A Dickens of a Christmas: Meditations on

A Christmas Carol
And Other Southern Seen Columns, 1989-2006

by
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Back Then Christmas
(1942-1946)

Back Then, Christmas was books and radio. Our books were gifts from great-aunts who knew how much we enjoyed reading and did their best to encourage it. Radio was not today’s blare, but Manhattan Merry-Go-Round, Charlie McCarthy and Edgar Bergen, Fred Allen, Bob Hope, Jack Benny, Fibber McGee and Molly, Dr. I. Q., Jack Armstrong, the Green Hornet, fireside chats from Franklin Roosevelt, and annual readings of *A Christmas Carol* from Lionel Barrymore. December school days ended with a chorus of “Hark the herald angels shout: a few more days and we’ll be out”.

Back Then, Christmas stretched for days over 150 miles between two grandfathers’ houses, like a strip of inner-tube lashed to the fork tips of a slingshot. One, a country politician, lost an eye from a stray kindling stick catapulted off the woodpile axe, out past the well in the side lot of the weather-gray farmhouse. The other, Spanish-American War veteran and a retired city dweller in Memphis, had his leg permanently bowed by a stray bullet passing through his bunkhouse wall in the railroad camp where he worked construction in his early days.

Free at last, we three boy cousins headed to the farm. There were no decorated trees or wrapped presents there, but there were table-bending meals and pie safes full of between-meal pies and cakes, plus cold biscuits for finger-sticking and molasses-filling. That was before TVA gave them night lights, and so we three would pile early into one of the two feather beds in the living room where our grandparents and the single fireplace were. Huddled onionskin tight against each other, with the oldest in the choice outside spot nearest the fire, we could see in the flickering firelight our grandfather’s glass eye staring at us from its heavy water tumbler at one end of the mantel, while from a twin glass at the other end, our grandmother’s dentures smiled at us. A snuff can in the center divided them.

Then, Christmas still days away, we boarded the L&N for Memphis. There three boy cousins slept on floor pallets we rolled away in daytime to make space to play endless games of Crazy-8 and Battle, in full view of a grandmother who thought card-playing was sinful. We played around our grandfather’s easy chair, hiding marbles in the red Walter Raleigh tobacco can from which he rolled his own cigarettes—which were also on the grandmother’s disapproved list. He would limp out to get the paper, and with us at his feet, use it as a text to teach us how to cuss without profanity as he explained how wronged the world were by FDR and Boss Crump. Looking up at him from our floor seats, he spoke with the authority and looks of God.

When a girl cousin was born and grew old enough to enter our all-male domain on the floor, she sat nearer our grandfather than any of us, her male elders, and would roll up his pants leg and gently rub the shin dent left by that long-gone bullet, endearing herself to him. We learned more about the Garden of Eden then than from all the times the grandmother cited it.

So we took our grandfathers with their wounds and ways and wrapped them in feather mattresses and *Press-Scimitar* news sheets and tied them in our memories to the Christmas trees and fruitcake slicings awaiting us back home, and we passed through a Depression and a War without knowing they were unusual events. We needed no electric trains, because we had the L&N, with grandparents at either end…and books…and radio.
Ebenezer Scrooge: Not a Villain But a Hero
(1989)

Ebenezer Scrooge, in his own way as popular as Santa Claus this season of the year, was an expert on Christmas spirits.
Not the drinking kind, but those ghostly spirits who, separately and together, pointed him to the one Great Spirit of Christmas.

Scrooge, you may recall, saw at least five spirits in his Christmas Eve nightmare that changed his life.

We usually forget the first two ghosts Scrooge saw. One was a face in his doorknocker, seen when he returned home from work to eat his gruel and to go to bed. This little ghost was there only a fleeting instant, sort of a warning signal. And like most brief signals, it was ignored.
The second spirit was also a warning, but a bit more dramatic. The ghost of Jacob Marley, fettered with heavy chains of greed he says he forged himself "yard by yard" while alive, warns Scrooge of the consequences of his greed and announces the approaching visits of three other spirits.

But since it was Marley whom Scrooge saw, not himself (although he was something of a ghost himself, a hollowed-out man), he chose to humbug the apparition. Being human, Scrooge failed to recognize himself in another.
The next three ghosts showed Scrooge pictures of himself, as he had been as a child and young man, as he was in relation to the Cratchits that Christmas, and as he would be soon, in the cemetery. The guides were the spirits of Christmases Past, Present and Yet To Be.

Christmases Past are matters of memory. Through memory's filter, something as small as a whiff of cedar or a burned-out tree bulb makes each of us young again, and calls to mind those times when life was very good.
The windmills of memory from Christmas Past stand in contrast to the treadmills of Christmas Today, when youth has faded and, with it, innocence. The image one catches in the middle ages of Christmas Present is a shock, like coming upon oneself in a mirror in a darkened hallway at night.

It's not that this Christmas is any different than a childhood Christmas. The difference is time. Time sifts out the fact that gifts were fewer, World War II was raging, and automobiles were hard to find in those days.
The best filter for Christmas Present is to mix one part Christmas Past with one part Christmas Yet To Be. To enjoy Christmas more this year, spend part of it remembering the joys of past Christmases and part of it thinking ahead to the kinds of Christmas worlds towards which to aim.

Christmas Present, therefore, slaps us in the face with fresh immediacy, both as a time to take inventory and as a time to plan ahead and place our orders for what kind of Christmases we want next year and the next.

Who can see the Cratchit crutches of Tiny Tim this Christmas Present and hurry back to the counting-house unchanged? What shepherds could have seen the angels that first Christmas and not left their sheep to hurry to Bethlehem?
The last spirit Scrooge saw was that of Christmas Yet To Be. This Christmas spirit left Scrooge terrified, begging for the chance to change his future.
The good thing about the future is that it hasn't happened yet. Some parts of it are left for us to determine for ourselves. We have free choices we can make, as Robert Frost knew when he talked about the consequences of choosing one fork in a road over another. Life speaks to us with a forked tongue. There are many moments when what we do or don't do now can change what we are or what we do in the future.

That was Scrooge's salvation--that second chance we call the future, that Christmas Yet To Be. When the Apostle Paul says "it doth not yet appear what we shall be," he is reminding us that our future is not fixed, that we can have a part in deciding what it will be.

We still have second chances at better Christmases for ourselves and our posterity, a possibility for "peace on earth, good will to men." All it takes is the heroism of Ebenezer Scrooge.

And that choice brings us a sixth Christmas Spirit, the one of which Scrooge's five spirits were a part. The Holy Spirit--that "came upon them" and "shone around about them"--can even yet enter our lives, 2000 years later, and radiate in love in the twinkle of each eye and of each star, and in the tinkle of a bell or of an icicled branch against a frosty windowpane.

Where love is, there is the real Spirit of Christmas. If you had that Spirit in Christmases Past and if you work for it for Christmas To Come, you will find it now, in Christmas Present.
**Christmas Business is "Miraculously Good"**

(1990)

Our several copies of Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* had all vanished--a tendency among the books we most treasure. Passing a Christian book store, we dropped in to get a replacement.

"Oh," said the pretty young clerk. "We don't carry that. You'll have to go to a regular bookstore. Our Christmas books are Christian." She pointed to some picture books with white sheep, bright stars, and blonde-haired white babies on the covers.

We bit our tongues to keep from pointing out to her that a display of videotapes next to her "Christian-only" nativity books included familiar packages of *Frosty the Snowman*, *Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer*, and *Santa Claus is Coming to Town*.

*A Christmas Carol* not Christian? The sheer audacity of such a judgment boggles the mind! What does that First Christmas mean if not a chance for any errant someone to be "born again in the spirit" as was Ebenezer Scrooge?

What is non-Christian about waking from dreams of early innocence and nightmares of current greed like a newborn baby swaddled in one's bedclothes? "I don't know what day of the month it is," said Scrooge. "I don't know how long I have been among the Spirits. I don't know anything. I'm quite a baby. Never mind. I don't care. I'd rather be a baby. Hallo! Whoop! Hallo there!"

Scrooge is about being born again.

We are all of us erring Ebenezers, all mal-focused Marleys, all fallen Adams. The ghosts of our Christmases past, present, and future are all within the spirit of the Christ-child's birth story. Dickens explored and explained that first Christmas birth's meanings for his time and place in 19th century London, as Luke had for Palestine centuries earlier. We are not so distant from either Luke or Dickens that we can miss their drift.

The meaning of Christmas is its potential for a re-birth of our better natures, a scouring away of layered grime and soot, a blowing away of fogs and washing of greasy windows through which we yearly see less and less clearly.

"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, self-contained, and solitary as an oyster. The cold within him froze his old features, nipped his pointed nose, shriveled his cheek, stiffened his gait, made his eyes red, his thin lips blue, and spoke out shrewdly in his grating voice. A frosty rime was on his head, and on his eyebrows, and his wiry chin. He carried his own low temperature always about with him; he iced his office in the dog-days; and didn't thaw it one degree at Christmas."

Not even Frosty was as icily cold-hearted as this man Scrooge (who was also Marley--"he answered to both names. It was all the same to him."--who is also us). The difference is that while Frosty's melting is an occasion for sorrow, Scrooge's thawing is a triumph of joy, as moving as the return of the Prodigal Son, the rescue of the 100th lamb, the salvation of the failing sparrow, and Easter's empty tomb.

What is this dread thing which Marley/Scrooge/We do, that re-birth into the Christmas Babe should be so necessary and desirable?
Let Marley speak for us: "It is required of every man that the spirit within him should walk abroad among his fellow-men, and travel far and wide; and if that spirit goes not forth in life, it is doomed to do so after death. It is doomed to wander through the world--oh, woe is me! --and witness what it cannot share, but might have shared on earth, and turned to happiness!

"I wear the chain I forged in life. 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.

"My spirit never walked beyond our counting-house--mark me!--in life my spirit never roved beyond the narrow limits of our money-changing hole; and weary journeys lie before me!

"Oh! captive, bound and double-ironed, not to know that ages of incessant labor, by immortal creatures, for this earth, must pass into eternity before the good of which it is susceptible is all developed! Not to know that any Christian spirit working kindly in its little sphere, whatever it may be, will find its mortal life too short for its vast means of usefulness! Not to know that no space of regret can make amends for one life's opportunities misused! Yet such was I! Oh! such was I!

"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!

"At this time of the rolling year, I suffer most. Why did I walk through crowds of fellow-beings with my eyes turned down, and never raise them to that blessed Star which led the Wise Men to a poor abode? Were there no poor homes to which its light would have conducted me?"

Marley gives Scrooge the Dickens--so to speak. Scrooge and we differ from dead-and-damned Marley principally in being still alive. Just being alive is itself always opportunity for a second chance. If one lives long enough and acts quickly enough, one has hope of salvation's self-reclamation.

The weird zealot who stands on our courthouse lawn with a placard proclaiming "The End of the World Is At Hand!" is more right than he knows. The end is always at hand, for each of us. Christmas is about thinking how our stories should end.

Dickens is a master of the moral warning, a watchdog over our spiritual souls, and the enemy of delayed good intentions and of ethical procrastination. Dickens's own best witness to the possibility of changing, and our best prophet of the urgency of the times, was Ebenezer Scrooge.

A funny line in an old hymn goes, "Here I raise my Ebenezer." We never understood it until an English professor told us an "Ebenezer" is a staff like a shepherd's crook. Priests and popes still bear replicas of them in testimony to the shepherds at Bethlehem and to the newborn Good Shepherd they honored.

Dickens sent Ebenezer Scrooge to be for us both a warning and a moral and spiritual guide. Scrooge is the quintessential parable of modern Christmas. Except for the biblical story of Christmas, no other literature holds a Christmas candle to *A Christmas Carol*. 

Take the time this year to read it again, slowly, word by word. Chew on its every sentence and digest its meanings. No Christmas dinner could taste better! Give this tasteful treasure to your friends, and make friends of strangers by sharing it.

Pleasant dreams ... and Merry Christmas.
The Dickens Who Saved Christmas
(1991)

Christmas without *A Christmas Carol* would be an empty stocking.

