

## A Christmas Carol- The Plot

### Stave 1: Marley's Ghost

Here the reader meets Ebenezer Scrooge, a miserable but wealthy old man. Scrooge works in his .....with his clerk,.....

Bob writes out records of accounts and Scrooge oversees the business but we don't know (it's not important) what it exactly does. (There may be a clue in the next chapter, where we see Scrooge as an apprentice with ..... ) It is Christmas....., and Scrooge receives several visitors.

One is his nephew.....who invites Scrooge to dine with him for Christmas. Then come two gentlemen who are collecting for ..... We learn here that Scrooge had a partner....., who died on Christmas Eve seven years previously.

Scrooge refuses to give the gentlemen anything, saying he helps the poor already through supporting prisons and workhouses. Scrooge allows Bob to have Christmas Day as a holiday, but insists that he..... (Boxing Day was not usually a holiday in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but was the day when tradesmen collected their Christmas "boxes" - gifts from their customers.)

When Scrooge returns to his lodging he is visited by the Ghost of Jacob Marley who is weighed down by ..... The ghost says that any spirit which does not mix with other people in life must travel among them after death. Marley tells Scrooge that he, too, wears a chain, larger than Marley's. Marley has often sat by him unseen. Now he tells him that.....

### Stave 2: The First of the Three Spirits

This is the Ghost of ..... - Scrooge's own past. The ghost has a strange changing form and gives out brilliant ..... With it Scrooge revisits the scenes of his earlier life.

We see him as a boy at .....on two occasions. First, he sits alone in a cold schoolroom - but as the spirit touches the arm of the child we see the characters of whom he is reading: Ali Baba and the parrot in **Robinson Crusoe**. Later we see him with his (slightly) older sister.....who has come to bring him home for the holidays. We learn that his father (who seems once to have been unkind) become "much kinder than he used to be". The ghost notes that (unlike Scrooge so far) his sister had a "large heart". She has died, but her son is Scrooge's nephew, Fred.

Next we see Scrooge as a young apprentice working for Mr....., in his warehouse. At seven o'clock on Christmas Eve, Mr. Fezziwig tells Scrooge and his other apprentice, Dick Wilkins, to make the warehouse ready for a ..... Everyone is welcome at Mr. Fezziwig's ball, and the young Scrooge enjoys it immensely. The Ghost tells Scrooge that Mr. Fezziwig has done nothing special, only spent a little money he

can easily afford. Scrooge replies that it is impossible to add up things like words and looks, but "the happiness" Mr. Fezziwig gives "is quite as great as if it cost a fortune".

The final scenes show us..... Scrooge's ex-fiancée. Scrooge is now in the prime of life. His (reasonable) fear, when younger, of being poor has now become an unreasonable love of money. Belle releases Scrooge from his engagement because she can see that..... He has not asked her to break the engagement but does not object to her decision. Another glimpse of Belle follows. Some years later - seven years before the present, she sits with her daughter. (At first Scrooge thinks the daughter is Belle, but she is now older. She has other children, too. Her husband tells her how he saw..... that day, working alone in his office, while his partner, Marley, was lying "upon the point of death". Scrooge contrasts his life with hers and her husband's. While they have a happy Christmas together, he is working alone. They are not wealthy as he is but not poor financially. In other ways they are far richer than he. Scrooge thinks of how good it would be to have a daughter like Belle's to look up to him.

### Stave 3: The Second of the Three Spirits

This spirit is the ..... It is a great giant, dressed in a .....robe (a little like a green version of our Father Christmas) and surrounded by piles of .....

This spirit shows Scrooge how Christmas is celebrated by his clerk's family, by strangers near and far, and by his nephew, Fred. The spirit carries a ..... and everywhere it goes this torch sprinkles incense or water on people and makes them become ..... to each other.

Scrooge has never been to Bob Cratchit's house. Here he sees how the Cratchits, despite being very poor, can be happy at Christmas. Bob and Mrs. Cratchit struggle because their family is large: there are six children. (Martha, Belinda, Peter, two unnamed "young Cratchits", and ..... ) Scrooge sees how frail he is, and asks the Spirit if he will live. The ghost tells him that unless something changes in the future, the child will die. When Scrooge protests he is reminded of his words earlier (Stave 1): "If he be like to die he had better do it and decrease the surplus.....".

