

18. A CHRISTMAS CAROL (1843)

by Charles Dickens

Author

Charles Dickens (1812-1870) was born near Portsmouth, but spent part of his youth in London. Because his family was poor, he had to work in a factory as a small child. After some unhappy years at a boarding-school, Dickens became a reporter to a newspaper. The first fiction he published was *Sketches by Boz* (1936-37). He became famous with *The Pickwick Papers*, which was published in cheap monthly instalments. Among his many well-loved novels are *Oliver Twist*, *David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations*.

Title

A carol is a religious song of joy and praise that people sing at Easter or, especially, Christmas. The great age of carol singing was the fifteenth century, but carols like 'Joy to the World' are still sung at Christmas time. This story, like a Christmas carol, expresses the joy of Christmas.

Genre and Theme

A Christmas Carol is a Christmas story. Dickens used to write one every year. It is a modern fairy tale about Christian charity and universal goodwill. Scrooge is a man who is interested only in making and saving money, who has no room in his heart for love or human kindness. The three ghosts bring about a change in Scrooge, so that he becomes a better person, one who lives all year round in the Spirit of Christmas.

Setting

The story is situated in London, in Dickens' own time. The author describes the atmosphere in London at Christmas time, with the fog and cold on the streets contrasting with the warmth and joy of the people celebrating the holiday in their homes and in their hearts.

Point of View

The story is told by an omniscient author, mostly from Scrooge's point of view.

Characters

Ebenezer Scrooge, a rich businessman, a miser (*prek*).
Jacob Marley, Scrooge's partner, now dead.
Bob Cratchit, Scrooge's poor clerk.
Mrs Cratchit and the Cratchit children: *Martha*, *Belinda*, *Peter* and *Tiny Tim*, Bob's youngest son, who is crippled.

Fred, Scrooge's nephew, and his friend *Topper*.

Old Joe, a second-hand dealer.

Mr Fezziwig, a jolly businessman to whom Scrooge was apprenticed (*in de leer*) as a boy.

The Ghosts of Christmas Past, *Christmas Present* and *Christmas Yet to Come*.

Note that Dickens' characters often have 'character names', which describe the person: 'Scrooge' comes from 'screw', a slang term for a miser (*prek*); 'Fezziwig' is a combination of 'fizzy', the sound made by champagne, and 'wig'; 'Cratchit' comes from 'to cratch' (*krassen*) and means something like *pennelikker*; 'Topper' means 'an excellent fellow'.

The Story

(Like a carol, the story is divided into staves or stanzas, not chapters.)

Stave I. Before Marley died, he and Scrooge were business partners. Now Scrooge runs the firm alone. He is extremely greedy and unkind, and nobody likes him. On Christmas Eve, Scrooge's nephew Fred comes along to wish his uncle a Merry Christmas. Scrooge thinks that Christmas is humbug (*onzin*), and does not understand his poor nephew's happiness. He refuses his invitation to Christmas dinner.

Two gentlemen ask Scrooge for money for the poor, but Scrooge sends them away with unkind words. While the fog is getting denser, people do their Christmas shopping. Grudgingly (*met tegenzin*) Scrooge gives his clerk, Bob Cratchit, permission to stay away from work on Christmas Day. Scrooge has dinner in a tavern and goes home. When he wants to open the front door, the knocker suddenly changes into Marley's face. Scrooge is startled by its ghostly expression. Then the knocker changes back to normal again.

Scrooge double-locks his door and eats his gruel (*pap*). Suddenly all the bells in the house begin to ring. When they stop ringing, Marley's Ghost enters the room. He is dragging a chain that is fastened around his waist. He tells Scrooge he is doomed to wander all over the earth in chains. Now he regrets that, when he was alive, he was always occupied with his business and paid no attention to the poor. He has come to Scrooge to warn him so that he may escape Marley's fate. Marley tells Scrooge that three ghosts will visit him.

As Marley leaves through the window, Scrooge hears the mournful (*treurige*) voices of many Ghosts wailing, and he sees them wandering through the streets wearing chains. Then he goes to bed and falls asleep at once.