Each Christmas of our youth, the great actor Lionel Barrymore, every one's favorite grandfather, read Charles Dickens' *Carol* to us, over radio. (People often mistook Barrymore for President Roosevelt, who also used a wheelchair and radio.) Nowadays we read it ourselves each year. Last year we even treated ourselves to a copy of Michael Patrick Hearn's annotated edition.

The book’s theme--the possibility and necessity of transforming human nature--could be summarized in two lines from it. At the very beginning, Scrooge says of his nephew's Christmas dinner invitation, "Bah! Humbug." At the very end, Dickens writes of Scrooge: “…and it was always said of him, that he knew how to keep Christmas well, if any man alive possessed the knowledge."

But summaries are an injustice to art. Color swatches and paint chips are inadequate. One has to experience the whole piece to grasp it--or, in the case of the *Carol*, to be grabbed by it. What comes in between the beginning and the ending is what *Carol* is really all about--a masterpiece of human progress-process etched in classic language and symbols upon an adhesive plot. *Carol* is literary flypaper; once you walk into it you are stuck to it forever.

Dickens did not invent the celebration of Christmas. But it is not too great an exaggeration to claim that *A Christmas Carol* rescued Christmas from extinction.

It was primarily a country holiday before Cromwell and the Puritans took over the English government in the 17th century. The Puritans outlawed it for being pagan and "Popish". It did not bounce back with the restoration of the monarchy, but languished in royal courts and remote baronial estates. Because it was rural in its early forms, it suffered from the coming of cities and the industrial revolution.

Up until Dickens' *Carol* in 1843, Christmas was in decay and decline. The essential traditions were still around, but muted. *Carol* revived them, and spawned generations of imitators and derivative writings (the best of which probably are Dylan Thomas' *Child's Christmas in Wales* and Dr. Seuss' *The Grinch Who Stole Christmas*).

Much of the work comes from people and incidents in Dickens' own life, or sometimes in reaction to them. Tiny Tim could have been one or both of Dickens's brothers, or his invalid nephew, Harry Burnett. The moors in Cornwall were drawn from a recent visit there with other writer friends. Peter Cratchit, Tiny Tim's brother, was probably Dickens himself, who pasted labels on bottles of blacking in a factory for six shillings a week.

What's important is not where Dickens got his material, but what he did with it. His famous contemporary, Thackeray, called the *Carol* a "charity-sermon," intended not for the pulpit of Westminster Abbey but "for the hearth of the common man". It had the twin virtues of stirring up enormous good feelings for others while also causing "an awful slaughter of Christmas turkeys."

And a sermon it is. Just as Christmas came in the first place in the form of a child, so Dickens sets a child, Tiny Tim, before us, and teaches us through him. The cynical Ebenezer, who goes to bed on Christmas Eve believing that "every idiot who goes about with 'Merry Christmas,' on his lips, should be boiled with his own pudding, and budded with a stake of holly through his hearts," awakens on Christmas morn, reborn, having been led by both the Christ
child and Tiny Tim to become a child himself. "I am as light as a feather, I am as happy as an angel, I am as merry as a school-boy.... I'm quite a baby.... I'd rather be a baby," Scrooge cries.

One can almost see the shackles and chains of selfishness and stinginess and cynicism melting off of Scrooge. And through Ebenezer's joy, that of the newest child born of Christmas, we readers ourselves become infected with the spirit of innocence and service which is the resurrection/nativity experience of Christmas.

We suppose that *A Christmas Carol* could be called a ghost story, more Halloween than Christmas. After all, there are the leading roles played by Marley's ghost and the three visiting Spirits, not to mention other unnamed spirits floating in the shadows at the edges of the story. It certainly is a story that haunts us forever after reading it.

But no ordinary ghost story takes us where this one does, out of the horror house of our psyches--"squeezing, wrenching, grasping, clutching, covetous old sinner"--and into the family circle of Christmas. The Holy Ghost of Christmas overpowers the goblins and ghosts of Halloween, freeing us from ourselves while inviting us voluntarily to accept new chains of obligations for one another.

The Christmas Dickens saved is the one we know in the best of holiday moments. It is, as Scrooge's nephew tried to tell him, "a good time: a kind, forgiving, charitable, pleasant time: the only time I know of, in the long calendar of the year, when men and women seem by one consent to open their shut-up hearts freely, and to think of people below them as if they really were fellow-passengers to the grave, and not another race of creatures bound on other journeys."
The Night the Animals Talk  
(1991)

Legend has it that on Christmas Eve the animals can talk. It is a sweet idea, but one which demonstrates quite a bit of human chauvinism. The implication of the legend is that humans are superior to their fellow animals because they have the power of speech. Thus, the miracle of Christmas Eve is that our inferiors are temporarily granted some approximation of our exalted status.

The truth is that our own talk about being superior to other animals is a psychological mask for a great insecurity, our fear that we may actually be the inferiors. Wealth and position--and token acts of kindness they make possible--are edges we invent to try to set us apart and above others who may actually be our peers or our betters.

Consider the birds of the air and the beasts of the fields. In their own patterns of evolution they have endless grace and abilities, instincts and beauty, that we lack and cannot help but envy.

Animals hear and make sounds we cannot; they survive in places and on foods we cannot; they fly and run with speeds we cannot; they do without the health care and machines we cannot; they have an orderliness and energy we cannot; and they adapt to nature's "cultural diversity" by sharing space and resources we cannot.

Perhaps, as William Faulkner said in his Nobel acceptance speech, the purpose of man's puny voice is to re-assure himself that he exists. Perhaps other animals are so superior to us that they have no need of our language. Perhaps instead of our condescending on Christmas Eve to let animals elevate themselves to our level by speaking, it is they who condescend--by lowering themselves to our primitive and inferior levels to speak in our language. Perhaps they feel we say little worth hearing and discussing.

Probably it is their patterned predictability that misleads us into thinking other animals are peons to man. Their mating, nesting, feeding, and migration habits are so routinized they seem to be equivalents of factory and office workers punching time clocks and paying bills punctually each month.

But what that really says is that we also categorize blue-collar workers and unemployed fellow humans as lower-life forms of "other animals", and hence as "inferiors".

This condescension of superior humans toward inferiors can be found elsewhere at Christmas time than in the legend of the animals talking.

It was at the heart of the crass Scrooge's resentment of clerk Bob Cratchit for having Christmas Day off. In pre-Civil War times, it was implicit in the tradition of giving the slaves Christmas Day off from work. It still permeates our philanthropy, for we are more solicitous, usually only temporarily so, of children, the hungry, the homeless, and employees at Christmas time.

Christmas is too often a time when human animals speak to their inferiors. For the rest of the year it is considered natural not to do so and unbecoming to do so.

Does being poor or "beneath" someone in an organization chart or in social status really have to mean being inferior? (If animals do talk on Christmas Eve, that would a good topic to chew one's cud over or to bleat about.) Is mankind all that it is quacked up to be?
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Jesus, whose birthday Christmas celebrates, spoke to us through animals--through the lost 100th lamb, through the tiniest fallen sparrow, through the fish of the sea, through the camel in the needle's eye, through the ass that was proud to carry him into Jerusalem.

The idea of animals talking together in the same language on Christmas Eve has in it echoes of Pentecost, when the wind rushed in and people of many languages suddenly spoke and understood in one.

Maybe what the animals talk about among themselves in their Christmas Eve forums is us--about how, like lost sheep, we have gone astray, wandering, with time and distance taking us farther and farther from the Bethlehem manger and its "live stock". We have fled from the animal kingdom into Egypt and seem unable to find ways out.

And in their pity for us, their nomadic inferiors, perhaps the animals annually resolve to continue giving us their songs, the beauty of their feathers and furs, their aerobatics and submarine shows, their meat, eggs, honey, and butter, cheese, and milk for our tables, and the fossil fuels of their ancestors' bones for energy.

Perhaps they find some hope for us in that so few of us now depend upon them for transportation, although they still condescend to carry us in other ways.

The gift of Christmas is their infinite patience with us. Maybe patience is a high form of animal love.
The Gruel, Gruel World of Dickens

(1992)

'Tis the season to give you the Dickens.
We do feel obligated to do our annual reading of Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*. We approach it each Christmas with some excitement, because we have yet to fail to find something new in it, some unwrapped gift overlooked and left under the tree last year.
You already know the story, so we need not summarize it.
What strikes us instantly in this year's reading is the significance--nay, even the brilliance--of Dickens's choice of a single word.
That word is gruel.
The context in which the word appears is this: it is Christmas Eve and Scrooge has sent his happy nephew, two Poor Fund solicitors, and the chilled and underpaid Bob Cratchit on their way, closed the shop, and wound his own way home. Noting a remarkable resemblance of his doorknocker to Marley, his dead partner, Scrooge climbs the darkened steps and enters his room. Shaken by Marley's face, he checks the rooms to see if anyone is intruding, but finds all in order. A bowl and spoon by the fireplace await his warmed gruel, prepared in advance because Scrooge has a head cold. He takes off his tie, puts on a dressing gown, slippers, and nightcap, and sits down before the fire to eat his gruel. Soon Marley will appear, followed by the three spirits.
But why? Why gruel?
Gruel, a thin cereal, usually oatmeal boiled in water, is the food of paupers, not of the wealthy--and Scrooge is no pauper. He could afford to eat pheasant and drink wine. But he chooses gruel.
The pre-bedtime snack symbolizes Scrooge himself, and since Scrooge himself is a symbol for selfishness, gruel symbolizes Greed. It even begins with the same letters as Greed.
Not content to take all he can from his business and from his clerk, nor to condemn and deny charities and his own family, Scrooge is so full of avarice that he even shortchanges himself. The poor eat gruel because they are lucky to get it; Scrooge eats it because he enjoys it. His one pleasure in life is denial. He is avarice personified, a sort of dead man walking around in the midst of life, sucking away from others what pleasures it has. He is a scavenger catfish scouring the bottom of the river, happy only when unhappy and when taking happiness away from others.
"What's in a word?" (Shakespeare wouldn't mind being quoted in a study of his countryman, Dickens.)
The word gruel is almost poetic. Merely saying it evokes all sorts of synonyms and affiliated images that recur throughout the story. Consider what this single word brings to mind:
Gruel = greed = grime = grease = grit = rue = regret = groan = grovel = grind = grunt = grouse = gripe = gout = grate = grasp = grim = grimace = grotesque = ghastly = ghost = grave gravity = goul = cruel = mewl = hell.
All that in one word!
In a word, Dickens sums up for us the whole netherworld of the pre-repentant Scrooge, the bulk of the tale, the dark side of his story without which the salvation and light of the ending would be unconvincing and unconveting sentimental saccharine.
Gruel is a brilliant choice of symbols, a singular key unlocking the story's meanings. The key makes its appearance almost immediately after Scrooge enters his room. "Quite satisfied, he closed his door, and locked himself in; double-locked himself in...."

Something is about to enter that double-locked door. Marley is on his way, and the three spirits will follow him.

Scrooge's bowl of gruel is not the cause of his visions. Marley quickly disabuses Scrooge of mistaking the visitations for indigestion from the gruel. But, in a way, it is their cause. Not as substance, but as symbol.

Symbolizing as it does the extremity of greed, Scrooge's bowl of gruel stands for all the selfishness and sickness which have made the visitations--and the rescue of the soul for which they are intended--necessary.

Scrooge had shaped a life for himself as completely apart from people as humanly possible. He had literally and figuratively locked himself off from any contact with the world, except whatever was necessary to profit from it. But even locked away, lavishing himself only with loneliness, the world could not be excluded. Gruel, the fare of the poor, was his link to the outside and hence to his undoing.

Dickens has out-Dickensed himself.

Don't take my word for it. Fix yourself a bowl of oatmeal or grits for Christmas breakfast. See for yourself whether Dickens has put a new taste in your mouth.

Give boxes and bags of the stuff for presents this Christmas, and have a grueling New Year!
Clothed for Christmas
(1993)

Time to dust off the Dickens.
Each December we re-read Charles Dickens's A Christmas Carol, never failing to find some hitherto hidden dimension to it. Last year, the importance to the story's plot of gruel being eaten by Scrooge early on was explored.

