Normally, he would reserve only a few hours a day for writing. Later that night, he complained of a toothache, and shortly thereafter fell out of his chair and lost consciousness. He was diagnosed with a brain aneurysm and dies the following day. His body is buried in Westminster Abbey in Poets' Corner.

The words he spoke on the night of his last public reading seem a fitting capstone to his remarkable life:

"From these garish lights, I now vanish forever more, with a heartfelt, grateful, respectful, affectionate farewell."



A copy of *All the Year Round* featuring the opening chapter of *A Tale of Two Cities*



Dickens' London

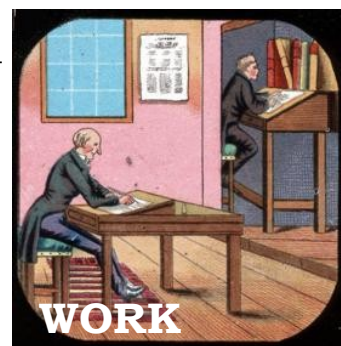
Charles Dickens lived in London during the 19th century. This period is generally known as the Victorian Era, named after Queen Victoria, Britain's longest-ruling monarch. Under Queen Victoria's rule, the British Empire became the most powerful empire in history, and London grew to be the largest population center on earth. Here's what life was like for the great city's inhabitants.



In many literary works of Dickens' time, you will find references to the famous "London Fog". This phenomenon was caused by air pollution coming from thousands of chimneys, factories, steam engines, and refineries. The fog was often thick enough to turn the city black in the middle of the afternoon, a fact that Dickens uses to set the mood in the opening pages of *A Christmas Carol*: "It was cold, bleak, biting, foggy weather, and the city clocks had only just gone three, but it was quite dark already."

Life was difficult for the working class in Victorian London. It was not unusual for employees to work six twelve-hour days per week to earn their pay. Workers were traditionally given days off every Sunday, May Day, and Christmas. Businesses were not required to give their employees these days off, however, so some unlucky souls had to come to work no matter what.

In Dickens' time, a typical clerk made about £80 (around \$130) per year, just enough to rent a house and raise a family. In *A Christmas Carol*, Scrooge pays his clerk Bob Cratchit "fifteen bob a week", about £39 per year.



Overcrowding, pollution, and poor public sanitation made Victorian London so rampant with disease that it was nicknamed "The Fever Patch". The most life-threatening disease was cholera, which killed 140,000 Londoners during Dickens' life-time. Cholera is caused by impurities in drinking water, which half the city took from the Thames river, London's central waterway and main waste-disposal system. 200 open sewers ran into the Thames, creating what the city's Medical Officer of

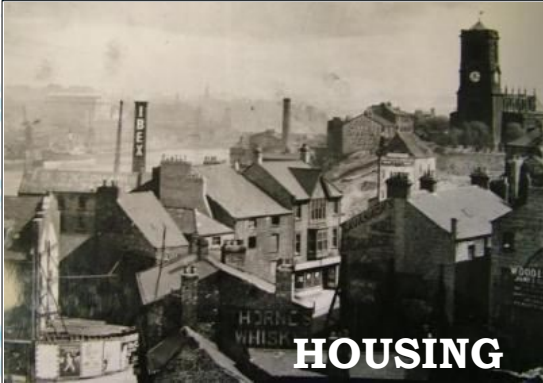
Health described as "a stinking vapour, which is in the highest degree offensive, and which inhaled produces slight headache, giddiness, and nausea."

The city's health problems were compounded by the ignorance of its medical professionals. Doctors at the time believed that disease was spread through tainted air rather than water. "All smell is disease," as one medical professional put it, and throughout the 19th century it was widely accepted that proper ventilation was the key to preventing disease. Hospitals were little help, since in addition to being rare and unaffordable, they were unsafe. Due to crude surgical techniques and a flawed understanding among doctors about the nature of infection, the spread of hospitals led to an increase rather than a reduction in the death rate. According to mortality statistics, it was actually safer to deliver your baby at home than in a hospital.