The ghost takes Scrooge magically to places outside London: he sees a family of ..... in a hut on a barren moor, two lighthouse keepers and sailors on a ship: all know what day it is and celebrate it as far as they can. All of them are made more aware of other people and feel more kindly towards them because it is Christmas.

Fred (Scrooge's nephew) is having a party, and Scrooge is brought by the spirit to see and hear it. Scrooge's nephew explains that Scrooge is to be pitied, not despised. He is rich but his money does him no good, and, as Fred says, "his offences carry their own punishment". The guests play....., to find the identity of a thing, in which questions can be answered only with Yes and No. Everyone is amused when Fred's wife's sister guesses that the mystery object is.....

The chapter has a strange ending. The spirit ages and shrinks as midnight draws near (because he lives for, and represents, one year only - he has had more than eighteen hundred brothers). Now Scrooge sees, under its robe, two horribly dirty and ugly..... The ghost tells him that they are not his but "man's" and that "This boy is ..... this girl is .....". Scrooge is told to beware of them both. When he asks if nothing can be done to help them the ghost again quotes his earlier words: "Are there no prisons? Are there no work-houses". He feels deep shame, as the ghost disappears, and he sees, coming towards him, the last of the spirits.

#### Stave 4: The Last of the Spirits

In this chapter Scrooge is again taken to places he does not know. The spirit is more like the kind of ghost we meet in conventional ghost stories. It is a hooded ....., its face is unseen and it points at things but does not speak.

We are puzzled by a group of wealthy men, discussing someone who has died. This person seems very unpopular. In another poor and squalid part of London a pawn-broker, Old Joe, buys stolen property from three people: a laundrywoman (Mrs. Dilber), a charwoman (a cleaner) and the undertaker's assistant. All these poor people have taken things from the dead man such as.....

Scrooge asks to see some "emotion caused by this man's death". He sees two scenes. First, a young couple who owed the man money. The wife (Caroline) fears they are ruined but her husband says there is hope now their creditor is dead. The debt will be transferred to someone else, but no-one else could be so merciless as the man who has died.

Next Scrooge returns with the ghost to the..... home. They, too are talking about death and preparing for a funeral. They all try hard to comfort and support each other. It becomes clear that they are grieving for....., who has died. He is to be buried in a beautiful green churchyard. Bob comes home from work and goes to sit with his son, who has obviously only just died.

Scrooge is horrified but still has to learn the identity of the mysterious dead man. He is shown to an ugly ..... "overrun by grass and weeds" in the town, and here sees on the..... his own name. He realizes (the reader has already guessed) that he is the man about whom the others were talking.

Scrooge begs the spirit to tell him whether he has seen what **will** be or what **may** be only. He thinks the spirit is showing pity to him and promises he will change.

#### Stave 5: The End of It

This chapter is very short. Scrooge wonders how much time has passed while he was with the spirits, and calls to a.....from his window, to ask what day it is. The boy is surprised by the questions as it is..... Scrooge pays the boy to go to the poulterer (like a butcher but specializes in poultry) and order the prize..... and send it to..... Out in the street he meets one of the gentlemen he earlier sent away. He whispers to him, but

the reader guesses that he promises to give a lot of money to the ....., as the gentlemen doubt whether he is serious. Scrooge explains that his donation includes "a great many back-payments".

Scrooge goes to ..... house and enjoys his party immensely. On Boxing Day he arrives early at work and ambushes Bob, pretending to be very angry with him for his being ..... He tells Bob that he will not "stand for this sort of thing any longer" as if he is about to sack him. Then he tells Bob, he is therefore going to raise his..... Bob at first thinks Scrooge has gone mad, but is convinced when Scrooge tells him to put more coal on the fire rather than work, and that he will discuss his affairs over a drink that afternoon.

The story ends with an account of how Scrooge becomes a "second father" to ..... "who did NOT die" but receives no more visits from the ghosts. He changes his way of life entirely. Some people laugh at him, but he lets them laugh and is happy with his new outlook on life. Dickens ends by repeating Tiny Tim's Christmas blessing: "God bless Us.....!"