Readers of Stephen Crane (The Red Badge of Courage being the best known of his several works) often note Crane's use of colors in his narratives. His stories are alive with reds, greens, yellows, blues, and browns.

Dickens's A Christmas Carol isn't much on colors--despite the tendency of film and television versions of it mostly to be in color. The dominant colors in A Christmas Carol as written were somber blacks, grays, and whites--and an occasional green.

But although he eschews color, what catches our eye in this year's revisiting is the attention Dickens gives to cloth. Dickens uses textiles (befitting the chief industry of the England of his day) for texture.

Early on, we meet Bob Cratchit (although not by name, for Scrooge is too callous to call anyone by name, or even to say the word "Christmas"). Bob (the English word for "shilling"), too poor to afford an overcoat, wraps himself in a white comforter at work and for his walk home.

Scrooge goes to his own home wrapped in a "great-coat", about the only luxury he allows himself and a purely practical one at that. Once in his cold home, he exchanges it for a dressing gown, a cheap way to keep warm and to save on coal.

Marley's ghost appears, dressed in death as he was in life, swallowtail coat with back buttons Scrooge can see through him. A handkerchief tied around Marley's head keeps his jaw from failing open.

The Ghost of Christmas Past wears "a tunic of the purest white" held together by "a lustrous belt". The tunic is trimmed with summer flowers, which contrast with a sprig of seasonal green holly the spirit holds. Taken back by this ghost to his boyhood, the friends Scrooge recognizes with the most excitement are fictional characters from the books that he read when he was a lonely lad--The Arabian Nights, a novel of two separated brothers, and Robinson Crusoe. Ali Baba is seen wearing "foreign garments: wonderfully real and distinct to look at".

Later, when the young Scrooge and his young lady, Belle, part company forever, she is wearing "a mourning-dress". She weeps that Scrooge has chosen gold over her as his idol. The same lost love reappears as an adult, surrounded by happy children swinging from their father's tie when he arrives bearing an armload of Christmas gifts.

Scrooge's bed is surrounded by draperies, and anticipating the second visitor and not wanting to be surprised, he carefully moves them all open. His ploy fails, for eventually he has to rise and go to the next room to find the Ghost of Christmas Present, a giant "clothed in one simple deep green robe, or mantle, bordered with white fur", hung loosely and held on by an ancient scabbard belt, the scabbard empty and rusted. When Scrooge is ordered to touch the robe, he is transported, rapidly shown glimpses of life in England in the last hour of preparations.
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for the coming Christmas Day, and all the people "flocking through the streets in their best
clothes, and with their gayest faces" to church and chapel.

Then, Scrooge still clutching the robe, they go to Bob Cratchit's. Mrs. Cratchit in her best
dress, "a twice-turned gown, but brave in ribbons" is helped by a daughter, also "brave in
ribbons", in laying the tablecloth. Martha, the daughter, works in a milliner's shop. A son, Peter,
turns the potatoes, proudly wearing his father's huge white dress collar, his Christmas gift and
rite of passage. Another son and daughter join them, and then Bob and Tiny Tim arrive. Bob
Cratchit is wearing "at least three feet of comforter exclusive of the fringe, hanging down before
him; and his thread-bare clothes darned and brushed".

Scrooge and the spirit leave, once more observing happy people in the streets, including
a group of handsome girls, all hooded and fur-booted", a running lamplighter "dressed to spend
the evening somewhere", and even a miner's family "all decked gaily in their holiday attire".
Suddenly they are at Scrooge's nephew's Christmas party. Wearing a blindfold, a guest, Topper,
succeeds in finding the plump sister-in-law (wearing a "white tucker") wherever she runs, simply
by eagerly following the sound of her rustling silk skirts. Scrooge, by contrast, has been dragged
unwillingly into chasing Christmas.

As the second spirit prepares to leave, his robe opens, revealing two hideous children,
mankind's misshapen offspring, Ignorance and Want.

The Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come, arrives at midnight. This one is "draped and
hooded ... shrouded in a deep dark garment" covering everything but one outstretched hand, all
that separates its blackness from the dark shades of the future. On their way to the foulest part of
town they overhear snatches of businessmen's talk about a death. Then they arrive at a dirty little
shop where rags are bought and sold, operated by an old man shielding himself from the wind
with tatters hung on a line. Two women and another man carrying heavy bundles enter--a
charwoman, a laundress, and an undertaker. Among the things they sell are the dead man's
sheets, shirt, boots, blankets, and bed-curtains. They are paid with coins from a flannel bag. The
scene switches to a room with a dead man laid out, draped in a single thin sheet. Then on to the
Cratchits, where all is silence, except for quiet sounds of sewing from the mother and daughters
around the fireplace. Then on to the cemetery, where Scrooge, finding his own tombstone, falls
to his knees in promises and remorse.

The spirit's black robes "shrunk, collapsed, and dwindled down into a bedpost", and
Scrooge finds himself back in bed on Christmas morning. The bed-curtains are still there and he
hugs them, and then "his hands were busy with his garments ... turning them inside out, putting
them on upside down, tearing them, mislaying them, making them parties to every kind of
extravagance." He gets to a window where he shouts down to "a boy in Sunday clothes" whom
he sends for a turkey for the Cratchits. Then he dresses himself "all in his best" and sallies forth
to greet strangers, make a donation to the needy, and to celebrate at his nephew's.

Next day, Cratchit is late to work, and takes off his hat and comforter as he sneaks in,
where he is surprised by the transformed Scrooge--who raises his pay and invites himself to
dinner.

Thus, fabric helps to fabricate this wonderful and ever-evolving story. Christmas gives
us the Dickens again--fully clothed.
Picking Dickens
(1994)

In Christmases Past, we have noted Dickens's interest in fabrics, a focus on gruel, use of Christmas spirits (ghosts), and the absence of colors. In almost every year's re-reading, our attention has been drawn to Scrooge's reformation, the symbol of Christmas hope for us all.

One year we noted that Scrooge never calls Bob Cratchit by name until the very end of the story, when he gives him a promotion and a raise the day after Christmas.

John Irving, the novelist, picks this tale as one of his personal favorite short stories. He calls our attention to the fact that at no time in the story do Scrooge and Tiny Tim ever actually meet.

In a way, that is the essence of this story--the separation of crusty greed from generous innocence. It is a very wide chasm indeed that Dickens must bridge.

The heart of the story--located exactly mid-point, in fact--is Scrooge's return with the first spirit (the ghost of Christmas Past) to his own sad youth. The lonely boy, shoved off into a distant school, forsaken by his parents at Christmas, is scarred for life. All that Ebenezer becomes--mean, miserly, greedy, conniving, self-consumed--can be traced to a youth scarred by neglect. He is cut off early from family, friends, and affection.

Sartre once wrote that hell is being condemned to be forever alone. Redemption for Scrooge would be a chance to join the human race. Alienation usually has causes. Remove its causes and alienation will leave, too.

Throughout the story Scrooge is shown crippled peoples--starving, despairing, homeless, diseased, suffering people. Yet, none of them seem to move him much closer to his rebirth. Among the sufferers, only Tiny Tim touches him--but without literally touching him.

What moves Scrooge about Tiny Tim is the shock of recognition. He sees himself in him. The Scrooge we see as a boy is ever bit as crippled as Tiny Tim. Perhaps even more so, for Tiny Tim has a loving family as his crutch while the young Scrooge had only one loving sister (the memory of whom rekindles faith within Scrooge as much as do all three ghosts and Marley's ghost combined).

If Tiny Tim, so frail and so ill fated, can live, then surely so can a hopeless reprobate like Scrooge. If Tiny Tim can be saved, innocence can be regained.

Tiny Tim, tiny Tiny Tim, leaning on his little tree limb crutch, is the mighty oak tree from which the miserable mistletoe that is Scrooge can draw life.

But not taken selfishly, as a vampire takes life from others. Not as a parasite feeding upon youth and innocence to replenish emptiness while giving nothing in return.

To be saved by innocence, the guilty must become innocent themselves. The taker must give as generously as he takes. The salvation of Scrooge is in the discovery of Grace, in the discovery that there are indeed second chances, in the discovery that a grasping wheezing world of taking that tramples mankind down has in it giving spirits of generosity and hope which freely lift mankind up.

A Christmas Carol is Dickens's rendering of the Parable of the Prodigal Son, with Scrooge playing the part of the prodigal and Tiny Tim cast as the brother.
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What both stories show us is that each of us is two persons, raw potential for being either wayward or wanton or else steadfast and selfless. What we become is of our own choice, like choosing which of Robert Frost's or Robert Burns's two roads to take.

But where Dickens and Jesus differ from Frost and Burns is in finishing the story with the grace of the second chance. The pilgrimage--the odyssey, the trek--is in a circle. We can work our way back--back to innocence, back to home. Before we have to accept being transformed by death, as Marley was, we have the chance to be transformed by life, as Scrooge was.

The real gift of Christmas is the gift of homeward hope, tagging alongside the limping Tiny Tims of the world--and letting them lead us to our better selves.
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A Fine Holiday Howdy-Do  
(1995)

Every December we find something in Charles Dickens's A Christmas Carol we had missed in two dozen or more previous scannings. In years past, we've explored its emphasis upon childlike goodness, its ghosts, the relationship of gruel to greed, an absence of colors, a fixation upon fabrics, its message of social conscience and individual consequences, and Scrooge's refusal to identify Bob Cratchit by name until the very end of the story.

A newfound theme for this year has to do with Dickens's use of toasts and greetings.

The name Ebenezer Scrooge, of course, is almost synonymous with his favorite response to the world around him: "Bah! humbug!"

He first utters it--twice, in fact--as the story opens on Christmas Eve in the drafty cold office that still bore Marley's name. Scrooge's nephew arrives, greeting Ebenezer with "A Merry Christmas, Uncle! God save you!"

Scrooge lectures him and then declares, "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 budded with a stake of holly through his heart." Stubborn in his own way, the chastised nephew still invites Scrooge to Christmas dinner and then leaves, again wishing him a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.

This contrast of greetings and toasts tendered, only to be rebuffed by the stubborn Scrooge, repeats itself throughout the story. A young caroler sings to Scrooge through the keyhole: "God bless you, merry gentleman! May nothing you dismay!" and is chased away by a ruler-wielding Scrooge.

That night, when Marley's ghost appears, it brings no greeting at all. Yet, the episode brims with "Humbug" responses from Scrooge. Thus, Marley's appearance is itself a greeting, a message of Christmas's meaning. It foretells the rest of the story.

When Scrooge is awakened by the first ghost, Christmas Past, no greetings pass between them. But Scrooge is transported to the market-town of his youth and sees familiar faces. "Why was he filled with gladness," he wonders, "when he heard them give each other Merry Christmas?" Off at school, alone with nothing but some books, his sister arrives unexpectedly, to fetch him home for Christmas. Then he is whisks to the dancing at Fezziwig's warehouse, which ends with the Fezziwigs at the door wishing each departing dancer a Merry Christmas. In the next scene Scrooge parts from his betrothed, and her extended good wishes ring ominously: "May you be happy in the life you have chosen!"

The Ghost of Christmas Present whisks Scrooge off through the market where people from all stations greet each other kindly and on to Cratchit's house, where the family warmly welcomes the working daughter home and awaits the coming of Cratchit and Tiny Tim. Cratchit makes a mulled drink, and after dinner offers the toast: "A Merry Christmas to us all, my dears. God bless us!" Tiny Tim, in words as immortal as Scrooge's "Bah! Humbug!", echoes his father: "God bless us every one!"

Then Bob Cratchit offers a second toast: "Mr. Scrooge! I'll give you Mr. Scrooge, the Founder of the Feast." His wife protests and then gives in, and the children join them. For five minutes, the spirit of the party dies away. But merriment returns and outside people pour from
their homes to greet relatives come to visit or to hasten to parties everywhere. Even in distant ships and miners huts, greetings and toasts are passed.

And then Scrooge is invisibly at his nephew's, where the nephew insists upon toasting Scrooge, as had Cratchit, over the giggles of his guests.

