

Study Guide

A Christmas Carol

Adapted and Performed
by George Younts

***This Study Guide is produced free of charge for all attendees and interested public. The purpose of this publication is to enhance the theatre experience for those folks who have a little bit of curiosity. All of the material in this guide has been gathered from a variety of sources. Thanks for being inquisitive!

Biography of Charles Dickens (1812-1870)

Excerpted from A Little Book about A Christmas Carol, by Linda Rosewood Hooper

In October of 1843, when he started to write *A Christmas Carol*, Charles Dickens was threatened by his publishers that they would reduce his salary from 200 pounds to 150 pounds per month.

His wife Catherine was expecting their fifth child. Money had always been a worry for Dickens. He was born into a struggling lower-middle class family. When he was ten, Dickens's father moved the family from Chatham to a smaller house in Camden Town, London. The four-room house at 16 Bayham Street is thought to be the model for the Cratchits' house. The six Cratchit children correspond to the six Dickens children at that time, including Dickens's youngest brother, a sickly boy, known as "Tiny Fred."

Even with the move to London, his family could not afford to send Dickens to school. When he was twelve, his father found work for him in a factory, and he boarded with another family. Soon afterward, his father was imprisoned for debt, and the whole family moved to the Marshalsea debtors' prison except for Charles, who kept working. He felt abandoned and ashamed of this experience for the rest of his life, and although he fictionalized it in his novels, during his life he told the truth to only one person, his friend and biographer, John Forster.

As an adult, Dickens found work first in a law office, and then as a newspaper reporter, covering the proceedings of Parliament. While working as a reporter, Dickens began writing semi-fictional sketches for magazines, eventually publishing them as *Sketches by Boz*. His next work was *The Pickwick Papers*, which was published in a relatively new serial format. Each month, a twelve thousand-word section of the book was sold in a "number," at a shilling each. This made a long book affordable to many more people. After *Pickwick*, all of his subsequent books, until *A Christmas Carol*, were first sold in serial form.

Charles Dickens was an outgoing, playful man who loved games and parties. The act of writing *A Christmas Carol* affected him profoundly. During its composition, he wrote a friend that he "wept and laughed, and wept again, and excited himself in a most extraordinary manner in the composition; and thinking whereof he walked about the black streets of London fifteen and twenty miles many a night when all the sober folks had gone to bed."

Despite Dickens's frequent criticism of organized religion and religious dogma, he loved celebrating Christmas. Of the Christmas following the publication of *A Christmas Carol*, Dickens wrote in a letter,

“Such dinings, such dancings, such conjurings, such blind-man's bluffings, such theatre-goings, such kissings-out of old years and kissings-in of new ones never took place in these parts before. To keep Chuzzlewit going, and to do this little book, the Carol, in the odd times between two parts of it, was, as you may suppose, pretty tight work. But when it was done I broke out like a madman, and if you could have seen me at a children's party at Macready's the other night going down a country dance with Mrs. M. you would have thought I was a country gentleman of independent property residing on a tip-top farm, with the wind blowing straight in my face every day.”

After *A Christmas Carol*, Dickens wrote another “Christmas book,” *The Chimes*, for Christmas 1844. Dickens wrote three more Christmas books and many Christmas stories. He edited two magazines, *Household Words*, and *All the Year Round*, which published annual “Christmas numbers” for which he wrote and edited stories. Writing about Christmas and, later, giving readings from the Carol were important sources of income for Dickens for the rest of his life. It is possible that Dickens sometimes regretted this relentless association with the holiday. In a letter to his daughter Mamie he wrote that he felt as if he “had murdered a Christmas a number of years ago, and its ghost perpetually haunted me.”

Playwriting for Charles Dickens

Adapted from an article by Wayne S. Turney

Charles Dickens work has always been constantly adapted to the stage even in his own lifetime. Sometimes this happened even before the novels were completely finished and published in serial form. There was a production of *A Christmas Carol* on the boards in London in the same year it was put into print.

Dickens was so popular a writer in his own day that in 1845, there were twelve different productions of another of his Christmas stories, *The Cricket on the Hearth*, in various London theatres during the holidays. This proliferation was made possible by a peculiarity in the copyright laws of the day and a strange reluctance on Dickens' part to do stage adaptations of his own work. This was odd that he did not do so. He certainly did not lack the writing skills nor did he lack the necessary knowledge of the stage.