## Characters

This novella is dominated by one character, Ebenezer Scrooge. The point of the story is to show how and why he changes. It is easy to overlook the change he has already experienced which is shown when he revisits his past in [Stave 2](#). As a child he enjoys the pleasures of the imagination, and he is close to his sister. As a young man working for Mr. Fezziwig he has not become greedy for gain. But a reasonable fear of poverty which drives him to work to gain security against hardship becomes his dominant passion. Fred is right in pitying Scrooge because he does not find any pleasure in his wealth: he does not spend on himself any more than on others. Either because of what he once was or because of what he can be or because he feels to blame for what Scrooge is, Marley comes to warn him that he must change.

Though the first two spirits tell Scrooge some things, he sees most for himself. His **own** statements and feelings are the biggest clue to his changing attitude. He also has the unusual experience of seeing himself as others see him. He repeatedly makes connections. Seeing himself as a small boy he thinks of the carol singer outside his door. When he sees his sister, Fan, he thinks of how harsh he has been to her son. But most of all he is affected by the sight of the person he is most able to help, Tiny Tim. Until the visit of the second spirit, Scrooge has not even known of the child's existence.

Dickens describes Scrooge by likening him to the winter weather, while noting that no weather has any effect on him. There is no hint that this sinister figure will become the comical Scrooge of the last chapter.

Finally in this brief sketch we should note that Scrooge is a caricature but represents very real tendencies. Dickens himself knew how harsh debt could be, working from childhood to assist his own "struggling family", his father having been sent to the Marshalsea, a debtors' prison. Why does Dickens choose to depict an old person? Perhaps to show that no-one is too set in his or her ways to change, and that change is possible even late in life. Scrooge has become one of Dickens' best-known creations. His name has become a byword for meanness - though it seems unfair that we recall him before his life-changing experience. His pet-phrase "Bah, humbug" has also taken on a life of its own, though it is worth remembering that in saying it Scrooge was complaining not generally but specifically about the "humbug" (or fraud) as he saw it of people being paid to take time off work.

There are many names in [A Christmas Carol](#) but few of these are characters in any sense. Often they come in groups, so we see a "knot of business men", three people selling Scrooge's goods to the pawn-broker or a husband and wife (Caroline) whom Scrooge does not know, but whose lives he has affected.

The three spirits and Marley are unusual in that Scrooge listens to them. At first he resists, but he rapidly learns not to oppose them. Where Marley is grotesquely comic, the first spirit is gentle and pitying, the second hearty and authoritative, and the third silently compelling.

We learn more of the members of Scrooge's family. His sister, Fan, though physically frail, tries to help her brother and works to improve his relations with their father. Fred has inherited her good nature and is as obstinate in his kindness as Scrooge is bad-tempered. Scrooge has no other family but his fiancée, Belle, is the first to see how money has changed him. She rejects money and finds happiness in her family.

Finally, there are those whom we see at work. Dick Wilkins is little more than a name, but Mr. Fezziwig is depicted very fully: a large kind man whose jollity is infectious. He is best judged by the company he keeps - almost every deserving poor person is welcome at his ball. Scrooge notes how Fezziwig has the power to make people happy or unhappy. Scrooge has the same power but he and Fezziwig use it in opposite ways. Best-known of all these characters are the Cratchits - two of them, anyway. Mrs. Cratchit and five of the children are sketched out but we see more of Bob and Tiny Tim. Bob is like a poor version of Fred in speaking up for Scrooge when his wife complains of him. In Scrooge's vision of Tiny Tim's death, Bob remarks on how kind Scrooge's nephew was to him. Tiny Tim is among the most famous disabled characters in literature. We do not know the cause of his lameness and today we would be uneasy about calling a child a "cripple", as Tiny Tim calls himself. In Stave 3 we are moved by Tiny Tim's courage and cheerfulness, in spite of his poverty and disability. In the next chapter we are moved again by the way the rest of the family comfort each other and remember the child. The scene is unashamedly sentimental but very moving. Happily, Dickens is able to reassure us that Tiny Tim does not die, and to give him the last word in the novella.

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## Settings

Like many of Dickens' novels this one is set mainly in London some time in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Because the story is relatively short, the locations are only sketched. There are some sumptuous descriptions of interiors, especially the transformation of Scrooge's home by the Ghost of Christmas Present and the preparations (Stave 2) for Mr. Fezziwig's ball.

We also see into the homes of Fred, the Cratchits, Belle and Caroline. In Stave 3 Dickens leaves London for a barren moor, a lighthouse and a ship at sea, while Scrooge's boarding school (Stave 2) is in a "little market-town" complete with a "church and winding river".