The third ghost, Christmas Yet To Come, being mute, extends no greeting. The mood is dark as Scrooge hears of a man's death, sees him in his deathbed, sees his belongings being divided by the robbers, and then comes to the sad Cratchit house. Cratchit tells of being greeted and consoled by Scrooge's nephew, but except for that, scene after scene is of naked gloom. Scrooge, in life toasted only by a nephew and a clerk, in death is toasted by no one, and mourned by no one.

But when Scrooge repents and awakens, the story becomes a parade of greetings. Scrooge leaps from his bed and dances from room to room, shouting Christmas and New Year greetings "to everybody". He runs to the window and greets a boy and sends him off for the fattest turkey in the shop. He gets dressed and walks the streets, greeting everyone he meets. He greets the man to whom he had refused a charity gift and made a handsome pledge. He goes to church, pats children, and greets beggars, winding his way to his nephew's house, greets the maid, greets the nephew, greets the guests, and next morning rises early to greet Bob Cratchit when the poor man arrives late for work, gives him a raise and promises to continue the greeting over mulled wine at Cratchit's home that evening.

Throughout the wonderful story, which never sags from retelling it, the lost and lonely Scrooge stands starkly silhouetted against the background world of Christmas greetings and toasts. Then come his repentance, redemption, and reclamation, as the world's worst miser becomes the world's best well-wisher.

And in the end, Dickens closes with a toast: "He knew how to keep Christmas well, if any man alive possessed the knowledge. May that be truly said of us, and all of us, And so, as Tiny Tim observed, God Bless Us, Every One!"

Indeed! Hear, hear!
My memory slips sometimes. I was convinced that near the end of Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*, Scrooge says, "I resolve to honor Christmas in my heart, and keep it all year long." There are several passages close to that line, but I'm disappointed to report I can't find the word *resolve* anywhere in the story.

It's too bad, because I wanted to quote it to help make a transition from Christmas to New Year's.

No matter. If it's not there, it ought to be.

The concluding point of the Scrooge story, whether the word is used explicitly or not, is indeed *resolve*. Scrooge resolves to reform his ways and to join the human race. If Dickens is to be believed, Scrooge succeeded in keeping his resolution. "He became as good a friend, as good a master, and as good a man as the good old City knew, or any other good old city, town, or borough in the good old world."

It is an important postscript for Dickens to make to the Scrooge chronicle. Most of us soon break the resolutions we make each year. Scrooge's transformation would not have meant much if it only lasted a few days. Perhaps he had seen loneliness and death up closer than most of us and had reason to forge a stronger "resolve" than most of us have.

*Resolve* is a peculiar word of several meanings.

It can mean "to solve anew", as in "re-solve". If a math teacher gives us an algebra problem to solve and, having solved it, we are then asked to go to the blackboard and work through it again for the benefit of the whole class, then we "re-solve" the problem.

There's not a whole lot we can do on December 31 to re-solve the problems we faced in the year already over. But there are two other definitions of "resolve" that are very relevant to New Year's.

One is the use of "resolve" as a verb meaning "to bring to cloture, to settle, to conclude". This definition is particularly appropriate as the year ends. There are a lot of loose ends left dangling that need tying together.

One good example is the American agenda for its budget. Somehow the differences between the two deadlocked parties in Congress, or between the president and the congressional majority, need to be "resolved" before government has to shut down. The daily work and needs of the American public are far too pressing and widespread to have to suffer as well from fiscal paralysis.

Our own personal agendas have unresolved items on them, too. There are people left behind whose feelings we have bruised, and we need to kiss and make up. There are assignments we accepted but never somehow got around to doing or completing. There are steps for the future (physical exams, changing diets, making wills, inventoring resources, fixing leaks) that we meant to take this year, but have left unresolved.

Our New Year's resolutions have to begin with wrapping up the old year's good intentions--"resolving".
The second pertinent definition of "resolve" is as a noun which means "will power" or "determination". (Didn't John Paul Jones or some other famous admiral have a battleship named *The Resolve*)

This is the way we most often use "resolve" at New Year's, as a noun synonymous with "resolution". We make long lists of them, and feel momentarily empowered to achieve them. It's as if we are Jesse or Frank James and the governor of Kansas has granted us amnesty. The slate is cleaned and we have a shot at improving our lot. New Year is indeed a time for cleaning up, "resolving" the dangling participles of the old year ending and showing "resolve" for how we will lead fresher and better lives in the year ahead.

It may not be as dramatic and complete a cleansing and conversion for us as it was for Ebenezer, but if we don't set about resolving--and succeeding at least partially at it--it will be every bit as fictional.
For years, we’ve annually re-read Charles Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol*, always finding some new and exciting aspect of it. We’ve explored ghosts and gruel, cloths and colors, and always, the inimitable Ebenezer Scrooge.

In this season’s reading, we ponder its title—*A Christmas Carol*. Why not *A Christmas Story*? or *Christmas Transformation*? or simply *Ebenezer Scrooge*?

Dickens’s book itself has very little caroling in it. There’s hardly any reference at all to churches (where carols are often heard)—except for a bell tower outside Scrooge’s office hidden in the fog on Christmas Eve. There’s a good bit of Christmas party music and dancing at a recalled office party of Scrooge’s youth and also when Scrooge visits his nephew’s house (in spirit)—but no carols.

One reference to carols comes early in the book. After businessmen soliciting Christmas alms for the needy are turned away, but before Scrooge goes home and is visited by the three ghosts (actually four, if one counts Marley), some repairmen build a fire in the main street and “ragged men and boys” surround it. One boy, “the owner of one scant nose, gnawed and numbed by the hungry cold as bones are gnawed by dogs, stooped down at Scrooge’s keyhole to regale him with a Christmas carol: but at the first sound of—‘God bless you merry gentleman, / May nothing you dismay!’ Scrooge seized the ruler with such energy of action, that the singer fled in terror, leaving the keyhole to the fog and more congenial frost.”

Dickens even got the carol words wrong in those two short lines. He wrote *A Christmas Carol* in a rush late in 1843. Earlier he had achieved fame through such works as *The Pickwick Papers* (1836-37).

Chapter 28 of *Pickwick Papers* was called “A Good-Humoured Christmas”. In that Christmas chapter, an embryonic Ebenezer, instead of being a miser, is a gravedigger named Gabriel Grub. When his church cemetery sanctuary is invaded by music from a caroler, Grub hides, leaps out, raps the lad on the head with a lantern five or six times, and sends the singer scurrying away. Grub’s story is told by old Wardle, jovial host at a rollicking Christmas Eve and wedding party. Wardle is the model for old Fezziwig, the jovial employer of a younger Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol*.

In that same *Pickwick Papers* chapter 28, old Wardle leads a holiday party in a five-stanza song that Dickens calls “A Christmas Carol”. Its first three stanzas celebrate the virtues of spring, summer, and fall, but discounts each as the best season of the year. The carol’s fourth and fifth stanzas tout the superiority of winter and of Christmas.

But my song I troll out, for CHRISTMAS stout,
The hearty, the true, and the bold;
A bumper I drain, and with might and main
Give three cheers for this Christmas old!
We’ll usher him in with a merry din
That shall gladden his joyous heart,
And we’ll keep him up, while there’s bite or sup,
And in fellowship good, we’ll part.
In his fine honest pride, he scorns to hide
One jot of his hard-weather scars;
They’re no disgrace, for there’s much the same trace
On the cheeks of our bravest tars.
Then again I sing till the roof doth ring,
And it echoes from wall to wall—
To the stout old wight, fair welcome to-night,
As the King of the Seasons all!

What Dickens did, therefore, was to transpose characters, parties, and something of a plot from his successful *Pickwick Papers* to a shorter book later on. But he didn’t transfer the lyrics of the long song, “A Christmas Carol”, from Pickwick’s Chapter 28 to the Scrooge book. Actually, Dickens saw his entire new book as a carol. Its complete title was *A Christmas Carol In Prose*, but most editions leave off the last two words.

Dickens organized his prose carol not in chapters, but in “staves” (a synonym for stanzas or verses). Like his earlier five-verse carol, his new book had five stanzas. And like the early carol, this book’s first “stanzas” shows the weaknesses of the alluring self-centered life—the folly and decay into which they entice promising young Scrooges—while the closing “staves” celebrate as contrasts the virtues of Christmas transformations and rebirths.

One major difference between the *Pickwick Papers* Chapter 28 Christmas and the Scrooge Christmas story seven years later is that Dickens by then was finding his social reform voice. Having suffered a lonely and oppressed childhood himself, with a father in prison and himself working in a children’s workhouse, he was always mindful of the sad plight of most London people, and of the contrasts between Haves and Have-Nots. The hope of the suffering people lay in pricking the consciences and changing the focus of those who prosper above the suffering and laboring classes.

Dickens gave words to that carol, but the music to go with his words, he felt, was the obligation of the many Scrooges who form mankind’s leadership class—a duty to which Christmas, like Tiny Tim, calls “us all, everyone”.

A Dickens of a Christmas:
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Wrap-Up Stories
(1997)

We pick three authors to help us see a single point.
Dickens is the first.

When the last spirit, the Ghost of Christmas Yet To Come, silently takes Scrooge on the frightening tour of his future (unless he reforms), they eavesdrop on business men meeting on the street. Discussing someone’s death, a fat one with a big chin says, “It’s likely to be a very cheap funeral, for, upon my life, I don’t know of anybody to go to it.” Down the street, two others give the death even shorter shrift. “Old Scratch has got his own at last, hey?” asks one. “So I am told,” replies the other, changing the subject instantly. “Cold, isn’t it?”

Further on, a charwoman, laundress, and undertaker divide the dead man’s linens and curtains. The charwoman asks, “Why wasn’t he natural in his lifetime? If he had been, he’d have had someone to look after him when he was struck with Death, instead of lying gasping out his last there, alone by himself.”

Never saying a word about him or to him, the ghost leads on to other scenes, ending with Scrooge reading his own name on a lonely tombstone. The 19th-century Dickens Christmas Carol prophecy was that Scrooge could die friendless and unmourned. Others of our own times make similar observations.

Hartley Mims, Jr., a North Carolinian narrator transplanted to New York in Allan Gurganis’ novel, Plays Well With Others, has kept address books since he was in grade school, a new one each year. As an adult trying to make it as a writer, his New York address books start thin and grow larger each year, but then they begin to thin out again as friends die of AIDS. He acts as executor for about thirty of them, comforting their parents who fly in from the midwest or south. When the last one is gone, Mims packs up and heads back to North Carolina, where names from his earlier books are also missing. He muses on memories, reflecting how longevity leads each of us inevitably to the sadness of removing names from our files. He honors the dead by remembering them and writing about them.

A fine lady writer, Barbara Holland, came to the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia years ago from Up East and decided to stay. In addition to writing books—including Bingo Night at the Fire Hall—Holland works at a small county newspaper two days a week, where she compiles and writes obituaries and a 10-25-50 “Years Ago” column, the two most-read columns in the paper.

What fictional Hartley Mims and real-life Barbara Holland have in common is that both deal in finding words to say about the dead to the living left behind.

“Saying a good word” for the dead is a thankless task, a noble “undertaking”, and a “dying” (in more ways than one) art form.

The worst fear most people have when they contemplate their inevitable dying is that no one will have anything good to say of them when they are gone.

It certainly got Scrooge’s attention. It changed the way he lived his last days.

When we read the weekly “Back Then” columns and daily obituary columns of our Tennessee hometown paper, or when we wander through the city and county cemeteries even after having left there over forty years back, we find most of my early history “en-graved” there. Teachers, court square merchants, high school athlete heroes, firemen, postmen, policemen, cab drivers, restaurant operators, church pillars, radio announcers, town drunks, eccentrics, and
ancestors--people we knew and people who affected us--are there, on tombstones and in obituaries.

The superiority of small-town newspapers to the large urban dailies (with the exception of the *New York Times*) is in the obituaries. The larger papers have moved to a space-saving, politically-correct formula of name, age, immediate family, last job held, church affiliation, and funeral arrangements. Most smaller newspapers still find ways to keep obituaries personalized.

