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CHARACTER MAP

**The Ghost of Christmas Past**
The first ghost to appear to Scrooge. This spirit is associated with memory and the past.

**The Ghost of Christmas Present**
The second spirit to appear. He spreads festive joy, but also gives Scrooge a dire warning.

**The Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come**
The final apparition. A voiceless, faceless phantom who silently points to what might be.

**Ebenezer Scrooge**
A notorious miser who refuses to celebrate Christmas.

**Jacob Marley**
Scrooge’s former business partner, who appears to Scrooge as a ghost and arranges for the miser to be haunted by three other ghosts.

**Bob Cratchit**
Scrooge’s long-suffering clerk. Though desperately poor, Bob gives thanks for what he has.

**Fred**
Scrooge’s nephew. An upholder of Christmas, who tries to convince his uncle to celebrate.

**Tiny Tim Cratchit**
A young, crippled boy – Scrooge becomes a second father to him after his redemption. An idealised Victorian child.

**Want and Ignorance**
The children of men, emaciated, wolfish and terrifying, they are part of the second ghost’s warning to Scrooge and Dickens’ readers.

**Old Fezziwig**
Scrooge’s benevolent former employer, who spreads Christmas cheer and represents an ideal towards which Scrooge must aspire.

**Contrasting representations of pauper children.**
OVERVIEW

About the author

Charles John Huffam Dickens was born in Portsmouth, England in 1812. His father, John Dickens, worked as a pay clerk for the royal navy, although his personal finances were rather fraught. John Dickens was known as a generous, convivial man, but he struggled with debt for much of his adult life and in 1824 he was imprisoned in the Marshalsea Debtors’ Prison.

Charles Dickens was only twelve years old at the time of his father’s arrest and was sent to work at Warren’s Blacking Factory, where he was employed to fix labels onto bottles of boot blacking. A deeply sensitive young man, Dickens found the experience to be both threatening and degrading, and he seems never to have truly recovered. John Dickens secured his release from the Marshalsea Prison in May 1824, but his son continued to work at the blacking factory until the father argued with the owner, several weeks later. The trauma of this sudden descent from a middle-class childhood to the world of work never left Dickens, although in his lifetime he confided only in his friend, John Forster, who eventually became his biographer. Dickens never forgave his mother for her eagerness to patch up the quarrel with the factory owners and send her son back to work.

This brief taste of poverty undoubtedly shaped the rest of Dickens’ life. It provided him with a remarkable drive to succeed, but it also gave him insight into the miseries of the urban underclass and particularly the sufferings of poor children. Dickens returned to school for a brief spell, but was then apprenticed as a clerk to a firm of solicitors. Not finding the legal profession to be stimulating, he went on to work as a parliamentary reporter, regularly writing up accounts of debates (including those surrounding child labour) for newspapers.

Bubbling over with ambition and energy, Dickens also began to write short fictional sketches and submitted one of these to the Monthly Magazine in 1832. The piece was not only accepted, its author was commissioned to produce more and these short works were eventually collected as Sketches by Boz. In 1836, Dickens was approached by
the publishers Chapman and Hall to provide the text for a set of sporting illustrations by the artist Robert Seymour. As Dickens gained more creative control of the project, the characters developed and gradually *The Pickwick Papers* was born. Early sales were disappointing and Seymour, who had been battling depression for some time, committed suicide in April 1836. Dickens, however, seized the opportunity to reshape the work. *The Pickwick Papers* became an immense success and from this point onwards Dickens was regarded as an up-and-coming novelist of great talent.

**Synopsis**

*A Christmas Carol* is a difficult novella to classify, and according to Juliet John it has become a ‘cultural myth’ providing ‘a parable for the modern, commercial age’ (John, p.270). Certainly, the story continues to resonate almost two centuries after its first appearance, and this is partly because it remains desperately relevant in a socially and economically divided world. For some readers it is a ghost story, for others a time-travel narrative and for others still, it is an exposé of social inequality in 1840s Britain. The story revolves around the miser Ebenezer Scrooge, a ruthless businessman who cares for nobody and who exploits his impoverished clerk, Bob Cratchit. Known only for his penny pinching, Scrooge is visited by the ghost of his late business partner, Jacob Marley, who walks the earth as a spirit forced to carry a chain representing the sins of his life. Marley warns Scrooge that he will share this fate unless he mends his ways and tells him that he will be visited by three ghosts.

The first ghost to appear is the Ghost of Christmas Past, who shows Scrooge scenes from his boyhood. The ghost plays on Scrooge’s nostalgia, but also shows readers that Scrooge was neglected by his father and often forced to remain at school while his fellow students returned home for the holidays. The ghostly visions gradually become more serious, as Dickens shows Scrooge becoming increasingly obsessed with material wealth at the expense of human relations. The next ghost is the Ghost of Christmas Present, who begins by showing Scrooge cheerful festive scenes, including an impoverished but merry Christmas in the Cratchit household. As with the first spirit, though, the yuletide celebrations gradually give way to darker visions, and Scrooge learns that his clerk’s
small, crippled son Tiny Tim will die unless someone aids the Cratchit family. After a harrowing scene in which Scrooge is confronted with the children of men, Want and Ignorance, the ghost vanishes and Scrooge finds himself in the presence of the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come.