When Dickens was a young man he had seriously considered becoming an actor. His amateur performances made those who saw him declare that he would have made a fine comedian. He may have even acted with the famous T. D. Davenport at the Portsmouth Theatre. Many think he used Mr. Davenport and his theatrical family as the model for the Crummies, the theatrical family depicted in *The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby*. He was also a lifelong friend of perhaps the greatest actor of his age, William Charles Macready.

Dickens even had a small theatre "perfectly fitted up" in his London residence, Tavistock House, where two of Wilkie Collins' plays were previewed before successful London runs. As early as 1836, Dickens wrote a successful burletta, *The Strange Gentleman*, for the stage of the new St.

James Theatre. It was his own dramatization of one of the Sketches by Boz, "The Great Winglebury Duel." The little piece was a success, running for over fifty nights, a very respectable run for its day. Indeed, the St. James had its first commercial success with this production. But his next effort, the libretto for a ballad opera called *The Village Coquettes*, had a run of only twenty nights to poor business.

At 25, Dickens was already a thriving author of the wildly successful *Pickwick Papers* and he was working on *Oliver Twist*. The less sure role of dramatist may well have been why he simply did not want to tackle this literary style when achievement was so apparently easy in another field less dependent on the performance skills of others.

Still, he left the adaptation of his own works to others, all of the Christmas Books to Albert Smith, for example, who of course, reaped the benefits. Edward Stirling and W.T. Moncrieff between them adapted the bulk of the rest of Dickens' stories and novels for the stage. The only novel Dickens himself adapted for the stage was *Great Expectations*. His version was never acted.

Dickens' undoubted love for the theatre and his relative lack of success in dramatizing his own works may help to explain why he chose to embark on his famous series of "readings." By far the most popular piece in his repertory was what he referred to as "The Carol". He "read" it in more than a quarter of the programs he gave from December 27, 1853 to his farewell performance on March 15, 1870.

Victorian London

Adapted from www.charlesdickenspage.com/dickens_london.html

Victorian London was the largest, most spectacular city in the world. While Britain was experiencing the Industrial Revolution, its capital was both reaping the benefits and suffering the consequences. In 1800 the population of London was around a million souls. That number would swell to 4.5 million by 1880. While fashionable areas like Regent and Oxford streets were growing in the west, new docks supporting the city's place as the world's trade center were being built in the east. Perhaps the biggest impact on the growth of London was the coming of the railroad in the 1830s, which displaced thousands and accelerated the expansion of the city.

The price of this explosive growth and domination of world trade was untold squalor and filth. In his excellent biography, Dickens, Peter Ackroyd notes "If a late twentieth-century person were suddenly to find himself in a tavern or house of the period, he would be literally sick – sick with the smells, sick with the food, sick with the atmosphere around him".

Imagine yourself in the London of the early 19th century. The homes of the upper and middle class exist in close proximity to areas of unbelievable poverty and filth. Rich and poor alike are thrown together in the crowded city streets. Street sweepers attempt to keep the streets clean of manure, the result of thousands of horse-drawn vehicles. The city's thousands of chimney pots are belching coal smoke, resulting in soot which seems to settle everywhere. In many parts of the city raw sewage flows in gutters that empty into the Thames. Street vendors hawking their wares add to the cacophony of street noises. Pickpockets, prostitutes, drunks, beggars, and vagabonds of every description add to the colorful multitude.

Inside the problem is not much better. Personal cleanliness is not a big priority, nor is clean laundry. In close, crowded rooms the smell of unwashed bodies is stifling. It is unbearably hot by the fire, numbingly cold away from it.

At night the major streets are lit with feeble gas lamps. Side and secondary streets may not be lit at all and link bearers are hired to guide the traveler to his destination. Inside, a candle or oil lamp struggles against the darkness and blacken the ceilings.

In *Little Dorrit* Dickens describes a London rain storm: "In the country, the rain would have developed a thousand fresh scents, and every drop would have had its bright association with some beautiful form of growth or life. In the city, it developed only foul stale smells, and was a sickly, lukewarm, dirt- stained, wretched addition to the gutters."

Sanitation and Disease

Until the second half of the 19th century London residents were still drinking water from the very same portions of the Thames that the open sewers were discharging into. Several outbreaks of Cholera in the mid 19th century, along with The Great Stink of 1858, when the stench of the Thames caused Parliament to recess, brought a cry for action. The link between drinking water tainted with sewage and the incidence of disease slowly dawned on the Victorians. Dr John Snow proved that all victims in a Soho area cholera outbreak drew water from the same Broad Street pump.

