

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

INSIDE THIS GUIDE:

ABOUT THE AUTHOR	2
VICTORIAN ENGLAND	4
CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS	6
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES	7
VISITING THE REP	8



If you would like to schedule a classroom workshop, or if we can help in any other way, please contact:

Jenny Kostreva at (414) 290-5370 or
jkostreva@milwaukeeerep.com

Rebecca Witt at (414) 290-5393 or
rwitt@milwaukeeerep.com



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**Study Guide
Created By:**

Rebecca Witt,
Education Coordinator

Edited By:

Jenny Kostreva,
Education Director

Kristin Crouch,
Literary Director

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Imagine yourself at the age of 12. Imagine that instead of living with a kind and affectionate family, you live by yourself in a small shack. Imagine that instead of going to school to learn, you work in a factory every day for 12 hours. Imagine that instead of sleeping in a warm bed at night, you sleep on a cold sidewalk. Can you imagine growing up in these conditions? Unfortunately, this was how Charles Dickens grew up during the early 1800's.

Charles Dickens was born in Portsmouth, England on February 7, 1812. On the night before Charles Dickens was born, his affectionate but often impractical mother went dancing. Considering the circumstances, the birth was normal and Dickens was born healthy.

His father, John Dickens, worked as a clerk in the Navy Pay Office. This meant that the family moved whenever and wherever the Navy demanded. When Dickens was five, his family moved to Chatham where they remained for six years. Dickens had five other brothers and sisters, making a home for eight quite crowded. This was a period Dickens 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. Dickens suffered from seizures which often kept him from going outside to play, so he poured his energy into reading and acting, which was encouraged by Weller.

This period of happiness ended quite abruptly in 1823. Dickens' father was unable to pay his debts and was arrested and taken to a debtors' prison. With his father in jail, Dickens could not go to school because he was expected to make money to feed his family. Two days after his twelfth birthday, Dickens was sent to work at a factory. The rest of Dickens' family, except for Dickens and his sister Fanny, went to live with his father at the prison. Dickens continued working and living alone near the factory. Both Dickens and Fanny went to visit their family in prison every Sunday. It was during this time that Dickens was able to see the disgusting conditions in which the poor people of London were forced to live.

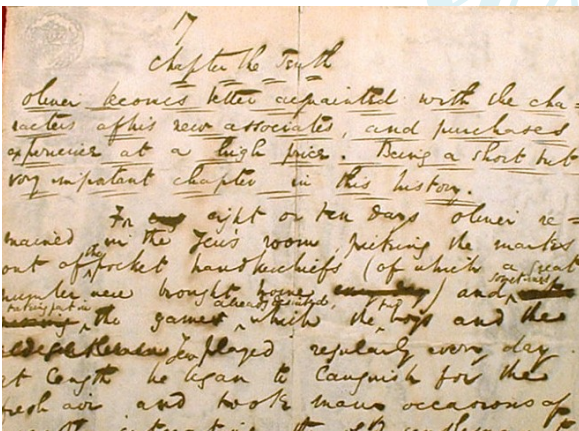
When his father was released from debtors' prison, Dickens went to school at Wellington Academy and at the age of 25, became a clerk at a legal firm. Over a brief amount of time, he developed excellent shorthand skills at the legal firm and quickly landed a job at the Doctors' Commons— where all the legal offices and courts were located. While Dickens was reporting on what was happening in the courts, he learned of all the problems in the British legal system. Dickens eventually used what he saw and heard in the courts to satirize them in his later novels.

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

In 1836, Dickens married Catherine Hogarth, the same year he began his first novel, *The Pickwick Papers*. This book, originally written serially for a magazine, would become a national favorite. Writing for a magazine was a way for people to publish books. They would print chapters in each publication, so

people would keep buying the magazine in order to finish the story. In fact, many of Dickens' successful novels, including *Oliver Twist* and *Nicholas Nickleby*, 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. After returning back to England in 1843, 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." While the book was immediately a success, Dickens received very little money due to poor contract arrangements.



DICKENS' COPY OF THE BEGINNING OF CHAPTER 10 OF *OLIVER TWIST*

Dickens' career would soon take two 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 that what he referred to as his fondest daydream was happening: "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, Dickens began working on *Great Expectations*.

While writing, Dickens often times performed public readings of his works. These performances 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 died the following day. His body is now buried in Westminster Abbey in the Poets' Corner.