Out where people are still important, the little local papers satisfy our hunger for details by giving us causes of deaths, lists of pallbearers, quotes from friends, lists of good deeds rendered, awards received, and often even a picture (usually showing the deceased as he or she is most remembered, twenty years or so younger). The personalized warmth of small-town obituaries is a virtue for which community-minded newspapers need to be applauded.

The address books of our minds are filled with crossed-out names. But memory makes the names, and the faces and actions behind the names, live on, crossed out but not erased. Good obituary writing is a public service. It puts in a good word for us when we need it most, even when reason tells us we probably don’t need it a-tall.
Ebenezer Scrooge and His Merry Men
(1998)

Near the opening of Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol*, an urchin singing “God bless you, merry gentlemen” through Scrooge’s keyhole is shooed away.

Scrooge’s whole problem was in having chased merriment out of his life, reducing it to a meaninglessness: no friends, no family, no good food, no festivity—nothing except getting and hoarding money.

We see dark shadows and misery around Scrooge on every page—sober ghosts of Marley and of the Christmases Past, Present, and Yet To Come, peddlers haggling over the dead’s bedclothes and other goods, panoramas of famine and catastrophe, and predictions of Tiny Tim’s death.

Images of darkness, death, and desolation dominate Dickens’s story. Yet, when we return to it each December, it is because it brings us good feelings.

What is it about this horror story that warms the cockles of our hearts?

What we may miss of importance in reading *A Christmas Carol* are the dismissed merrymakers. They pop up over and over again, forming an essential counter-point to the more dramatic and desperate conspicuous figures.

At the very beginning, miserly Scrooge and Marley are contrasted with thoughtful and loving Bob Cratchit, considerate nephew Fred, and generous businessmen soliciting for charity. Outside the office, as closing time on Christmas Eve nears, the people are increasingly happy, their spirits rising even as the temperatures drop. Water main workers huddle happily around a fire, the Lord Mayor sets 50 cooks and butlers to work fixing entertainment, a little tailor stirs up a pudding in his attic garret, and shop keepers frolic with their customers. Bob Cratchit, happy it is Christmas and homeward bound, stops to slide down a slope twenty times with a troop of boys.

Scrooge goes home, gets Marley’s warning visit, and goes to bed. Pages of dust and dankness past before the first spirit appears. Christmas Past brings bright light and sparkling illusions. Scrooge is transported to a country road, the place of his youth, “conscious of a thousand odors floating in the air, each one connected with a thousand thoughts, and hopes, and joys, and cares long, long forgotten”. Boys “in great spirits” jog by on horseback, shouting to each other.

A lonely boy—Scrooge—is cheered by visits from fictional characters, imagined playmates found in books—Ali Baba and Robinson Crusoe.

Then his sister happily takes young Scrooge home for Christmas, and the stern schoolmaster unexpectedly offers them cake and wine in parting. Then comes the marvelous Fezziwig party, with its odd assortment of Fezziwig daughters, suitors, co-workers, tradesmen, and fiddler, dancing and laughing the evening away. Finally, Scrooge is shown his abandoned girl friend, now grown and many times a mother, as her large family revels in the season.

Then comes Christmas Present, “a jolly Giant”, surrounded by piles of steaming food. They see poultry-men and fruit-sellers and chestnut-roasters, all bubbling with happiness, and streets crowded with gay church-goers and dinner-preparers, and then come to the Cratchits’ Christmas dinner, happiest of all places. Back in the streets, homes are lit as guests arriving, and the streets are alive with playing children and joyous adults. Even on isolated lighthouses and
ships at sea, cheerfulness reigns. And at nephew Fred’s, the fun and games rival the gladness at the Cratchits.

Then comes Christmas Yet To Come, silent and menacing. There is nothing cheerful at all in this chapter, although the Cratchits, with dead Tim lying in bed upstairs, try to make merry with decorations and bright candles and small talk of happy moments past and hopes for the future.

Then, in the climax, Scrooge is transformed on Christmas morn into the embodiment of all the merry makers he had ruthlessly shut out of his life. He becomes the merriest gentleman of them all. He whoops and shouts and laughs, and brings delight to a boy he sends for a turkey and to a charitable solicitor he has turned away the day before. He walks the streets wallowing in people and in happiness, and coming to his nephew’s in the afternoon, turns into the hit of the party. Next day, he gives Cratchit a raise and promises to aid his family.

“Some people laughed to see the alteration in him, but he let them laugh…. His own heart laughed, and that was quite enough for him.”

We read *A Christmas Carol* because it defines splendidly the “Merry” in “Merry Christmas”.

John Winthrop, an immigrant penning the Mayflower Compact back in Shakespeare’s times, long before Dickens, wrote what Scrooge learned: “We must delight in each other; make others’ conditions our own, rejoice together, mourn together; labor and suffer together….”
Buried beneath Nat King Cole and Bing Crosby recordings in a discount bin was a little $2.99 C-D disk, “Sir Lionel Barrymore in Charles Dickens A Christmas Carol, Narrated by Orson Welles”.

Despite the poor punctuation in the title, and knowing full well that Lionel Barrymore was neither English nor a knighted “Sir”, we bought the piece. It was a radio transcript from the old Mercury Theater that Orson Welles and others made famous (especially with their panic-producing Halloween presentation of “War of the Worlds”). By the time Mercury Theater presented its dramatized version of *A Christmas Carol*, Barrymore was already a Christmas institution, having read the story on radio alone, without actors to aid him, for several years.

So this Christmas 1999, our own re-reading of our dog-eared copy of Charles Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol* is doubled in pleasure by getting to return to childhood days a half century or more ago to hear Barrymore read it to us again.

What strikes us in this year’s quest for some new dimension to the story is Dickens’s treatment of *Time* itself.

The story opens by fixing a time—the day and the hour. “Once upon a time—of all the good days in the year, on Christmas Eve, old Scrooge sat busy in his counting-house…. The city clocks had only just gone three, but it was quite dark already….” Scrooge has his office door open, so he can keep his eye on Bob Cratchit, whose own eye is on the clock.

Scrooge’s jovial nephew drops in and praises Christmas-time, to which Scrooge is opposed, “as a good time; a kind, forgiving, charitable, pleasant time; the only time I know of, in the long calendar of the year, when men and women seem by one consent to open their shut-up hearts freely, and to think of people below them as if they really were fellow-passengers to the grave, and not another race of creatures bound on other journeys.” Scrooge, as the first half of the story demonstrates, will have nothing to do with that idea of Time.

Closing time comes, and Scrooge shuffles home. He undresses, eats his gruel, and then is visited by Marley’s ghost. What makes Marley most frightening is that he appears at the wrong time. Being dead, his arrival is untimely and unnatural. He has been wandering for a long time—seven years.

From that moment on, Time plays tricks with Scrooge. He goes to bed on Christmas Eve night and is visited by three spirits, each scheduled, according to Marley, on consecutive nights: the first is due at one Christmas morning, the second at one on December 26, and the third after midnight on December 27.

The spirits come as promised. The first obliterates time by taking Scrooge back to his childhood and early manhood days; the second obliterates time by whisking Scrooge instantly around the city and the world to see Christmas in the present time; and the third jumps ahead in time to show Scrooge Tiny Tim’s empty chair and Scrooge’s own grave.

Scrooge awakens from the third visitation, screaming and remorseful, only to discover that Time has been tampered with again.

Time has been telescoped, and like the Christ-child, Scrooge is born on Christmas Day. “I don’t know what day of the month it is,” he says in his delirious joy at having a second
chance. “I don’t know how long I have been among the Spirits. I don’t know anything. I’m quite a baby.”

The bells of the city are pealing as he throws open the window and asks a boy, “What’s today, my fine fellow?”

Scrooge’s joy is complete. “I haven’t missed it. The Spirits have done it all in one night. They can do anything they like.” Instead of three separate nights of visits, all have been made in a single night. Scrooge has gone from reprobate to repenter in a single night.

The story ends where it began, with Scrooge in his office watching Bob Cratchit’s “tank”, but this time watching the office clock in anticipation: “The clock struck nine. No Bob. A quarter past. No Bob. He was a full eighteen minutes and a half behind his time.”

A Christmas Carol is simultaneously timeless and timely every Christmas. It is time for us to read and heed it again.
Possessed with Possessions, Maddened by Money
(2000)

Is Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol* about money? My annual ritualistic reading of it focuses on that. skim the story for references to money.

“What’s Christmas-time to you but a time for paying bills without money; a time for finding yourself a year older, and not an hour richer; a time for balancing your books…?” “And therefore, uncle, though it has never put a scrap of gold or silver in my pocket, I believe that it has done me good….” “There’s another fellow, my clerk, with fifteen shillings a week and a wife and family, talking about a merry Christmas. I’ll retire to Bedlam.” “A few of us are endeavoring to raise a fund to buy the poor some meat and drink, and means of warmth.” “I can’t afford to make idle people merry.” “Even the little tailor, whom he had fined five shillings on the previous Monday for being drunk and bloodthirsty in the streets, stirred up tomorrow’s pudding in his garret….” “You’ll want all day to-morrow, I suppose?…If I was to stop half a crown for it, you’d think yourself ill-used….A poor excuse for picking a man’s pocket every twenty-fifth of December!”

All of that monetary allusion comes at the very beginning of the story, before Scrooge has gone home. It comes in the *counting-house* where Marley & Scrooge made money exchanging money.

Then Marley’s ghost appears, wearing sixty feet of heavy chains. “He moans, “My spirit never walked beyond our counting-house—mark me!—in life my spirit never roved beyond the narrow limits of our money-changing hole…” “But you were always a good man of business, Jacob….” “Business!….Mankind was my business. The common welfare was my business….”

References to money are scarce when the Ghost of Christmas Past takes Scrooge back into his own poor childhood. A fleeting reference to Fezziwig spending three or four pounds for a party to make his employees happy is followed by the turning point in Scrooge’s life, his rejection by Belle, who tells him, “Another idol has displaced me….a golden one…. I have seen your nobler aspirations fall off one by one, until the master passion, Gain, engrosses you.” The young man Scrooge loses bride and happiness to money.

The Ghost of Christmas Present takes Scrooge to the Cratchits, where the pickings are lean but the happiness abundant. Then on to other places they go, a lighthouse, a ship, Scrooge’s nephew’s, sickbeds, foreign lands, almshouse, hospital, jail—all cheerful despite lack of money. As the spirit takes his leave, the twin children of mankind, Ignorance and Want, emerge from beneath his robes.

Then comes the silent Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come. A knot of businessmen discuss Scrooge’s death and wonder what became of all that money he had accumulated. Two wealthy men whose esteem Scrooge had coveted scarcely note his death. Two hags and the undertaker divide goods stolen from Scooge’s house, getting profit from his death than he denied everyone while alive. He sees a family ruined by his refusal to grant credit, sees the Cratchits mourning Tiny Tim, and sees his own grave…and he repents.

Christmas morn finds a transfigured Scrooge, throwing open his window and tossing coins to a boy to fetch a turkey, paying for a cab to deliver the turkey to the Cratchits, raising Bob Cratchit’s salary and pledging to care for Tiny Tim. “He became as good a friend, as good a
master, and as good a man as the good old City knew, or any other good old city, town, or borough in the good old world.”

One could easily mis-conclude that this Christmas story is about money, that the rich are unhappy and lost, and the poor are happy and saved. Scrooge stands in contrast to Cratchit, and one concludes Cratchit is the richer of the two.

But much as money is made of in the saga of Ebenezer Scrooge, *A Christmas Carol* is not about money. It isn’t the money or the lack of it that divides Evil from Good or Unhappiness from Happiness. Substitute for Money heavy drinking, or sexual carousing, or hunting, or television or computer addiction, and the point would be the same.

The villain is Obsession, for which money-making is Dickens’ symbol.

Whenever any object or objective so possesses a person that he or she becomes callused and cold, self-centered and self-consuming, indifferent and insensitive, solitary and soul-killing, dominating and demeaning, that person becomes an unsaved Jacob Marley or a pre-regenerated Ebenezer Scrooge.

We all stand in peril of losing our souls. We are all Marleys. We all need the grace of Christmases past and future to free us of fetters self-forged.