Sir Joseph Bazalgette, chief engineer of the new Metropolitan Board of Works (1855), put into effect a plan, completed in 1875, which finally provided adequate sewers to serve the city. In addition, laws were put in effect which prevented companies supplying drinking water from drawing water from the most heavily tainted parts of the Thames and required them to provide some type of filtration.

In the Streets

After the Stage Carriages Act of 1832 the hackney cab was gradually replaced by the omnibus as a means of moving about the city. By 1900 3000 horse-drawn buses were carrying 500 million passengers a year. A traffic count in Cheapside and London Bridge in 1850 showed a thousand vehicles an hour passing through these areas during the day. All of this added up to an incredible amount of manure, which had to be removed from the streets.

The Law

The Metropolitan Police, London's first police force, was created by Home Secretary Sir Robert Peel (hence the name Peelers and, eventually, Bobbies) in 1829 with headquarters in what would become known as Scotland Yard. The old London watch system, in effect since Elizabethan times, was eventually abolished.

The Poor

The Victorian answer to dealing with the poor and indigent was the New Poor Law, enacted in 1834. Previously it had been the burden of the parishes to take care of the poor. The new law required parishes to band together and create regional workhouses where aid could be applied for.

The workhouse was little more than a prison for the poor. Civil liberties were denied, families were separated, and human dignity was destroyed. The true poor often went to great lengths to avoid this relief. Dickens, because of the childhood trauma caused by his father's imprisonment for debt and his consignment to the blacking factory to help support his family, was a true champion to the poor. He repeatedly pointed out the atrocities of the system through his novels.

With the turn of the century and Queen Victoria's death in 1901 the Victorian period came to a close. Many of the ills of the 19th century were remedied through education, technology and social reform... and by the social consciousness raised by the immensely popular novels of Dickens.

The History of the English Christmas

From "The Story of A Christmas Carol" by Tori Haring-Smith and A Little Book about A Christmas Carol by Linda Rosewood Hooper

When Dickens wrote *A Christmas Carol* in 1843, English Christmas traditions had been in decline for centuries. Stores and factories remained open on December 25th, and many people were forced to work on Christmas Day.

Christmas was first promoted as a major holiday in England by Pope Gregory in 601 C.E. In his effort to convert the Anglo-Saxons to Christianity, he urged Christian missionaries to adapt the local traditions of pagan winter festivals into a celebration of Christ's birth, which was traditionally placed around December 25. The traditional Christmas celebration that we are familiar with is primarily created from a mixture of pre-Christian elements: Druid Festivals, the Saxon feast called Yule, and the Roman Saturnalia, all of which celebrated the winter solstice and the return of lengthening days.

Pope Gregory and his successors did not see a conflict between pagan roots and Christian applications of the hybrid holiday. On the contrary, they hoped that by adapting the Anglo-Saxons' own traditions into the Catholic Church, they would be more likely to accept the religion. At this time, and for the next several centuries, the English lived in rural areas and rarely left the place where they grew up, which made it easier for traditions to be preserved and passed on. "Christmas" was a 12-day festival taking place in the manor of the local lord, and included burning the Yule log, playing traditional games and telling folktales, and feasting on traditional foods. By Shakespeare's time, these Anglo-Saxon traditions had grown into elaborate Christmas revels with evenings of elaborate feasting and theatricals among the wealthy.

All of this came to a halt when the Puritans took control of the English government in 1642. The Puritans felt that Christianity should be purged of pagan elements and restored as closely as possible to the form of worship used by Jesus and the apostles. Not only did Puritan dictator Oliver Cromwell close England's theaters, but, distressed by its pagan roots, his Parliament also outlawed the holiday of Christmas. In 1647, Parliament declared the feast of Christ's birth could not be celebrated with the other holy days and on December 24, 1652, they proclaimed: "No observance shall be had of the five and twentieth day of December, commonly called Christmas Day; nor any solemnity used or exercised in churches upon that day in respect thereof." The Puritans believed that even the established date for Christmas had been based on mere assumption, not biblical evidence, and thus was not worthy of being proclaimed a day of special worship.