Stave II. Just after Scrooge awakes, the clock strikes twelve. He is afraid he has slept for almost 24 hours. He wonders if he has been dreaming. But at one o'clock sharp a Ghost appears. He is small and dressed in white and radiates light. He tells Scrooge he is the Ghost of Christmas Past, and has come to reclaim (*bekeren*) Scrooge. He takes Scrooge to the village where

he grew up. Scrooge sees himself, sitting all alone at Christmas time. The only companions he has are imaginary people from books. Then he sees himself a few years older. This time, his loving sister Fan comes to take him home for Christmas. The Ghost reminds Scrooge that his sister has died, but has left behind a son, Scrooge's nephew.

Then Scrooge is led to Mr Fezziwig's firm where he was apprenticed as a boy. He also sees Dick, his fellow-apprentice. Together with Mr Fezziwig the two boys turn the warehouse into a ball-room. Soon a merry Christmas party is going on.

Then Scrooge sees himself as a young man. He is beginning to show the signs of avarice (*hebzucht*). He is with a girl who accuses him of being more interested in money than in her. Once they loved each other but now Scrooge has changed, and so she breaks off their engagement.

Scrooge wants to go home, but the Ghost shows him one more vision. Now he sees the same girl as a middle-aged woman, surrounded by children. Her husband comes in with presents for the children. Scrooge realizes that if he had been a different sort of person, he might have been the happy father. He puts a cap on the Ghost to try to hide its light, and falls asleep in his own bed.

Stave III. When Scrooge wakes it is one o'clock again. Looking for the source of a mysterious light, he opens the door to his sitting-room. In the midst of all kinds of Christmas decorations and delicacies (*heerlijkheden*) an enormous Ghost is waiting for him. He introduces himself as the Ghost of Christmas Present. The Ghost first takes Scrooge to a street which is covered with snow. It is Christmas morning. The shops are still open and happy people are hurrying to do their last-minute shopping. When the bells start ringing many people go to church.

The Ghost leads Scrooge to Bob Cratchit's little house. The poor clerk's family are preparing dinner, very happy together in spite of their poverty. Soon Bob comes home, carrying his crippled son Tiny Tim on his shoulders. They sit down to their Christmas dinner, a goose followed by a delicious plum-pudding. The Ghost tells Scrooge that Tiny Tim will die young if nothing is done. When Bob Cratchit proposes to drink Mr Scrooge's health, his family agree reluctantly.

The Ghost then shows Scrooge a poor miner's family celebrating Christmas, and two men doing the same in a lonely lighthouse. After a visit to a ship the Ghost leads Scrooge to his nephew's house. Fred and his wife and their friends are making fun of Scrooge's low opinion of Christmas. The company are in high spirits. Topper, one of the guests, is flirting with one of Fred's sisters-in-law. They sing, they make music and play games. Scrooge becomes gay and light-hearted and even takes part in some of the games, although nobody can hear him. Like Bob Cratchit, Fred drinks his uncle's health.

The Ghost and Scrooge leave the merry company and visit all kinds of people, rich and poor, in various countries. Now the Ghost is getting older

quickly. Out of his robe two miserable children appear. The Ghost says that their names are Ignorance (*onwetendheid*) and Want (*gebrek*). They represent the miserable lives many children have to live. When the clock strikes twelve the Ghost and the children vanish and a solemn Phantom (*spook*) appears.

Stave IV. The Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come is dressed in black and does not say a word. Scrooge suddenly finds himself among businessmen who are talking about the death of a rich person. He has no idea who they are referring to. Then he is led to a dirty shop in the most wretched part of town, where an old man called Joe buys all kinds of things that people come to offer him. Three servants of a rich man who has died come in; they sell Joe things that they have taken from the dead man's house. The charwoman has even brought the bed-curtains and the blankets from the dead man's bed. At once Scrooge is shown a bed without curtains. On the bed there is a dead body, covered only by a sheet. Scrooge does not have the courage to lift the sheet to see who the dead man is. He begs the Spirit to show him someone who feels sorry for the dead man. But instead he is shown a man and his wife who owe the dead man money and are quite glad of his death.