The only possession worth having is to be possession by the spirit of sharing and caring. The rich young ruler could not sell all he had and give it to the poor as commanded. Nor can we easily overcome our obsessions.

Scrooge turns out to be richer than most of us. He was able to change. And more easily than we.
Meet the Cast
(2001)

Each of a dozen years, we’ve re-read Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*, never failing to find something new in it. Someone once asked Rodgers or Hart which came first — words or music? One could ask Dickens the same thing. Did he assemble a cast—many of them real people he knew—and then write a story, or did he have the idea for a story and then find characters to people it?

Dickens’ characters are unforgettable, and this Christmas reading is an introduction to some in *A Christmas Carol*, using Dickens’ own words:

**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. The cold within him froze his old features, nipped his pointed nose, shriveled his cheek, stiffened his gait, made his eyes red, his thin lips blue, and spoke out shrewdly in his grating voice. A frosty rime was on his head, and on his eyebrows, and his wiry chin. “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. Bah, Humbug!”

**MARLEY’S GHOST:** Old Marley was as dead as a door-nail. The chain he drew was long, and wound around him like a tail; and it was made of cash-boxes, keys, padlocks, ledgers, deeds, and heavy purses wrought in steel. “I wear the chain I forged in life. I made it link by link, and yard by yard; I girded it on with my own free will, and of my own free will I wore it.”

**GHOST OF CHRISTMAS PAST:** It was a strange figure; like a child; yet like an old man. Its hair, which hung about its neck and down its back, was white, as if with age; and yet the face had not a wrinkle in it. Its legs and feet, most delicately formed, were like those upper members, bare. It wore a tunic of the purest white; and round its waist was bound a lustrous belt, the sheen of which was beautiful. It held a branch of fresh, green holly in its hand; and, in singular contradiction to that wintry emblem, had its dress trimmed with summer flowers. From the crown of its head there sprang a bright, clear jet of light, by which all was visible. The figure itself fluctuated in its distinctness. And, in the very wonder of this, it would be itself again, distinct and clear as ever.

**GHOST OF CHRISTMAS PRESENT:** Heaped up on the floor, to form a kind of throne, were turkeys, geese, game, poultry, brawn, great joints of meat, sucking-pigs, long wreaths of sausages, mince-pies, plum-puddings, barrels of oysters, red-hot chestnuts, cherry-cheeked apples, juicy oranges, luscious pears, immense twelfth-cakes, and seething bowls of punch. Upon this couch sat a jolly Giant, who bore a glowing torch, in shape not unlike Plenty’s horn. It was clothed in one simple, deep-green robe, or mantle, bordered with white fur. This garment hung so loosely on the figure that its capacious breast was bare. Its feet, observable beneath the ample folds of the garment, were also bare, and on its head it wore no other covering than a holly wreath, set here and therewith shining icicles. Its dark-brown curls were long and free. Girded around its middle was an antique scabbard, but no sword was in it, and the ancient sheath was eaten up with rust. From the robe, it brought forth two children, wretched, abject, frightful, hideous, miserable. “The boy is Ignorance. The girl is Want.”
BOB CRATCHIT: Bob had fifteen “Bob” a week himself; and yet the Ghost of Christmas Present blessed his four-roomed house! Little Bob, the father, with at least three feet of comforter exclusive of the fringe hanging down, and his threadbare clothes darned up and brushed, to look seasonable.…..

TINY TIM: Alas for Tiny Tim, he bore a little crutch, and had his limbs supported by an iron frame! He behaved as good as gold, and better. He gets thoughtful, sitting by himself so much, and thinks the strangest things you ever heard. He hoped people saw him in church, because he was a cripple, and it might be pleasant to them to remember upon Christmas Day who made lame beggars to walk and blind men see.

GHOST OF CHRISTMAS YET TO COME: He beheld a solemn Phantom, draped and hooded, coming, like a mist along the ground, toward him. In the very air through which this Spirit moved it seemed to scatter gloom and mystery. It was shrouded in a deep black garment, which concealed its head, its face, its form, and left nothing of it visible except one outstretched hand. It was tall and stately when it came beside him, and its mysterious presence filled him with a solemn dread. It shrunk, collapsed, and dwindled down into a bedpost.
**The Organ Pedals of Our Minds**  
*(2001)*

“There was nothing very cheerful in the climate or town, and yet there was an air of cheerfulness abroad that the clearest summer air and brightest summer sun might have endeavored to diffuse in vain. The people who were shoveling away were jovial and full of glee, the poulterers’ shops were still half open, and the fruiterers’ were radiant in their glory. The grocers! Oh, the grocers!—the customers were all so hurried and so eager in the hopeful promise of the day, that they tumbled up against each other at the door, and committed hundreds of the like mistakes, in the best humor possible. But soon the steeples called good people all to church and chapel, and way they came, flocking through the streets in their best clothes, and with the gayest faces.”

Scenes of townspeople bustling about in Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol* described Christmas Eve in 1843 England, but it was little different from Christmas Eves we recall in Tennessee a hundred years later.

The old Triangle Café where we first worked, back in 1950, was a short-order drive-in restaurant with six four-chair tables and four counter stools inside. Owned by Crawford Chambers and Curtis Jackson, with two adult cooks rotating shifts, the Triangle staff consisted of high school boys. We worked from 5 to 10:30 weekdays (for $1.50 plus tips and food) and 11:00 to 8:00 or 2:00 to 11:00 Saturdays and Sundays (for $3.00 plus tips and food).

On Christmas Eve, we would lock the front doors, but only after John Arnett and his clerks and butchers from Arnett’s City Grocery downtown arrived at 11:00 p.m., with old Mr. Arnett toting cans of oysters our cooks used to make oyster stew for the party while filling oval platters with fried country ham, sliced turkey and dressing, and fried chicken, all of it finished off with coconut pies or boiled custard.

A large old Wurlitzer juke box (a nickel a play, or six for a quarter) stood by the entrance door, and on it the usual 78 RPM records such as “Harbor Lights” or “On Top of Old Smokey” were temporarily displaced by Big Crosby’s “White Christmas” and other seasonal selections. These were pre-Elvis and pre-Beatles years, when crooning was the standard and when words to songs were understandable. The Arnett staff kept the Wurlitzer records whirling.

After they left just before midnight, we cleaned up quickly afterward and loaded into the one or two vintage Dodge and Plymouth cars our older student waiters—Dickie Sensing, R. T. Miller, or Rex Latimer—owned and went to Crawdad’s little house for our own party.

Crawford Chambers, a real imp of a man who loved revelry and costumes, was our version of Dickens’ beloved Old Fezziwig. “‘Clear away, my lads, and let’s have lots of room here! Hilli-ho, Dick! Chirrup, Ebenezer!’ Clear away! There was nothing they wouldn’t have cleared away, or couldn’t have cleared away, with old Fezziwig looking on.”

Crawford and Laura Lee Chambers had an old upright pump organ in their living room, and petite Mrs. Chambers played as plump cook Lorene Watkins and all the boys sang. My job was to crawl beneath the organ bench and Mrs. Chambers’ legs and pump the organ with my arms and hands. I could work up a sweat on the coldest night of the year.
A Dickens of a Christmas:
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We recall at least a dozen homes with similar pump organs from those days. Occasionally even today, we see one selling for outlandish prices in an antique shop, and we always have to fight the impulse to crawl to its two pedals and start pumping.

And now, so many happy years past, we pump the organ pedals of our memories, and the fading and forgotten faces of so many incredibly great friends and family, blazing again with all “the hopes and fears of future years” that have moved Christmas Yet to Come into being Christmas Past, fill the cleared rooms of our minds anew.

Peace to you and yours and the whole wide world this Christmastide.
A Dickens of a Christmas:  
Being a Decade of Meditations on A Christmas Carol 1989-2006

A Heartwarming Tale  
(2002)

Our 12th annual reading of Charles Dickens’ A Christmas Carol notices contrasts between light and dark and between fire and ice, between a joyous Christmas and a cynical Christmas, and between Scrooge after he is “re-born” and the old Scrooge.

“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. The cold within him froze his old features, nipped his pointed nose, shriveled his cheek, stiffened his gait, made his eyes red, his thin lips blue, and spoke out shrewdly in his grating voice. A frosty rime was on his head, and on his eyebrows, and his wiry chin. He carried his own low temperature always about with him; he iced his office in the dog-days; and didn’t thaw it one degree at Christmas. External heat and cold had little influence on Scrooge. No warmth could warm, no wintry weather chill him. No wind blew was bitterer than he, no falling snow was more intent upon its purpose, no pelting rain less open to entreaty.”

“On Christmas Eve—old Scrooge sat busy in his counting-house. It was cold, bleak, biting weather, foggy withal, and he could hear the people in the court outside go wheezing up and down, beating their hands upon their breasts, and stamping their feet upon the pavement stones to warm them.” “Scrooge had a very small fire, but the clerk’s fire was so very much smaller that it looked like one coal. But he (Bob Cratchit) couldn’t replenish it, for Scrooge kept the coal-box in his own room; and so surely as the clerk came in with the shovel, the master predicted that it would be necessary for them to part. Wherefore the clerk put on his white comforter, and tried to warm himself at the candle.”

Scrooge’s nephew enters, “so heated himself with rapid walking in the fog and frost, this nephew of Scrooge’s, that he was all in a glow; his face was ruddy and handsome; his eyes sparkled, and his breath smoked again.” Hearing him praise Christmas, Cratchit applauds. “Becoming immediately sensible of the impropriety, he poked the fire, and extinguished the last frail spark forever.” The nephew bestows “greetings of the season on the clerk, who, cold as he was, was warmer than Scrooge.”

Businessmen seeking funds “to buy the poor…some means of warmth” are ushered out. “In the main street, at the corner of the court, some laborers were repairing the gas-pipes, and had lighted a great fire in a brazier, round which a party of ragged men and boys were gathered, warming their hands and winking their eyes before the blaze, in rapture…. The brightness of the shops… made pale faces ruddy as they passed.” A lad, “gnawed and humbled by the hungry cold as bones are gnawed by dogs” sang a carol into Scrooge’s door key and was chased away.”

Scrooge goes home. “The fog and frost so hung about the black old gateway of the house, that it seemed as if the Genius of the Weather sat in mournful meditation on the threshold.” “There is a small fire in the grate…a very low fire indeed; nothing on such a bitter night. He was obliged to sit close to it, and brood over it, before he could extract the least sensation of warmth from such a handful of fuel.”

Marley’s ghost appears. “Upon its coming in, the dying flame leaped up…and fell again.” Having roamed the universe as a condemned spirit for seven years, Marley laments: “Why did I walk through crowds of fellow-beings with my eyes turned down, and never raise them to that blessed Star which led the Wise Men to a poor abode?”
A Dickens of a Christmas:
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Scrooge goes to bed, and the first spirit appears, and “from the crown of its head there sprung a bright, clear jet of light.” The spirit takes Scrooge with it, and “it would have been in vain for Scrooge to plead that the weather and the hour were not adapted to pedestrian purposes; that his bed was warm, and the thermometer a long way below freezing; that he was clad but lightly in his slippers, dressing-gown, and nightcap; and that he had a cold.” Scrooge sees himself as a lonely student reading “near a feeble fire.” “Not a clicking in the fire, but fell upon the heart of Scrooge with softening influence, and gave a freer passage to his tears.” In Fezziwig’s shop where he apprenticed, “the lamps were trimmed, fuel was heaped upon the fire; and the warehouse was as snug, and warm, and dry, and bright a ballroom as you would desire to see upon a winter’s night.”