When the Puritans were finally overthrown at the end of the 17th century, and the English monarchy reestablished, the Christmas traditions were slow to reappear. War and economic changes had dispersed old communities and created new ones. Many Christmas traditions had been forgotten or survived only in rural areas and among the elderly. In the early 19th century, though, the Romantic interest in things past and folk wisdom revived an interest in Christmas traditions. Collections of traditional carols began to be published.

Even before Dickens wrote *A Christmas Carol*, a few popular books attempted to record the celebrations of the past, such as *The Book of Christmas* by T.H. Hervey (1837) and *The Keeping of Christmas at Bracebridge Hall* by Washington Irving (1820). But the rapidly changing society of industrial England made it difficult for the old rural traditions to be revived. Dickens was one of the first of these writers to not only record the old holiday traditions in his story, but also to show his readers a way to adapt them to their modern lives.

The Christmas celebrations in *A Christmas Carol* show the old twelve-day manorial feast reworked into a one day party any family could hold in their own urban home. Instead of gathering together an entire village, Dickens showed his readers Christmas celebrations that brought together the “nuclear family” and close friends. Dickens’s story made the Christmas traditions accessible to an urban, industrial society, and evoked the childhood memories of people who had moved to the cities as adults.

With *A Christmas Carol*, Dickens also helped separate the traditional celebration of Christmas from its Christian religious content. Dickens had misgivings about organized religion throughout his life and, while *A Christmas Carol* does contain some references to the Christian Jesus, he avoided using most of the strictly religious symbols of Christmas in his story. This in itself was controversial at the time-- some ministers believed that any story of Christmas that did not make specific reference to the birth of Jesus was self indulgent and unchristian, and that the ritualistic games and parties in the story were pagan and sinful if they lacked this religious context. But Dickens and others have felt that the story’s themes of fellowship and kindness are not exclusive to Christianity. *A Christmas Carol* helped inspire its own tradition (that has lasted to the present day) of Christmas feasting and giving that appeals to Christians and non-Christians alike.

Christmas Greetings from Charles Dickens

The following is from Charles Dickens' *Sketches by Boz*, published in 1836: "There are people who will tell you that Christmas is not to them what it used to be: that each succeeding Christmas has found some cherished hope, or happy prospect, of the year before, dimmed or passed away. Never heed such dismal reminiscences but draw your chair nearer the blazing fire. Fill the glass and send round the song, and if your room be smaller than it was a dozen years ago, or if your glass be filled with reeking punch, instead of sparkling wine, put a good face on the matter, and empty it offhand, and fill another, and toll off the old ditty you used to sing, and thank God it's no worse. Reflect on your present blessings (of which every man has plenty) not on your past misfortunes, of which all men have some. Fill your glass again, and with a merry face and contented heart. Our life on it, but your Christmas shall be merry, and your New Year a happy one!

There seems a magic in the very name of Christmas. Petty jealousies and discords are forgotten; social feelings are awakened in bosoms to which they have long been strangers; father and son, or

brother and sister, who have met and passed with averted gaze, or a look of cold recognition, for months before, proffer and return the cordial embrace, and bury their past animosities in their present happiness. Kindly hearts that have yearned towards each other, but have been withheld by false notions of pride and self-dignity, are again reunited, and all is kindness and benevolence! Would that Christmas lasted the whole year through (as it ought), and that the prejudices and passions which deform our better nature, were never called into action among those whom they should ever be strangers!"

Games for a Victorian Christmas

Adapted from www.humbugtheatre.com

Charles Dickens writes in *A Christmas Carol*, "But they didn't devote the whole evening to music. After a while they played at forfeits; for it is good to be children sometimes, and never better than at Christmas, when its mighty Founder was a child himself." Along with music and dancing, parlor games entertained friends and family, young and old together, at holiday gatherings in Victorian England. Here are the rules to a few favorites.

Forfeits

Players in a game of forfeits surrender a personal belonging to a "judge." In order to get their belongings back, each player must perform a task or forfeit. Forfeits may also be demanded in other parlor games if, for instance, a player loses a game or answers a question incorrectly. Some of these forfeits have included: * Kneel to the prettiest, bow to the wittiest, and kiss the one you love the best. * Go to the four corners of the room. Sigh in one, cry in one, sing in one, dance in one. * Make three people laugh. * Recite a poem.

Blindman's Buff

One player is blindfolded. The others spin him or her around, and then they scatter throughout the room. The blindfolded player tries to catch and identify someone. If the blindman guesses correctly, the player who is caught becomes the next blindman. As the blindfolded player tries to catch other players, they often tease him or her by tapping or tickling them.