INTERESTING FACTS

- * **Dickens was an actor for a year while living in America.**
- * **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.**
- * **Dickens created 989 named characters during his career.**
- * **In 1867 Dickens performed a public reading of *A CHRISTMAS CAROL* 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.**

VICTORIAN ENGLAND

Victorian England is much different from our world today. Conditions were much worse and London provided few opportunities for the lower class to achieve success. Dickens often observed the city for days at a time in order to reproduce the horrible conditions correctly in his books. These thorough descriptions allow the reader to experience the sights, sounds and smells of the old city.

Unlike the democracy that exists in America, England has a constitutional monarchy. Today, Queen Elizabeth II rules England. In Dickens' day, Queen Victoria ruled the country. Under her direction, England gained control of India, Burma, New Zealand and Hong Kong, making England a very strong imperial power in the world. While Victoria did many good things to help out her country, her main weakness was her willingness to let the rich become richer and work less and to let the poor work themselves to death.



**QUEEN VICTORIA
IN HER PRIME**



**WOMEN IN A FACTORY ROLL
CIGARS FOR HOURS ON END**

Life was difficult for the working class in Victorian London. While a typical work week is about 40 hours, in Victorian London it was not unusual for employees to work six twelve-hour days or 72 hours per week. Most workers were given days off every Sunday, May Day, and Christmas. However, businesses were not required to give their employees these days off 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" or about £39 per year.

"The Fever Patch" was the nickname for Victorian London due to overcrowding, pollution and poor public sanitation. The city was rampant with disease, including the most life-threatening disease, cholera. It killed 140,000 Londoners during Dickens' lifetime. Cholera is caused by impurities in drinking water, which half the city took from the Thames River, London's central waterway. Unfortunately, it was also the main waste-disposal system where 200 open sewers ran into the Thames. The Thames was so disgusting that it created a stench so horrible it gave people headaches, made them nauseous and forced Parliament to recess.

The city's health problems were compounded by the ignorance of its medical professionals. At this time, doctors believed that disease was spread through tainted air rather than water. Throughout the 19th century, it was widely accepted that proper ventilation was the key to preventing disease. Hospitals were also of little help because they were few and far between and often times unaffordable as well as unsafe. Due to crude surgical techniques and a flawed understanding 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.



**ONE OF THE FIRST CHOLERA VICTIMS
IN ENGLAND: A GIRL WHO DIED
IN NOVEMBER, 1831.**

During the first half of the nineteenth century Great Britain was adjusting to the effects of the Industrial Revolution, when the previously farming 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.



OVERCROWDING IN THE STREETS AS THE POPULATION OF LONDON ROSE TO EXTREME AMOUNTS.

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, over 76,000 people had been uprooted.

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.



A CHARITY SCHOOL

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; subjects generally accepted as appropriate and necessary 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). 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 from 8:00 pm until the next morning.

While times were harsh for people living in Victorian England, they managed to survive and still enjoyed life. Like the Cratchits, people relied on their families and friends to keep hope alive. It was their love that helped them through rough patches. In the end, families always found a way to support one another and give each other the strength to carry on.

CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS

Christmas in Victorian England shared only some of the similarities with the way it is currently celebrated in homes that recognize the holiday. Even in 1843 established traditions were being joined by “new” methods of celebrating that many people still enjoy today.

OLD TRADITIONS

- * January 6th, for a long time, was celebrated as “Twelfth Night.” In Christianity, this night was the supposed night that the wise men arrived in Bethlehem. The celebration usually included a twelfth cake, similar to pound cake, which often had a lucky bean or coin baked inside.
- * A long time non-religious tradition of singing door to door throughout the entire year gave birth to what we know as caroling, specifically during the holiday season. Its origins date back to the middle ages when peasants would offer a song in exchange for food and drink.
- * In Ancient times, mistletoe, holly and ivy were associated with pagan midwinter celebrations. However, by the time A CHRISTMAS CAROL was written, these greens were accepted decorations in Christian homes as well. Mistletoe, or the kissing bow, was usually the centerpiece of a room’s decorations.
- * Gifts were a very small part of most celebrations. Wealthy families might exchange a few simple gifts, but poor families did not.