Awaiting the second spirit, Scrooge sees light streaming from the next room: “The crisp leaves of holly, mistletoe, and ivy reflected back the light, as if so many little mirrors had been scattered there, and such a blaze went roaring up the chimney, as that dull petrification of a hearth had never known in Scrooge’s time, or Marley’s, or for many a winter gone.” A giant figure sat, “glorious to see who bore a glowing torch, in shape not unlike Plenty’s horn, and held it up, high up, to shed its light on Scrooge.” Leaving the room filled with every food imaginable, they went into the street where “the sky was gloomy, and the shortest streets were choked up with a dingy mist, half thawed, half frozen, whose heavier particles descended in a shower of sooty atoms, as if all the chimneys in Great Britain had…caught fire, and were blazing away to their dear hearts’ content…and yet there was an air of cheerfulness abroad that the clearest summer air an brightest summer sun might have endeavored to diffuse in vain. For the people who were shoveling away on the housetops were jovial and full of glee….” They stop at the Cratchit house, in which the fireplace is central and around which gathers the whole family, including Tiny Tim with his little crutch. The fire’s warmth and forgiveness, and especially Tiny Tim, thaw the cold Scrooge. Then sweeping across the globe, Scrooge sees Christmas cheer in the coldest places—a mining shack, a lighthouse, a ship at sea—before returning home to watch games and fires at Scrooge’s nephew’s home.

There is no light or heat at all with the third spirit, covered in black robes, prowling cold streets, a funeral parlor, a used-clothing dealer’s dark room, and finally the cemetery. The contrasts of the cold Christmas Yet To Be with the warmth of Christmases Past and Present are too much for Scrooge to bear. He begs, and awakens clutching his bed curtains. Between Life and Death, between Light and Dark, between Warm and Cold, he makes the right choice, and is born anew. Flinging open his window, outside “no fog, no mist; clear, bright, jovial, stirring, cold: cold piping for the blood to dance to; golden sunlight; heavenly sky; sweet fresh air; merry bells. Oh, glorious! Glorious!”

And then, comes the end of the story. On the morning after Christmas, Crachit arrives late, finding the transformed Scrooge, who orders him: “Bob! Make up the fires, and buy another coal-scuttle before you dot another i, Bob Cratchit!”
Christmas Revivals
(2003)

Each December for the past dozen years, we have re-read Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol* and extracted from it some aspect unnoticed in previous readings: e.g., Dickens’ use of light, fabrics, colors, food, ghost stories, etc. Here are notes from our reading this year. This year we look at the role of religion in *A Christmas Carol*.

The most striking thing in scanning the Christmas classic for religion’s role in it is how seldom religion is mentioned. This is, after all, a Christmas story, and one would think it would be filled with religious references. There are, early on in the story, references to St. Paul’s Churchyard and “the ancient tower of a church, whose gruff old bell was always peeping slyly down at Scrooge out of a Gothic window in the wall” of his office. Two citizens call asking for funds for the poor, in the name of “Christian cheer of mind or body.” Scrooge’s home fireplace, built by a Dutch merchant many years before, was paved with Dutch tiles with scriptural illustrations: Cain and Abel, Pharaoh’s daughters, Queen of Sheba, angels, Abraham, Belshazzar, and Apostles.

Marley’s ghost makes the most explicit Christian references of all: “Oh! Captive, bound and double-ironed…. Not to know that any Christian spirit working kindly in its little sphere, whatever it may be, will find its mortal life too short for its vast means of usefulness!… Why did I walk through crowds of fellow-beings with my eyes turned down, and never raise them to that blessed Star which led the Wise Men to a poor abode?”

Scrooge’s nephew, making his annual visit to the old sourpuss, reflects, “I have always thought of Christmas-time, when it has come round-apart from the veneration due to its sacred name and origin, if anything belonging to it can be apart from that-as a good time; a kind, forgiving, charitable, pleasant time….. God bless it!”

In the Christmas Present scene with the Cratchit family, Bob Cratchit enters with Tiny Tim on his shoulder. Bob reports, “He told me, coming home, that he hoped the people saw him in the church, because he was a cripple, and it might be pleasant to them to remember, upon Christmas Day, who made lame beggars walk and blind men see.”

Scant though explicit religious references may be in *A Christmas Carol*, the implicit messages throughout the whole saga are very religious.

The essential Christmas story to which Scrooge is introduced by the three spirits of Christmases Past, Present, and Yet to Be is actually the Easter story: the story of Resurrection…or, what one spirit calls Scrooge’s “reclamation.” Time and time again Scrooge has to confront death--Marley’s, his sister’s, Tiny Tim’s, and his own. The dead, but virtuous, people of his past--Fezziwig, his sister, and others--are all brought to life again by the ghosts who stir the nearly-cold embers of Scrooge’s memory. In the end, Tiny Tim misses a youthful grave. Scrooge himself speaks several times, as the story reaches its climax, of being “born again”.

There are plentiful allusions and descriptions of the after-life (or its cold, lonely absence) in this story: Marley is sentenced to wander the universe forever, wearing chains his greed forged for him in life; Scrooge confronts his own cold body and his own unkempt grave.

Dickens’ idea of Hell is clear: to be shut off from loving and being loved by others, to be abjectly lonely, to have nothing of consequence (wealth being meaningless if hoarded) to show for a lifetime. His idea of Heaven is this-worldly: the warming comfort of service to others, the
pleasures of family and good company, the joys of giving and of games and of gracefulness and
gratitude, the simple delight of being greeted in the streets, the utter rapture of having a home to
go to for the holidays, the uplifting award accorded by merited respect others show a person, and
being remembered fondly once one is dead.

Dickens’ religion is a popular Protestantism, a salvation earned by good works, and those
good works are prompted by a purified heart, and good works and good hearts are created by
rays from a long-ago and far-away “blessed Star which led the Wise Men to a poor abode.”

Dickens, and Scrooge, find God--not in churches, but in cemeteries, alleys, garrets, and
gulches of everyday life, and they find God on no ordinary day, but on Christmas Day. The
Extraordinary comes in the midst of the Ordinary, the Sacred comes gift-wrapped in the Secular,
the World Beyond Comes into Our World.

Born again-on Christmas.

A Christmas Carol is a religious story indeed--and in deeds.
A Dickens of a Christmas:
Being a Decade of Meditations on A Christmas Carol 1989-2006

“And He Set a Child in Their Midst”
(2004)

Now comes Christmas, and with it our re-reading of—and commentary upon—Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*—our 16th annual revisiting of the classic. In past years, we have noted Dickens’ use of light, fabrics, colors, food, ghost stories, religion, etc. This year we focus on the children in the story.

The first child, a little street urchin, sings a carol through Scrooge’s office keyhole. Scrooge chases him away. Shortly after, Bob Cratchit, on his way home for Christmas, slides down a icy hill twenty times between a lane of boys, to celebrate the holiday.

Children figure prominently in the visit of the first Spirit, the Ghost of Christmas Past. The figure itself alternates between seeming to be a child and an old man. It takes Scrooge to several childhood scenes—boys trotting astride ponies on a country road, a deserted school room in which the young Ebenezer is the only pupil remaining and then the fetching of him home for Christmas by his sister, a party in Fezziwig’s warehouse where he and Dick Wilkins were apprenticed, the breaking up of his love affair with a girl he had courted since he was a boy, and that same lost love seen married and now a mother with a lovely daughter and a house full of children.

Children appear in Scrooge’s travels with the second Spirit, the Ghost of Christmas Present, who describes the Cratchit brood—Martha, Peter, Brenda, an unnamed boy and girl, and then Tiny Tim himself. The Spirit, looking ahead, sees an empty seat by the fire where Tiny Tim sits. After that, passing through the city, brightly lit homes brimming with happy children appear. In one little hut, four generations gather, children of children of children of children. At his nephew’s home, Scrooge invisibly plays children’s games with the party there. And, as the Spirit departs, he opens his large robe, to show two grotesque children clinging to his legs—mankind’s worst offspring, the boy Ignorance and the girl Want.

The speechless third Spirit, the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come, leads to scenes in which some wealthy citizen’s recent death is celebrated by assorted characters—pawnbrokers, charwomen, businessmen, a couple about to lose their possessions to the dead man’s foreclosure. Then comes the Cratchit home again, where Tiny Tim lies newly dead in a bedroom and Bob Cratchit describes the green cemetery where he will be buried, a contrast to the cemetery lot at which the third visit ends—Scrooge’s own untended and lonely grave.

By then, Scrooge has been converted and saved, and he awakes on Christmas morning feeling like a child himself, makes amends with his nephew, sends a huge turkey anonymously to the Cratchits, and the day afterward gives Cratchit a healthy raise and adopts Tiny Tim as his special object of redemption.

Hidden in this timeless story of Ebenezer Scrooge and the restoration of his childhood innocence is some autobiography from Dickens himself. When Dickens was 12, his father was sentenced to debtor’s prison. Prisoners could not work to erase their debts, and often a prisoner’s family, lacking possessions or support, would move into the prison with the debtor. Dickens lived in Marshalsea Prison in London for several months. Removed from school, he was sent to Warren’s Blacking factory, where he glued labels on bottles of black goo. (Dickens’ experience resonates with me, because an honors student of mine at Wofford College told me that, when he was young, he and his family had lived several months just across the street, in a shelter for the homeless.)
The plight of the innocent young became a central theme in Dickens’ books, and not just his Christmas stories. Like Scrooge, many young people never knew youth; circumstances forced them to be little adults long before their times. When he wrote *A Christmas Carol* in 1843, he was already famous for *Oliver Twist*, *Nicholas Nickleby*, *Boz*, and the *Pickwick Papers*. He was serializing *Martin Chuzzlewit*, but his readers were not responding well to it.

He needed money, and he was inspired by a newspaper appeal for help for the Ragged Schools (wretched schools for paupers and supplements to child labor) to think about writing an essay on poor children. After making a speech advocating education as a means to fight poverty, he decided to make his case through fiction, and from that came *A Christmas Carol*, the first of his seasonal Christmas books, which were followed in later years by annual Christmas stories. Placed on sale December 19, 1843, *A Christmas Carol* immediately sold out its 6,000 initial volumes, and by March 1844 it was in its sixth printing.

And so, children foremost in Dickens’ mind, we have this treasure, *A Christmas Carol*, a compelling ghost story about the need for salvation and the means to get it, laced with tear-jerking one-liners about children: “It is good to be children sometimes, and never better than at Christmas, when its mighty Founder was a child himself.” “He (Tiny Tim) told me, coming home, that he hoped the people saw him in the church, because he was a cripple, and it might be pleasant for them to remember, upon Christmas Day, who made lame beggars walk and blind men see.”
I Want A Doll to Call My Own
(2004)

In the tradition of O. Henry’s “Gift of the Magi” tearjerker about the wife who sold her hair to buy her husband a watch fob only to find he had sold the watch to buy her hair combs, we offer this true story from the Christmas just past.

A colleague, a mathematics professor, has an insatiable appetite for all Old West things. (So did President Teddy Roosevelt, so we shall call our friend “Teddy”, to protect his identity.)

Teddy knows the name of every actor, leading or bit player or villain, in every B-grade western movie or television series ever made, and periodically he takes students west for a January of study. His fascination with the West dates back to when he got a Roy Rogers Rodeo set (houses, stables, fences, cows, horses, cowboys, etc.) for Christmas when he was six and got a larger Lone Ranger Ranch set when he was eight (in 1957). An only son of a Baptist minister, Teddy lived his fantasy life on his ranch. As toys of youth are prone to do when played with frequently, the pieces disappeared as he aged. Now, over fifty, he misses his ranch.

A few months ago, Teddy discovered eBay. Finding that he could bid on pieces of his old ranches up for eBay auction, he started bidding. We’ll save him the embarrassment of telling exactly how many hundreds of dollars he has spent this year rebuilding his 42-and 44-year-old ranch collections, but it’s a lot.

Teddy is dating seriously a lovely lady, and among her virtues is practicality. As Teddy shows her his expanding ranch acquisitions, stored in two dresser drawers, she occasionally arches an eyebrow at his obsession, which she finds a bit strange for a man with a daughter in college and a flair for applied mathematics.

In response, he asked her if there was not a childhood Christmas that she especially relished. She answered that the Christmas she remembers most was a sad one, in 1968, when she was seven. That year, the queen in the realm of Christmas dolls was a two-foot battery-operated pirouetting hard-plastic ballerina with blonde hair, painted blue eyes, white tutu, pink leotards, and bronze plastic tiara called the Mattel Dancerina Ballerina.