The Minister's Cat

Each player describes the Minister's Cat using an adjective that starts, in the first round, with the letter A, in the second round with the letter B, and so on. "The Minister's Cat is an Angry Cat." "The Minister's Cat is an Anxious Cat."

Yes and No

A game like Twenty Questions. One player thinks of a person, place, or thing. The others try to guess what he is thinking of by asking questions which must be answered Yes or No. When someone guesses correctly, it is his turn to think of a person, place or thing.

Charles Dickens & Platform Readings

Adapted from "Light in the 18th-19th Century Darkness" by Diane Howard, The Power of One- The solo play for the playwrights, actors and directors by Louis Caton and The Annotated Christmas Carol: A Christmas Carol in Prose by Charles Dickens, Michael Patrick Hearn

The 19th Century was considered the golden age of platform readings. Such events, often called *Platform Readings* because they took place on a platform, lacked the complexity of multi-character plays and audiences responded enthusiastically to them. This monodrama movement mirrored the cultural tastes which were expanding rapidly, especially in literature. At home both Victorian and American families were gathering by the fireplace to read aloud from the Bible and the literary works of William Shakespeare, Charles Dickens, Edgar Allen Poe, and Mark Twain. As public interest in literature grew so did receptivity to these literary theatrical events.

Platform presenters responded in kind and described themselves as elocutionists, readers, reciters, characterists, impersonators, monologists, storytellers, and expressionists. Reflecting a romantic interest in the individual, they created a rich period of one-person, independent performances of great literature and of fascinating characters.

Particularly after the American Civil War, there was a strong demand for non-theatre entertainment. Literacy was widespread and there was an avid interest in hearing the written word read or recited. The railroads were readily available to provide the travel needs for solo performers. Hence, platform "lectures" became very common.

However, besides the literature fan club culture other factors also facilitated the popularity of the one-person, platform performances.

First, they were considered more commercially viable than plays.

Secondly, during the 19th century, there was a strong resistance from churches to the theater. Factors, such as the common practice of prostitutes frequenting the third tier of theaters to meet "clientele," justified the concerns of clergy and churches.

Thirdly, an evening out in American Theatre could mean having to deal with a rather rough atmosphere of audiences behaving like quasi-mobs via the give and take with stage performers. Early 19th Century lighting was sometimes not that technically advanced enough to just isolate the stage. Therefore, audiences and actors were equally lit for one to see, and more importantly, "to be seen". Many times there was a plethora of "performances" going on besides the one on stage. The lower classes embraced this and rallied in the rowdy interactive booing and hissing environment. Or as Aristotle would surmise, it gave them a much needed group catharsis. The upper classes did not support this. They were in favor of "decorum" (politely sitting still and quietly listening). According to them, in this type of setting one could be readily available to be elevated by the artistic event.

Platform presentations did allow for this because they consisted of lectures and solo readings of literature. They were considered genteel, dignified, respectable, and edifying. Therefore, they were able to draw more broad popular and mainline support than theatre productions could.

Lyceum bureaus were established, which served as booking agencies for lecturers and promoted notable American and English figures on American platforms, during this period. Daniel Webster, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Alexander Graham Bell, and Oliver Wendell Holmes were some of the most celebrated. Distinguished authors publicized their writing and then secured supplemental income by platform presentations.

Charles Dickens became a celebrity through his readings in both Britain and in the United States. The public adored him. He was more like a popular star would be today. In retrospect, he was the greatest, one-man show of the 19th century. Having aspired to be an actor in his youth, Dickens performed characters from his writings, breaking from the elocutionary style of the day.

His first reading of *A Christmas Carol* ran for three hours but then he began to carefully abridge the text. Later it was edited down to two, and then to eighty or ninety minutes retaining those episodes which worked best with his audiences. Gone were the long descriptive passages along with most of the sociopolitical content. Instead, he retained the famous holiday set pieces, the Fezzwig ball, the Crachit Christmas, and Fred's party. These scenes of jolly celebration contrasted beautifully with the horrors of old Joe's rag and bottle shop, the Crachits in mourning, and the denouement in the graveyard. He concentrated on character rather than setting. He merged Stave Four with Stave Five. All that was left of Scrooge's conversion was the purchase of the prize turkey and Scrooges' unprecedented appearance at Fred's door on Christmas Day. The only episode from the book that remained almost in tact was the Crachits Christmas dinner. Apparently, he never read directly from the page. He carried a paper cutter not to separate pages, but merely for effect. He was always trying out new ideas from the platform, slightly altering lines here and there whenever he thought appropriate.