NEW TRADITIONS

- * The very first Christmas Cards were printed in England in 1843. However, it would not be until the early 1900’s that they were a regular part of holiday celebrations.
- * Santa Claus arose from the stories of St. Nicholas, a saint admired by Dutch immigrants. The image we recognize today was actually made popular by author Clement Clarke Moore who wrote *The Night Before Christmas* in 1822. However, Santa Claus did not become accepted in England until the 1870’s.
- * The Christmas tree had been prevalent in Germany even before the 1800’s. It did not become popular in England until after Queen Victoria married a German man who wished to include the Yuletide tree in the royal celebrations. After the 1840’s, English families who could afford a tree would have one.
- * The candy cane was originated in the 1600’s to look like a Shepard’s crook and then was given to children in church to keep them quiet. People started to use the candy cane as an ornament for trees during the mid-1800’s because they were sturdy and colorful. Eventually, they became a Christmas treat.

A long time tradition, and favorite treat, in England is the scone. These were made regularly during Christmas and were on everyone’s table, no matter how wealthy or poor. One way to experience what it would be like to be English is to have your own scone. Here’s a recipe you can try at home or at school:

You will need: a large mixing bowl, 2 oz butter, 7 oz self-raising flour, 1/4 teaspoon salt, 5 tablespoons milk, a pastry board, a pastry cutter (about 2 inches in diameter), a baking tray, and a rolling pin.

Sift the flour and salt into a bowl and cut in the margarine. Gradually add the milk to make the dough soft. Turn out the mixture onto a board dusted with flour and roll it out until it is 1/3 inch thick. Using the cutter, cut out circles until all the dough has been used up. Place the circles on a cookie sheet that has been lightly greased. Bake in the oven at 400 degrees for about 12 to 14 minutes. The scones should be light golden in color and firm to the touch.

After baking, set the scones aside to cool and harden a little. Cut in half. Spread with butter or jam and top it off with some fresh whip cream. Enjoy!



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

Charles Dickens grew up in a time when things were very difficult for the typical family. He had a rough childhood after his father was sent to prison. Imagine that you are Dickens growing up in this time and that you are keeping a journal. With the given information about Dickens and Victorian England, write an entry in the journal describing a week in your life. Share these with your classmates and discuss what it would be like to live during this time.

Often times, writers create cartoons or pictures satirizing society. It was done in Victorian England (right) and is still done today. With the information gained from this study guide, imagine you are a writer from Victorian England and create your own cartoon or picture about life back then. Now, think about today. What problems do you see in America? Create another cartoon or picture about today. Compare your two pictures with your classmates and discuss the problems you thought about and your artistic choices.

**A COMIC FROM 1850:
A MAGNIFIED DROP
OF WATER FROM THE
THAMES.**



There are many Christmas traditions and celebrations that are seen in *A CHRISTMAS CAROL*: Fezziwig's party, the gathering at Fred's and the Cratchit family dinner. What traditions does your family celebrate? Have you started any new traditions? Write briefly about a special tradition or celebration that you enjoy.

The Ghosts of Past, Present and Future visited Scrooge in the play. Imagine that you were given the opportunity to view these three things. What would you most want to see? What might you cherish or regret? What do you hope to see in the future? What factors influenced your decision?

In the play, Scrooge goes through a major transformation and changed his behavior. Think about a time in your life when you had to change the way you had to behave. How did you feel before, during, and after the transformation? How did you change? What did you learn about yourself?

The moral of *A CHRISTMAS CAROL* is to treat others how you'd like to be treated and to always give to and care for one another. Scrooge was able to turn his ways around and help out someone less fortunate than him. With your class, do something for the less fortunate this Christmas-- have a food drive, buy gifts, or donate coats and blankets to shelters. Invite other classes, friends and family members to help make a difference in the lives of others.

RESOURCES AND FURTHER READING

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*"The theatre is so endlessly fascinating
because it's so accidental.
It's so much like life."
Arthur Miller*

Our lives are greatly enhanced with theater.
Studying and viewing it teaches us about
other cultures and times, collaboration,
work ethic, and imagination. We become
more aware of the world around us with
these concepts, and in addition to this,
more alert to and responsive of human
nature. With this improved understanding
of what theater can provide for us we are
able to gain a better appreciation not
only for theater, but for life as well.

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**THE MILWAUKEE REPERTORY THEATER
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION**

Jenny Kostreva, *Education Director*
jkostreva@milwaukeeep.com
(414) 290-5370

Rebecca Witt, *Education Coordinator*
rwitt@milwaukeeep.com
(414) 290-5393

The Rep Milwaukee
THEATER ♦ TRAINING AT ITS BEST

VISITING THE REP

The 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. Our production of A CHRISTMAS CAROL will be held in the Pabst Theater. If you enter from the Wells Street side of the building, the box office of the Pabst Theater will be immediately to your right. The entrance to the theater 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.

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