Then the Spirit takes Scrooge to Cratchit's house and shows him a death that has indeed made people sad: the death of Tiny Tim. Again Scrooge asks the Spirit who the dead man is. The Spirit leads him to a churchyard. There, on a neglected (*verwaarloosd*) grave, he reads his own name, and realizes that he himself was the dead man on the bed. He begs the Spirit to give him a chance to change his life. Then the Spirit suddenly changes into a bedpost.

Stave V. Scrooge is extremely happy that he is not dead. He now has the opportunity to make amends (*alles goedmaken*). And he is delighted to find that it is still Christmas Day; the three spirits have visited him in the course of just one night. He asks a boy to buy a large turkey (*kalkoen*) for the Cratchits. In the street he meets the man who asked him for a donation the previous day, and promises him a large sum of money. Then he goes to his nephew Fred's house for dinner and has a wonderful evening. The next morning, Bob Cratchit arrives late. Scrooge pretends to be angry as usual, but then tells him he will raise his salary, and wishes him a Merry Christmas. Scrooge becomes a good friend of the Cratchits and a second father to Tiny Tim, who therefore does not die young after all.

Questions (The numbers refer to the staves.)

1. a. Why does Scrooge's clerk wear his comforter (*das*) at work?
b. What ghostly vision does Scrooge have when he climbs the stairs?
c. What is Marley's chain made of?
2. a. What makes Scrooge think of the boy who was singing carols?
b. What makes him think of his clerk?
c. Why does the father of the happy family mention Scrooge to his wife?

3. a. What magic power does the Ghost's torch have?
- b. The Ghost says he has more than 1800 brothers. What does he mean?
- c. Why does the ghost say to Scrooge just before he leaves: 'Are there no prisons? Are there no workhouses?'
4. a. Do the businessmen plan to go to the dead man's funeral?
- b. Describe the contrast between Tiny Tim's grave and Scrooge's.

To Think About

1. How do the scenes from Scrooge's past (in the schoolroom) help us to understand him and his attitude towards Christmas?
2. Some readers dislike Dickens because, they say, he is too sentimental. Other readers delight in the warm emotions in his stories. What is your opinion?
3. Is this a religious story?

19. THE HOUND OF THE BASKERVILLES (1902)

by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

Author

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (1859-1930) was born in Edinburgh of an Irish family. He took his medical degree at Edinburgh University. As his practice was not successful, he turned to writing detective fiction. In *A Study in Scarlet* (1887) he introduced the famous detective Sherlock Holmes. Conan Doyle, like the detective he created, helped the police to solve murder cases. He was knighted in 1902.

Genre

The Hound of the Baskervilles is a detective story. The American writer Poe is usually regarded as the first writer in this genre. But it was Conan Doyle's stories about Sherlock Holmes that made the genre popular. These detective stories have become famous for their suspense and for the way Holmes solves mysteries by means of his scientific method of deduction. Readers also like the Victorian atmosphere of the stories with their fogs and hansom cabs (*tweewielige huurrijtuigen*).

Setting

The first five chapters and the last one are situated in London; the rest of the story takes place in and near Baskerville Hall, a gloomy estate on the moors of Devonshire. The landscape contains rocky fields and dangerous bogs and has an unearthly, dreary atmosphere.

Point of View

The story, like most of the Sherlock Holmes stories, is told by Holmes' friend and assistant, Dr Watson.

Main Characters

Sherlock Holmes, private detective of Baker Street, London.

Dr Watson, his friend and assistant.

Sir Henry Baskerville, heir of Baskerville Hall.

Dr Mortimer, Sir Henry's friend and neighbour.

Mr Stapleton of Merripit House, a naturalist.

Beryl Stapleton, his pretended sister.

Other Characters

Mrs Laura Lyons, a woman separated from her husband.

Lestrade, a Scotland Yard detective.

John Barrymore, the butler at Baskerville Hall.

Eliza Barrymore, his wife.