His reading desk also evolved through trial and error. The earliest one was tall like a Punch and Judy booth and concealed too much of his body. He finally settled on a specially constructed reading desk, now in the Dickens House, in London. It had two levels: the lower shelf for a glass of water and a paper cutter; the upper for his books and elbow rest upon which he leaned his arm. The reading platform (stage) was covered with a red and black carpet, the desk with an embroidered red velvet cloth. A maroon screen was set-up behind him, and overhead carefully adjusted gas lights illuminated the speaker. He always appeared punctually at 8:00pm, in evening dress, a red geranium in his buttonhole and a pair of white gloves draped over the edge of his reading table. He held his prompt copy in his hand, but it was really no more that a prop. He memorized his stories; he turned the pages for effect, only occasionally glancing at the text, perhaps as much for dramatic emphasis as for need. He refreshed himself during the intermissions with little more than sherry and ice water.

Wonderfully expressive with his body and face, he performed with energetic and specific character gestures. He was also a careful actor who believed in through preparation in rehearsing every aspect of his performances. In *Charles Dickens: The Public Readings*, Phillip Collins details the novelist careful notes from twenty-one of his readings- words to accent, changes in language for greater impact, even instructions for small effects such as sighs or pauses. He confessed to his son Henry in a letter on February 11, 1868, "from ten years ago to last night, I have never read to an audience but I have watched of an opportunity to striking out something better somewhere." His performances had mixed reviews, it was said by some that he succeeded in dialogue more than in recitation. Some considered him more of an animated storyteller than a reader.

Some Dickens scholars believe that the insight gained from playing characters in public readings helped him create characters in his novels. Yet one has to wonder how Dickens found time to write novels, given his busy one-man international touring schedule. In the 1885 book *Charleston Dickens as I Knew Him: The Story of the Reading Tours in Great Britain and America*, his friend and manager George Dolby says that Dickens readings can be counted in two categories: an unknown number of charitable readings during 1854-1858, and 423 readings from 1858 to 1870.

Other well known platform performers during this time include Edgar Allen Poe who was noted for his performances of poetry. James Murdoch, a popular Shakespearean actor, served his country with benefit readings in order to arouse patriotic spirit, during the American Civil War. Anna Cora Mowatt, Fanny Kemble, and Charlotte Cushman were popular, female, platform performers. Then, of course, at the end of the century, Samuel Clemens emerged as Mark Twain, the popular American humorist and master storyteller.

Also during this period, the Chautauqua Assembly was founded. This American adult educational movement was formed through gatherings on the shore of Chautauqua Lake in New York. It originally began as Sunday-school meetings held in the woods for lectures, lessons, sermons, devotions, and conferences. People, who attended the camp-like meetings, stayed in tents. What began for religious instruction was expanded into cultural enlightenment at various sites. Fifteen years after the Lake Chautauqua meeting there were one hundred independent assemblies across the United States. Lyceum presentations were conducted in comfortable auditoriums in the winter and Chautauqua meetings were held outdoors in the summer. Famous performers were seen in both circuits.

In conclusion, the 19th century was marked by great, prolific, platform performances of literary, dramatic monologues. Against the backdrop of the unsavory public theatrical performances independent platform lecturers and performers reaped the benefits by providing wholesome and mentally stimulating presentations.

Charles Dickens – The Pop Star

Adapted from Stage Frights, an article in The Guardian by Matt Shinn, Saturday 31 January 2004
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2004/jan/31/theatre.classics>

Charles Dickens's public readings were dramatic, hypnotic and hugely popular. But they might also have been the death of him, writes Matt Shinn.

Charles Dickens's grueling tour itineraries 150 years ago read like Madonna's or Eminem's. People sometimes fainted at his shows. His performances even saw the rise of that modern phenomenon, the "speculator" or ticket tout. (The ones in New York City escaped detection by borrowing respectable-looking hats from the waiters in nearby restaurants.)

As well as being our greatest novelist, Dickens developed a new, composite art form in his stage performances, acting out specially adapted passages from his own works and varying his expressions and speech patterns, so that it seemed as if he were becoming possessed by the characters he created.