She let her mother know that she wanted Dancerina Ballerina for Christmas. Alas, the mother was working in a textile mill and simultaneously attending college, and money was tight. Christmas morn came, but the doll did not. Unfortunately, it did come to the girl’s best friend who lived just across the street. It was a sad day in Milltown that year. (I know how she felt. Every Christmas from about 1944 on until she died recently, I reminded my mother that I have not gotten the Lionel electric train I expected...something she always explained as “due to wartime shortages of metal”.)

Moved by this heart-wrenching tale, Teddy put his eBay skills to new uses, searching for a Mattel Dancerina Ballerina. He found one and bid $75, only to have someone buy it for $125, and he found some others priced above $200 for which he didn’t bid. Finding there were several models, he had to show his lady the eBay pictures, and her eyes lit up on the third picture, a blonde, and she exclaimed, “That’s the ONE!” The quest went on.

Then, one day, he found one—right description, right color hair—described as used and worn and inoperable. He bid $10, and—lo, and behold!—bought it for that. The shipping charges cost more than the doll did. A lady in Washington State sold him the doll, and they fell into e-
mail dialogues. He told the seller his lady’s sad Christmas story. She wrote back that he was a sweet man to try to find her doll.

Late in October, he told his lady that he had bought the doll. She scoffed at the news, but when they arrived home from a football game, there on his doorstep was a large shipping box (previously holding a dozen reams of paper). She laughed at him, wondering how many ranch sets he could have ordered requiring such a large container.

Opening it, they found, lying faces down, two dolls—one a brunette version of her doll in street clothing, sent free in response to his e-mail story, but the other an actual—somewhat jaded and faded—blonde 1968 Mattel Dancerina Ballerina. They could hardly wait to get her out of her box and plastic wrapping.

Teddy reached deep into the box and grabbed the ballerina by her shapely waist and lifted her.

At which point, her head broke off. Teddy’s lady friend told me, “I waited all those years for that doll…and he broke her neck.”

Teddy had not noticed that the doll was taped to the bottom of the box to prevent sliding around in shipping.

Following a faculty Christmas luncheon, I saw the doll—wilted tutu and faded leotards and all. Stored in the back of an SUV, it is still in its northwestern shipping box, still taped down. But the plastic head—golden hair and blue eyes and all—is rolling around as loose as the severed head of Mary Queen of Scots.

Teddy still searches eBay, but now it is for doll hospitals. Otherwise, he’d better be packing to ride off into the western sunset, alone, with nothing to kiss but his horse.
Scrooge as Comedian?
(2005)

Sure enough, as expected, we again found a neglected dimension for our annual reading of Charles Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol*. Over the past 15 years we found topics such as gruel, fabrics, colors, light and darkness, fire, ghosts, greetings and toasts, money, religion, and children and child-likeness. This year, our focus is the question of whether or not Scrooge had a sense of humor.

Certainly the opening description of Ebenezer would indicate he did not: “Oh! But he was a tight-fisted hand at the grindstone, Scrooge! A squeezing, wrenching, grasping, clutching, covetous old sinner! Hard as flint, from which no steel had ever struck out generous fire; secret, and self-contained, and solitary as an oyster. The cold within him froze his old features, nipped his pointed nose, shriveled his cheek, stiffened his gait; made his eyes red, his thin lips blue; and spoke out shrewdly in his grating voice. A frosty rime was on his head, and on his eyebrows, and his wiry chin. He carried his own low temperature always about with him; he iced his office in the dog-days; and didn’t thaw it one degree at Christmas.” In short, Scrooge is a man who was all-business, empty of humor, compassion, and other estimable virtues and emotions. “It was the very thing he liked. To edge his way along the crowded paths of life, warning all human sympathy to keep its distance….”

And yet. And yet….there was humor—albeit sarcasm, irony, a relish of imagery and words-- in his miserable existence.

When his nephew appears ladling out Christmas cheer, Scrooge delights in his own response; “Bah! Humbug!” would be much funnier to Scrooge than a mere, “Ridiculous,” or “You are wrong.” In the office chill, Scrooge must have warmed himself with his clever phrasing: “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.” After his nephew’s stirring defense of celebrating, Scrooge fires a cynical retort, sure of his Wittiness: “You’re quite a powerful speaker, sir. I wonder you don’t go into Parliament.”

The nephew leaves, but pauses to wish Bob Cratchit a good holiday. Scrooge mutters, “There’s another fellow, my clerk, with fifteen shillings a-week, and a wife and family, talking about a merry Christmas. “I’ll retire to Bedlam.”

Fired up by his own humor—invisible though it was to anyone else—Scrooge receives the two businessmen seeking donations for the poor. Scrooge rises to the occasion with sarcasm: “Are there no prisons? …. And the Union workhouses? Are they still in operation? …. The Treadmill and the Poor Law are in full vigour, then?”…. I help to support the establishments I have mentioned: they cost enough: and those who are badly off must go there…. If they would rather die, they had better do it, and decrease the surplus population.”

Scrooge has a flippant answer to everything; to him flippancy is humor. When Cratchit says that the paid holiday is only one day a year, Scrooge retorts, “A poor excuse for picking a man’s pocket every twenty-fifth of December!”

His humor comes out more clearly, however, when he is at last at home, now the private man rather than the public miser. Marley makes his ghastly appearance, but Scrooge discounts his old partner with humor. (Perhaps they had found pleasure in each other’s company and in laughing and sneering at mankind when Marley was alive.) . “Scrooge was not much in the habit
of cracking jokes, “Dickens tells us, but Scrooge is at his funniest when he thinks Marley is only a figment of his own imagination. Scrooge thinks Marley might be “an 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!” he puns. “You see this toothpick? …. Well! I have but to swallow this, and be for the rest of my days persecuted by a legion of goblins, all of my own creation. Humbug, I tell you—humbug!” When Marley cries out, Scrooge quickly loses his humor, managing only a feeble parry to Marley’s announcement of the three Spirits: “Couldn’t I take ’em all at once, and have it over, Jacob?”

When Scrooge asks the Ghost of Christmas Past what brings him there, the spirit answers, “Your welfare.” Scrooge thinks “a night of unbroken rest would have been more conducive to that.” That trek is one filled with laughter and tears as one encounter after another with his former self occurs.

The Ghost of Christmas Past appears in a room filled with food, and whisks Scrooge to a town teeming with food. Scrooge tries a bit of irony, accusing the spirit of wanting “to cramp these people’s opportunities of innocent enjoyment” by depriving them of their means of dining well on their only free day, Sunday (when shops and eating places are closed for religious reasons). More visits follow, many of them happy ones, but several of them sad. The mood grows somber. With the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come, what little humor Scrooge displayed earlier disappears altogether.

When Scrooge awakens on Christmas morn, the most obvious evidence of his redemption is his suddenly-blossomed sense of humor. “I am as light as a feather, I am as happy as an angel, I am as merry as a school-boy. I am as giddy as a drunken man. …Ha ha ha!” Dickens says, “really for a man who had been out of practice for so many years, it was a splendid laugh, a most illustrious laugh. The father of a long, long line of brilliant laughs!”

Next day, when Cratchit is late, Scrooge indulges in one more sally, letting poor Bob think he is being sacked, but getting a raise instead. When people laughed at the new Scrooge, “his own heart laughed; and that was quite enough for him.” And in the end, when we finish the reading, we laugh with him, too.
Each year at this time, since 1989, we have re-read Charles Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol*, the classic written in 1843, and never yet failed to find in it some new dimension—humor, use of light and color images, word choices (such as “gruel”)—upon which to reflect.

Reading this year, we were jarred by the oft-neglected appearance mid-book of two grotesque children under the robe of the Spirit of Christmas Present:

- From the foldings of its robe, it brought two children; wretched, abject, frightful, hideous, miserable….
- “Oh, Man! Look here. Look, look, down here!” exclaimed the Ghost.
- They were a boy and a girl. Yellow, meager, 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 shrunken hand, like that of age, had pinched, and twisted them, and pulled them into shreds. Where angels might have sat enthroned, devils lurked, and glared out menacing. No change, no degradation, no perversion of humanity, in any grade, through all the mysteries of wonderful creation, has monsters half so horrible and dread….
- “Spirit! Are they yours?” Scrooge could say no more.
- “They are Man’s,” said the Spirit, looking down upon them. “And they cling to me, appealing from their fathers. This boy is Ignorance. This girl is Want. Beware them both, and all of their degree, but most of all beware this boy, for on his brow I see written which is Doom, unless the writing be erased. Deny it!” cried the Spirit, stretching out its hand towards the city. “Slander those who tell it ye! Admit it for your factious purposes, and make it worse! And bide the end!”
- “Have they no refuge or resource?” cried Scrooge.
- “Are there no prisons?” said the Spirit, turning on him for the last time with his own words. “Are there no workhouses?”

This is the passage most readers of the *Carol* prefer to skip. The ghastly grotesqueness of these two suffering children is almost unbearable, and its reason for being there, like an unexpected pothole in a road, certainly is not clear. (It took us 18 readings to get a meaning.) The misery of the real-life characters in the surrounding story pales in comparison to this imagery.

We have, for years, delighted in what we thought to be Dickens’s intended message. We have thought that the meaning of *A Christmas Carol* lay in the pilgrimage and transformation of Scrooge from “squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous old sinner” at the beginning to “as good a friend, as good a master, and as good a man, as the good old city knew, or any other good old city, town, or borough, in the good old world”.

We had thought, in short, that this story—with Scrooge as its focus—was a way of retelling the biblical parable of the Prodigal Son’s return. Dickens’s point seemed to be that every lost sheep—like the one the shepherd sought while leaving ninety-nine behind—is worth saving, even a wealthy but worthless Scrooge, and that Christmas celebrations can be conversion experiences.

But these two maimed children, Ignorance and Want, who will grow up into Doom, make us aware that Dickens is actually casting a wider net than tracing the salvation of one old
Scrooge miser and one young Tiny Tim cripple. The focus of the *Christmas Carol* is not Scrooge, but all the world’s children.

In a bleak and dismal and divided world, Dickens delighted in children. The hope he saw for rescuing the entire world rested in its children. If they were reared in ignorance and in poverty, they would become callous and capricious adults. “As the twig is bent, so is the tree inclined.”

So Dickens here is waging class warfare. The innocence and unshaped souls of all children clash with the jaded and jaundiced cynicisms and selfishness of Man, and the greed and corroded atmosphere of adults clash with the Christmas idealism of thinking of and giving to others before serving self, and the captains of business clash with the common masses of people. Humanity is blind to its need for salvation of its soul, and the only way to save Mankind from itself is by focusing itself upon its children. Spare the children from Ignorance and from Want, Dickens pleads, and in doing this Mankind will itself be saved.

One way of becoming children-conscious, Dickens seems to be saying, is to return to the reason there was a child in a manger. See through and strip away the rituals, the sermons, the ecclesiastical and capitalistic and hypocritical layers of centuries of rationalizing power and self-centered focusing. Return to the children. Man’s own worst enemy is Man. Beware especially of those who disguise their baser motives in the robes of religion.

In Stave Three, Scrooge goes on the offensive against the Ghost of Christmas Present by accusing the Christianity it represents and celebrates of actually harming the poor. The response from the Ghost (which could easily describe “religious” voices conspicuously heard today in national affairs, executive offices and polling places in recent years) is chilling:

“There are some upon this earth of yours,” returned the Spirit, “who lay claim to know us, and who do their deeds of passion, pride, ill-will, hatred, envy, bigotry, and selfishness in our name; who are as strange to us and all our kith and kin, as if they had never lived. Remember that, and charge their doings on themselves, not us.”

The trappings of modern times are precisely that: trappings. We are trapped by habits, and institutions, and attitudes centuries in the making—chains and coffer boxes like those Marley is doomed to wear in eternity. We must, Dickens warns, divest ourselves of most of what we think defines us. We must save the children from ignorance and from want, and we must become wise and caring children ourselves. Our own rebirth will come when we focus upon children, not upon ourselves.

(For past Dickens columns, go to [www.wofford.edu/southernseen/dickens_2000](http://www.wofford.edu/southernseen/dickens_2000))