## Themes

The most important themes of the story are stated more or less clearly by characters in it. The first of these might be Marley's saying, " Business...Mankind was my business" . Where Scrooge sees business in the familiar sense of trade and finance, Marley now sees that one's " business " is what one should do in life, duty or obligation. Mankind is or was not just Marley's business of course, but Scrooge's business, your business and mine, in fact, **everyone's**.

Scrooge's unkind remark that poor people should die and " reduce the surplus population " brings us to another theme of the story. When Scrooge asks if Tiny Tim will die he is reminded of these words. Why? Because the " surplus population " is not an abstraction but real individuals. Scrooge is told by the Ghost of Christmas Present to find out " What the surplus is, and Where it is " before making such statements.

Another theme is that change is possible however set we are in our ways. Dickens imagines the most miserable and hard-hearted man he can, and shows how he can be reformed if he sees his responsibilities.

## Techniques

### Structure

The structure of the story is determined by its content. In the middle are three chapters which relate the visits of the three spirits. These are framed by two chapters which serve as prologue and epilogue. *Marley's Ghost* introduces us to Scrooge and his moral failings while Stave 5 is a very brief account of how Scrooge reforms. Assuming that Dickens is in control of his story-telling you might consider why the final chapter is much the shortest.

The three central chapters correspond to times in Scrooge's life: his past; the present as it is for other people, many of whom are affected by Scrooge's unkindness; and his future as it may be or will be, if he does not change.

### Dialogue

A very obvious technique in this story is the extensive use of dialogue (speech) to show what people think or feel. Dickens writes speech like a dramatist: it is interesting that so many film and television dramatizations of *A Christmas Carol* have been made. It is a convenient length and has an almost ready-made screenplay in the passages of conversation.

### Irony and playing Devil's advocate

Another technique is what we might term playing Devil's advocate: in many situations the spirits do not tell Scrooge why he is in the wrong, but let him see it for himself. The first two spirits especially do this. The Ghost of Christmas Past argues (ironically, no doubt) that Mr. Fezziwig has done nothing special, causing Scrooge to praise his generosity. And the Ghost of Christmas Present quotes Scrooge's own earlier words so that Scrooge can see why they are wrong. Elsewhere, of course, this ghost and Marley's, **do** tell Scrooge why he is wrong.

### Imagery and symbolism

Though Dickens writes prose narratives he is fond of comparisons of the kind we expect in poetry. There are far too many to mention here, but a few stand out. First, we should look at the passage in Stave 1 where Scrooge is described in a series of weather images. A memorable poetic image comes where the Ghost of Christmas Present compares people to insects, and the wealthy Scrooge is ridiculed for looking down on other "insects" who have less to live on:

"Oh God! to hear the insect on the leaf pronouncing on the too much life among his hungry brothers in the dust!"

This is written in the iambic metre, like Shakespearean verse. (For the technically-minded there is a pentameter ending at "leaf", followed by a tetrameter and another pentameter starting with "among".)

An important symbol in **A Christmas Carol** appears in Stave 1, where Marley is weighed down by a massive chain, and tells Scrooge he has an even longer chain: it was as long as Marley's seven years ago, and he has "laboured on it since" This chain, made up of cash-boxes, padlocks, purses and business documents, represents Scrooge's achievement in life - earning money which weighs down his spirit.

At the end of Stave 3, Scrooge sees under the robe of the Ghost of Christmas Present, two children, whose names show that they are symbols: Ignorance and Want. Dickens sees that a lack of education and extreme poverty make it impossible for anyone to have a good life. Of the two, the Ghost tells Scrooge to beware the boy "most of all" because ignorance allows poverty to continue.

### Food

One final technique to mention in this brief sketch is Dickens' descriptions of food. The modern reader may find this a little strange, although our ideas about eating and drinking at Christmas owe something to Dickens. Dickens' readers would not have homes so full of food as we do today. Because there were no freezers or tins most food would be bought when it was needed. And many people would not keep much food in the home, but, like Scrooge, would take their meals in public houses. (He has a hob with a pan of gruel on it.) Christmas is the one time in the year when the Cratchits can eat a filling meal. The description of Scrooge's room in Stave 3 becomes at one point a long list of foods heaped up "to form a kind of throne".