His reading tours won him huge popular acclaim on both sides of the Atlantic. And in all probability they contributed to his premature death, from a stroke, in 1870.

Why did Dickens take his show on the road? His first public readings were for charity, beginning with two performances of *A Christmas Carol*, before a crowd of 2000 working-class people in Birmingham. Soon, though, the offers of payment were coming in, and Dickens, always with an eye for the business opportunity, was tempted. His close friend John Forster warned that such a "public exhibition for money" might be demeaning, and this was enough to dissuade Dickens for a while — respectability was an issue with him. But the lure of public performance proved too much, and the author turned professional in 1858.

As he told Forster, most people thought he was being paid for his readings anyway. Dickens took a large Gladstone bag with him on his tours — a contemporary cartoon shows it stuffed with money. His American readings alone, from December 1867 to April 1868, earned him over £19,000, a colossal sum at the time; it was certainly more than he was earning from his published works.

But if money was a motivation — he said he needed it for repairs to Gad's Hill Place, the Kent house he had just bought — it was far from the only one. Dickens was fascinated by the stage: he had seriously considered becoming an actor as a young man, and had a small theatre fitted up at his house in Tavistock Square. He also clearly relished the chance of coming face to face with his readers, to whom he spoke so personally in the prefaces to his novels.

What Dickens's public got for their money was something of a spectacle. Like a Victorian magician, Dickens performed against simple but striking stage architecture, with a vivid maroon backdrop and a red reading stand that he had designed himself, with "a fringe around the little desk for the book".

On top of the stand, Dickens kept the reading copies that he made of his texts — special versions of the Christmas books and passages from his novels, pasted into volumes with extra-wide margins, to allow for his scribbled alterations and stage directions to himself.

Continually changing while in repertoire, these adaptations developed into new, free-standing versions of the old favourites. (The reading text of *A Christmas Carol* has just been reprinted, for the first time in nearly a century.) Many people found Dickens's performances hypnotic; the author is known to have experimented with mesmerism.

One audience member describes a particularly popular rendition, of the murder of Nancy by Bill Sikes in *Oliver Twist*: "Warming with excitement, he flung aside his book and acted the scene of the murder, shrieked the terrified pleadings of the girl, growled the brutal savagery of the murderer . . . Then the cries for mercy: 'Bill! dear Bill! for dear God's sake!' . . . When the pleading ceases, you open your eyes in relief, in time to see the impersonation of the murderer seizing a heavy club, and striking his victim to the ground."

Not everyone fell under his spell so easily. Mark Twain was disappointed by the performance that he saw: Dickens, he said, was "a little Englishy" in his speech, pronouncing Steerforth as "St'yaw-futh". But even he was taken with the sight of such a celebrity, fascinated to have in front of him the

famous head, that "wonderful mechanism" that had governed the directions of so many literary characters. "I almost imagined I could see the wheels and pulleys work."

For all the extraordinary effect that they had, the story of Dickens's public readings does not have a happy ending. By the late 1860s, the author's family and friends were becoming concerned that the tours were taking too great a toll, particularly after the Sikes and Nancy scene was added to the bill. "The finest thing I ever heard," Dickens's son Charley told him, "but don't do it." As with most other things in his life, Dickens pursued his readings with a compulsive energy that allowed him little time to rest. And in 1865 he had been involved in a serious train crash at Staplehurst (his was the only carriage that did not fall into a ravine), which meant that this particular form of transport, on which he relied so heavily while on tour, was nothing but trauma to him.

Dickens's friend and doctor, Francis Carr Beard, finally called time on the public performances. His medical notes, featured in the exhibition, show that Dickens's heart rate was raised dramatically each time he read, particularly when his text was Sikes and Nancy.

His final readings, like the others, were a huge success, but he ended them like Prospero: "From these garish lights I vanish now for evermore." Within three months he was dead.

Plot of A Christmas Carol (not necessary what is followed in the one man adaptation)

The tale begins on Christmas Eve seven years after the death of Ebenezer Scrooge's business partner Jacob Marley. Scrooge is established within the first stave (chapter) as a greedy and stingy businessman who has no place in his life for kindness, compassion, charity, or benevolence. After being warned by Marley's ghost to change his ways, Scrooge is visited by three additional ghosts – each in its turn – who accompany him to various scenes with the hope of achieving his transformation.