A comic from 1850 showing a "magnified drop of water from the Thames", printed in the humor magazine *Punch*





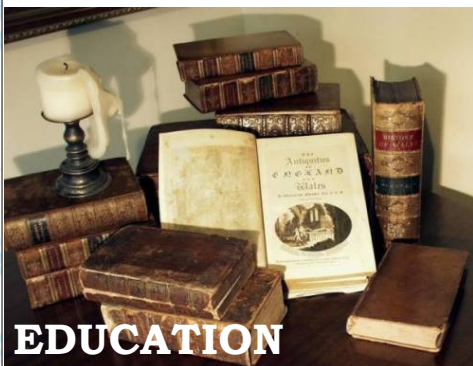
During the first half of the nineteenth century Great Britain was adjusting to the effects of the Industrial Revolution, when the previously labor-based economy of the country changed to one relying more on industry and manufacturing. Britain underwent a period of swift urbanization, the movement of large populations from the countryside to cities. Scores of young men and women were drawn to London by the promise of work and entertainment. The rural poor were also attracted to the city, seeking employment or at least a dry place to sleep. Between 1800 and 1850 the population of London doubled, topping 2.3 million people.

The city could not support such a rapid increase in its populace, and soon became massively overcrowded. Says Kitson Clark, social historian, "Suitable housing did not exist, and the additional numbers were crammed into every nook and cranny from attic to cellar of old decaying property... with little or no access to light and air."

The creation of the steam railway made the problem worse. The first steam locomotive was built in 1804, and rail transport proved so profitable that the countryside was soon crisscrossed with lines. Unfortunately, these railways were built by private companies who had few restrictions on their behavior. Entire neighborhoods in London were demolished to make room for tracks, with no thought or aid given to the families who lived there. By the time laws were put in place to control the rail companies, 76,000 people had been uprooted.



A steam locomotive



Education in the Victorian Era was a privilege enjoyed by those who could afford it. In many cases money was so scarce that children from poor families were sent to work in factories as soon as they were old enough. Whenever possible, these children would attend charity schools (called *ragged schools*), where they were taught basic mathematics, reading and scripture.

Children from wealthy families had more options. Young ladies were taught by a governess, a woman who taught in the family's home and sometimes lived there. Governesses taught the "delicate" skills of dance, drawing, music and French, generally accepted as appropriate and necessary subjects for upper-class young women. Boys were typically sent to live in boarding schools, where they were taught a more rounded curriculum (reading, writing, history and mathematics), similar to one you might find in a modern public school. Boarding schools were harsh places, where beatings were an accepted method of discipline, and dunce caps (cone-shaped hats which labeled the wearer a "dunce" or idiot) were used to humiliate students who didn't learn fast enough. At Eton, one of the most prestigious schools of the time, boys were locked in their rooms every evening at sundown.



A dunce cap

Beginning in 1870, laws were passed to fix this inequality. New schools were built, and existing school systems were given grant money to make education affordable to more students. By the end of the 19th century, schooling was free and compulsory (required) for all children up to the age of fifteen.



Notes on *A Christmas Carol*



TINY TIM

Charles Dickens never explains what disease Tiny Tim suffers from in *A Christmas Carol*. The boy is described as undersized, withered and less than a year from death, yet he somehow makes a miraculous recovery when Scrooge has a change of heart.

In 1992, a **pediatric neurologist** (a doctor who specializes in nervous system disorders in children) named Donald Lewis studied the case and diagnosed Tiny Tim with distal renal tubular acidosis, a disorder which occurs when acid in a person's bloodstream dissolves the calcium from their bones. This leads to weakness, stunted growth and bone deformity, the exact symptoms suffered by Tiny Tim.

This diagnosis also explains Tim's dramatic recovery. The Ghost of Christmas Present tells Scrooge that without help, the boy will die within a year. A treatment for acidosis existed in Dickens' time, but it was expensive, and the Cratchit family would have been unable to afford it. With Scrooge's help Tim would have been able to buy antacid medicine which would cure his condition forever.



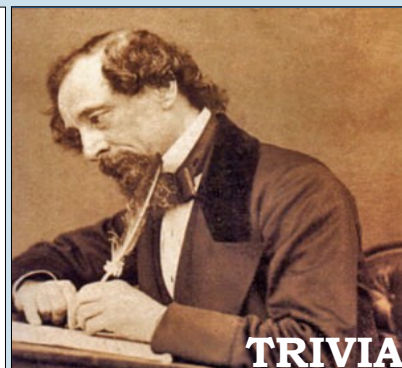
CAROLS

Though modern carols tend to be associated with the Christmas season, they were originally sung all year round. As far back as the thirteenth century, communities would sing carols together for harvest festivals and spring celebrations. Francis of Assisi is credited with introducing the modern Christmas carol into church ceremonies in the 12th century, replacing the

usual somber hymns with simple, joyful songs of celebration.

