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A Christmas Carol

Charles Dickens · *1843 · original English text*

A hard man of business is shown his past, his present and his likely end, and is given time to become someone else. Dickens's carol is a story of repentance: the chains of habit can still be broken, and Christmas becomes the name for a year-round amendment of life.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

Can a life spent in counting still learn to keep Christmas—and to keep it all the year?

"I will honour Christmas in my heart, and try to keep it all the year."

Scrooge · Stave IV

Scrooge begins by calling Christmas a humbug and the poor a surplus. The spirits do not argue theory; they show him faces he has refused: a neglected self, the Cratchits, his own unwept death. The change is real because it becomes deeds—wages, a turkey, a second fatherhood—not a mood for one morning.

KEY CHARACTERS

Ebenezer Scrooge
miser, then penitent

Jacob Marley
the friend who comes back too late for himself

Bob Cratchit
poor, loyal, thankful

Tiny Tim
weakness that blesses

Fred, the nephew
open-handed constancy

The three Spirits
memory, charity, and judgment

Belle
the love he traded for gold

Fezziwig
a master who knew how to be merry and kind

Grades 5–8
Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01
Marley's Ghost
STAVE I

A closed office, and a warning in chains.

- Ebenezer Scrooge, partner of the dead Jacob Marley, refuses his nephew's greeting and two gentlemen seeking alms
- He grudges Bob Cratchit even the coal and the holiday
- That night Marley appears, bound in the chain he forged in life
- He promises Scrooge three spirits, and a chance he himself no longer has

> *"I wear the chain I forged in life," replied the Ghost. "I made it link by link, and yard by yard; I girded it on of my own free will, and of my own free will I wore it."*
> **Marley** · Stave I

02
The First Spirit
STAVE II

Christmas past: what was once open, and how it shut.

- The Ghost of Christmas Past shows the lonely schoolboy, and the sister who came for him
- Fezziwig's generous ball teaches what a little kindness can do for workers
- A younger Scrooge lets Belle go, because a golden idol has displaced her
- He cannot bear the last pictures, and he extinguishes the spirit like a light he is not ready for

03
The Second Spirit
STAVE III

Christmas present: a world still glad, and a child at risk.

- The Ghost of Christmas Present takes him through streets of poor, hearty celebration
- At the Cratchits' he sees a feast made of almost nothing, and Tiny Tim's fragile life
- His own words about decreasing the surplus population are given back to him
- He also sees his nephew's open party, and, at the end, the children Ignorance and Want

> *"God bless us every one!" said Tiny Tim, the last of all."*
> **Tiny Tim** · Stave III

04
The Last of the Spirits
STAVE IV

Christmas yet to come: a death no one mourns, and a stone that may still be wiped.

- A silent phantom shows a man's death discussed with cheap satisfaction
- The Cratchits mourn Tiny Tim; the other house does not mourn its dead at all
- Scrooge is brought to a neglected grave and reads his own name
- He prays to have the writing sponged away, and promises to honor Christmas in his heart all the year

> *"I will honour Christmas in my heart, and try to keep it all the year. I will live in the Past, the Present, and the Future."*
> **Scrooge** · Stave IV

05
The End of It
STAVE V

The window is opened, and the life begins to be mended.

- He wakes on Christmas morning, still in time
- He sends a prize turkey to the Cratchits, gives to the men he had refused, and goes to church and to dinner at his nephew's
- The next day he raises Bob's wages and becomes a second father to Tiny Tim
- The change holds; Tim does not die, and Scrooge knows how to keep Christmas well

Repentance | Mercy | Memory | Generosity | The Poor | A Kept Word

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 5–8

1. Marley's chain is forged "of my own free will." The hauntings do not cancel responsibility; they offer a late freedom to use it better.
2. Scrooge's line about the surplus population is returned to him at the Cratchits' table. Why does a face make the sentence unbearable?
3. Watch what each spirit shows that the others do not: a lost past, a present claim, a future without amendment.
4. The vow in Stave IV names the Past, the Present and the Future all at once. The last stave is only the proof that the vow became deeds.
5. Tiny Tim's blessing is small and easy to quote. Set it beside Scrooge's new fatherhood, which costs him money and pride.
6. Dickens calls this a carol. What, in the structure of five staves, is like a song that can be learned and sung again all the year?

Quotations are verbatim from the original English text, Project Gutenberg #46, the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/a-christmas-carol/. Citations give book and chapter (or canto and line) so every line can be checked.