

A Christmas Carol : Being a Ghost Story of Christmas is a novella (short novel) written by Charles Dickens in the year 1843. There is no doubt that it has had a marked impact on the way people view Christmas and the meaning of Christmas. It has obviously has a religious aspect, but the book also helped people see Christmas as a **time of peace and goodwill**. Many of the terms Dickens uses are now in common use, notably : Bah Humbug, Merry Christmas and Scrooge as an archetypal mean person.

Dickens **wrote A Christmas Carol in just 6 weeks**, apparently stopping only to take long walks on the streets of London at night to focus his thoughts. It was published on December 19th 1843 and the first edition of 6000 copies sold out by Christmas Eve. Eleven more editions had been published before the end of 1844 and it has never been out of print since. There is no doubt that Dickens had developed a social conscience and had intended to write a pamphlet on the poor children, but thought this book would have much greater impact.

The time when Dickens wrote a Christmas Carol is when Christmas traditions were being formulated. The Victorian Christmas revival captured in the novella introduced the idea of a **humanitarian Christmas**. Many called it a 'new gospel.' "Peace on earth and goodwill to all men," as the bible says at the first Christmas. "I will honour Christmas in my heart, and try to keep it all year," says Scrooge as his redemption is complete. The sentiment behind the words is credited with ushering in the modern era of Christmas and the festive vision of the holidays that have endured since Dickens first published the novel in 1843. Dickens has been called the 'man who invented Christmas.'

The novella may have been inspired in part by a visit Dickens made to a **Ragged School**. Ragged Schools were charitable institutions set up in the 19th century primarily in lower working class districts, for the poorest and most destitute street children. In them the most deprived and worst behaved children could get a start in life. Dickens supported them financially and in his writing, and probably based his description of Tiny Tim on children he had seen in a London Ragged School.

### CHARLES DICKENS : The writing of Christmas Carol



A Christmas Carol was illustrated by John Leech who was chosen by Dickens to produce **8 images for the first issue of the book**.

Leech was a caricaturist and satirical illustrator who worked closely with Dickens and there is no doubt that his images helped the book become the lasting success it became. His illustrations were particularly impressive in the way they portrayed the supernatural character of the ghosts and in bringing Dickens success after a couple of slow selling books.

Dickens seems to have been **inspired in his writing of a Christmas Carol by other authors**, particularly Washington Irving. Irving wrote about old English traditional Christmases and believed, like Dickens, that a nostalgic Christmas might restore social harmony. Another writer, Douglas Jerrold, who was a friend of Dickens also wrote a short story for Punch in 1841 about an uncharitable businessman enjoying Christmas while the poor suffered. He was also influence by Christmas fairy tales and nursery rhymes which appeared to be stories of conversion and transformation.

The plight of the poor and children in the mid 19th century illustrates the **Social Injustice** of the time. The Industrial revolution had led to a massive growth of cities and many of the poorest lived in squalid slum conditions. Disease and misery were common amongst the poor. This was probably the inspiration for Tiny Tim, as life expectancy amongst the poor was only around 40 years of age. Almost 1 in 5 children in working class families died before the age of 5. If a family was unable to support itself it was sent to a workhouse where conditions were poor and the fit and able had to work in dreadful conditions. The rich lived in comparative luxury and the gap between rich and poor was huge.

Although Dickens was from a middle class family he was able to draw on episodes from his own life to give him an understanding of life amongst the poorest levels of society in London. When he was 12 his **father was sent to Debtors prison** and he was sent to a factory alone. In this factory he stuck labels on bottles, he was poorly paid and the conditions were terrible. This made him very aware of the conditions suffered by the poorest in society in the early to mid 19th century. Later he worked as a court reporter and saw the injustices of the court system for himself. These experiences led him to be a fierce campaigner for the rights of the poor, better living conditions and a fairer legal system.