Caroling, the practice of going from house to house singing songs at Christmastime, takes its origins from something called *wassailing*. Wassailing is a tradition from the middle ages where peasants would offer a song of blessing to the local lord in exchange for food and drink.

By the 17th century, carols and caroling had become important aspects of the English celebration of Christmas. This custom was halted in 1640 by a group of government officials led by a man named Oliver Cromwell. Cromwell was a man of strict faith who believed that the celebration of Christmas should be somber and respectful. He introduced reforms which made the holiday into a fasting day, with any evidence of celebration punishable by law. These reforms were thrown out shortly after his death in 1658, but Christmas carols did not regain their popularity until Dickens' time.



TRIVIA

- After reading a government report on child labor in mines and factories, Dickens vowed to "strike a sledgehammer blow... on behalf of the Poor Man's Child." *The Sledgehammer* later became the working title of *A Christmas Carol*.
- The line "Old Marley was dead as a door-nail" came from a dream Dickens had. In his dream, a doctor used the phrase to report the death of one of Dickens' close friends.
- The initial printing of *A Christmas Carol* sold out in five days.
- In 1867 Dickens performed a public reading of the book in Chicago. One of the audience members, a factory owner named Fairbanks, was so moved by the story that he decided to "break the custom we have hitherto observed of opening the works on Christmas day." He gave all his employees a turkey and told them to take the day off.

Discussion Questions and Activities

- 1) At the beginning of the play, Scrooge is a miserable, lonely old man. The Ghost of Christmas Past shows us the events which have made him this way: his childhood at boarding school, his relationship with Belle, his career at Fezziwig's, and his partnership with Marley. Choose one of the events from Scrooge's past and discuss how the choice he made affected the course of his life. What could he have done differently? Rewrite the scene, having Scrooge make a different choice, and discuss how your change affects the rest of the story.
- 2) Imagine that tonight you are going to be visited by the spirits of Past, Present and Future. What would they show you?
 - What significant events from your past do you particularly cherish or regret? How have they made you the person you are today?
 - Which people are most important to your present life? How do you affect their lives, and how do they affect yours?
 - If your life continues along its present course, what do you see happening in the future? Are you pleased with the direction your life is heading? What choices could you make in the present to improve your future prospects?
- 3) Think about the relative wealth of Scrooge, Fezziwig, Fred, and Bob Cratchit. How does each person feel about money? How does each person's wealth affect the way they live? What brings them happiness?
- 4) The ghosts choose to show very specific scenes from Scrooge's past, present and future in order to change his nature. What is the purpose of each ghost? What does each one teach Scrooge about himself? Why does he change at the end of the play? In general, what is the message of the story?
- 5) Several different Christmas celebrations are shown in the play: Fezziwig's party, the gathering at Fred's, and the Cratchit family dinner. How do you celebrate during the holidays? What rituals and traditions take place in your home, at your school, and in your community? How do they compare to the traditions shown in *A Christmas Carol*?

Sources and Suggested Reading

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The Audience

You can sit there and have a universal experience, of fear, of anger, of tears, of love, and I discovered that it's the audience, really, that is doing the acting. - **Marlon Brando**

Theater is a collaborative art form. The success of a production relies upon every member of the ensemble performing their role expertly, from the cast and crew to the administrative staff to the audience themselves. Come prepared to make your contribution as a member of the audience. You have an active role to play, and the performers are relying on you to be respectful and attentive. Months of preparation, weeks of rehearsal and hours upon hours of effort have gone towards providing the best possible performance for you. Your participation is what makes this process worthwhile.

Visiting The Rep ...

Milwaukee Repertory Theater is housed in the Milwaukee Center at the corner of Wells and Water Streets, downtown. Our building was formerly the home of Electric Railway & Light Company. This name is still carved on the wall outside.

You'll enter on the Wells Street side into a large, open space. Our box office will be visible on your left as you come through the front doors. The large space is the main hub for the businesses that share this building: a bank, an office tower, the Pabst Theater and the Intercontinental Hotel. If you enter from the Wells Street side of the building, the box office of the Pabst theatre will be immediately to your right. The entrance to the theatre is next to the Pabst box office.

Inside the lobby are restrooms, water fountains and a coat check. If you decide to bring a snack, please know that food and drink are NOT permitted in the theater. However, you can leave things (at your own risk) in the coat check room, and enjoy them outside the theater during the intermission. Most plays have one intermission that is about 20 minutes long. You might also want to look for signs in the lobby which give the full "running time" of the play.

**For information on our education programs and our productions, visit our website at
www.milwaukeeexp.com**