The first of the spirits, the Ghost of Christmas Past, takes Scrooge to the scenes of his boyhood and youth which stir the old miser's gentle and tender side by reminding him of a time when he was more innocent. The second spirit, the Ghost of Christmas Present, takes Scrooge to several radically differing scenes (a joy-filled market of people buying the makings of Christmas dinner, the family feast of Scrooge's near-impooverished clerk Bob Cratchit, a miner's cottage, and a lighthouse among other sites) in order to evince from the miser a sense of responsibility for his fellow man. The third spirit, the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come, harrows Scrooge with dire visions of the future if he does not learn and act upon what he has witnessed. Scrooge's own neglected and untended grave is revealed, prompting the miser to aver that he will change his ways in hopes of changing these "shadows of what may be."

In the fifth and final stave, Scrooge awakens Christmas morning with joy and love in his heart, then spends the day with his nephew's family after anonymously sending a prize turkey to the Cratchit home for Christmas dinner. Scrooge has become a different man overnight, and now treats his fellow men with kindness, generosity, and compassion, gaining a reputation as a man who embodies the spirit of Christmas. The story closes with the narrator confirming the validity, completeness, and permanence of Scrooge's transformation.

Glossary for A Christmas Carol

<i>counting-house</i>	business office
<i>humbug</i>	nonsense
<i>workhouses</i>	Publicly supported institutions to which the sick, destitute, aged, and otherwise impoverished went for food and shelter
<i>half a crown</i>	a British coin equal to 2-1/2 shillings, or 30 pence
<i>great-coat</i>	overcoat worn outdoors, often accompanied by a short cape worn over the shoulders
<i>blindman's-buff</i>	popular parlor game in which the contestant is blindfolded and then must catch another player and then guess who he had caught
<i>fancy</i>	creative imagination
<i>lumber-room</i>	a room for storing old furniture and other unused odds and ends ready for the Victorian garage sale. It would probably be a musty, moldy, spider-webbery kind of place
<i>gruel</i>	cheap food made by boiling a small amount of oatmeal in a large amount of water
<i>waistcoat</i>	a vest
<i>apprenticed</i>	bound by agreement to work for another for a specific amount of time (usually seven years) in return for instruction in a trade, art or business
<i>Welsh wig</i>	woolen or worsted cap, originally made in Montgomery, Wales
<i>forfeits</i>	group of popular parlor games in which play goes round the room with each player needing to supply an answer and is penalized if an answer is not supplied
<i>negus</i>	liquor made from wine, water, sugar, nutmeg, and lemon-juice
<i>twelfth-cake</i>	cakes made in celebration of Twelfth Night. They contained a pea or a bean, the finders of which were king and queen of the celebration
<i>poulterer</i>	butcher who deals in fowl, mainly chicken and turkey
<i>Walk-ER</i>	Cockney exclamation of disbelief
<i>smoking bishop</i>	Christmas punch made from heated red wine flavored with oranges, sugar, and spices. So named because of its deep purple color
<i>Jack Robinson</i>	Used to indicate a period of time. Supposedly Jack Robinson was a man who was notorious for making and changing his plans. You had to be quick to catch him. Also, there was the Robinson Umbrella Company which made a fast-opening umbrella.

References for Further Study

It is needless to say, but there is an immense amount of wealth out there on a Christmas Carol, Charles Dickens and many of the other subjects mentioned in this study guide. On the next page are a few places to get started:

Christmas Books

By Charles Dickens

This anthology was originally published by him in 1868 and includes his five most popular Christmas tales: The Chimes, The Haunted Man, The Cricket on the Hearth, The Battle of Life, and A Christmas Carol.

The Annotated Christmas Carol: A Christmas Carol in Prose

by Charles Dickens (Author), Michael Patrick Hearn (Author), John Leech (Illustrator)

Greet keepsake for the whole family to use during the holidays.

A Christmas Carol and Its Adaptations: A Critical Examination of Dickens' Story and Its Productions on Screen and Television

By Fred Guida

Just what the title implies. A wealth of information and opinions on adaptations.

Cast of One: One-Person Shows from the Chautauqua Platform to the Broadway Stage

By John Gentile

Overviews the one person show genre which Dickens was a major star in.

www.victorianweb.org

Good website for an overview of the Dickens time period.

www.charlesdickenspage.com

One of the best places on the web to begin learning about Dickens

www.sheeplaugh.com/scrooge/

Tribute site with film production images along with information on other versions too.

www.online-literature.com

Great site to read many of Dickens works as well as many other great writers too!