Unlike the other two spirits, the third ghost is silent, leaving Scrooge to supply the narrative and draw his own conclusions. The ghost shows Scrooge the most chilling of all of the visions. Scrooge hears a range of discussions regarding a recently dead man about whom nobody has a kind word to say. Gradually, he realises that he is seeing a vision of his own future and that he is the unpleasant miser whose death is being celebrated by his creditors and employees. Juxtaposed with the revelry surrounding Scrooge’s death is the deep sorrow of the Cratchit family, whom we see mourning the loss of Tiny Tim. The ghost then takes Scrooge to his own graveside where, in terror, he pledges, ‘I will not be the man I must have been but for this intercourse’ (p.108). As he pleads with the spirit for another chance, the ghost gradually transforms into Scrooge’s bedpost and the miser finds himself in his own home.

Resolved to keep his promise, Scrooge responds with great emotion and energy to the opportunity he has been given to change his life. He arranges for a prize turkey to be sent to the Cratchits (as John Sutherland points out, in contrast to the meagre goose with which they celebrate in the Ghost of Christmas Present’s vision of their Christmas meal). He then goes to his nephew’s house and, after years of declining his invitations, joins him and his family for Christmas dinner. The story ends with Scrooge informing Bob Cratchit that he will raise his salary and assist his family, while the narrator informs us that Tiny Tim did not die and that Scrooge became an exemplary man who was never again visited by spirits.

**Character summaries**

Characters are listed here in order of appearance.

**Ebenezer Scrooge:** a notorious miser and misanthropic moneylender, who refuses to recognise or celebrate Christmas.

**Jacob Marley:** Scrooge’s former business partner. Like Scrooge, a miser who appears as a ghost to warn his former partner that he must mend his ways.
Fred: Scrooge’s cheerful, generous nephew, the son of Scrooge’s sister Fan. Fred has for many years attempted to persuade his uncle to celebrate Christmas with him.

Bob Cratchit: Scrooge’s long-suffering clerk. Scrooge pays Bob a pittance and forces him to work in a freezing office. In spite of his exploitative work conditions, Bob remains a cheerful and loving husband and father, who is grateful for small mercies.

The Two Gentlemen: collecting money for charity, these men are appalled by Scrooge’s callous attitude to poverty and his refusal to assist those in need. One of the two gentlemen returns as ‘the portly gentleman’ in the closing pages.

The Ghost of Christmas Past: the first of three spirits to visit Scrooge. The Ghost of Christmas Past takes the miser back to his childhood and scenes from his life as a young man to remind him of a time when he cared for people rather than money.

Fan: Scrooge’s younger sister. Appears in Scrooge’s recollection of his boyhood to bring Ebenezer home from school, having persuaded their father to allow the boy to come home for the holidays. The Ghost of Christmas Past tells us that Fan dies a young woman and is the mother of one son, Scrooge’s nephew, Fred.

Old Fezziwig: Scrooge’s employer when he is a young apprentice. A kind, generous man, Fezziwig provides memorable Christmas festivities for his family and those in his employment.

Belle: Scrooge’s former fiancée, who releases him from a long engagement because of his growing avarice and worldly ambition.

The Ghost of Christmas Present: A ‘jolly Giant’ (p.72) who spreads good cheer at Christmas, particularly to those in need. He reveals a number of Christmas celebrations to Scrooge, including those of his nephew and the Cratchit family. He also introduces the miser to Want and Ignorance.

Mrs Cratchit: The loyal wife of Bob, Mrs. Cratchit is a loving parent who manages her meagre household budget as well as she can. She refutes Bob’s affection for Ebenezer Scrooge, initially refusing to engage in a Christmas toast to the miser.
Tim Cratchit (Tiny Tim): Bob’s weak youngest son, Tim is doomed to die unless his family’s living conditions improve. Like Bob, Tim is cheery and thankful. He is most memorable for his joyful enjoiinder, ‘God bless Us, Every One!’

Want and Ignorance: Presented to Scrooge as the children of man, these two terrifying figures represent humanity’s future if people fail to respond to the plight of the poor. Almost wild in demeanour, the children have been neglected to the point that they have become feral.

The Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come: The most sinister of all the spirits. We never see this ghost’s face, nor do we hear him speak. His terrifying visions are of what the future will be if Scrooge refuses to reform.

Old Joe: A dealer in used goods who buys Ebenezer Scrooge’s belongings from his employees in the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come’s vision. He lives in a particularly unpleasant area of the city.

Charwoman; Mrs Dilber; the undertaker’s man: Three characters who steal and sell Scrooge’s possessions to Old Joe.
BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

Historical setting

Writing at a time when the balance of political power in Britain had shifted from the landed gentry to the manufacturing middle classes, Dickens wanted to rally the public into action. The Great Reform Bill of 1832 had given many male middle-class property owners the right to vote for the first time. While the aristocracy had long believed in the idea that with noble birth came responsibility (*noblesse oblige*), those who had risen to social dominance through their own hard work as factory owners or captains of industry generally did not share this belief, subscribing instead to the idea that with enough effort anyone could succeed. Like his great friend and mentor, the writer and philosopher Thomas Carlyle, Dickens was deeply agitated by what he perceived as the inertia of the wealthy middle classes. Dickens’ opinion was that those with riches and influence had a duty to take care of those who were less fortunate than themselves, particularly since their wealth was often founded on the labours of a poorly paid workforce. Dickens was to be a lifelong critic of this negligence, condemning it most witheringly in *Little Dorrit* (1855–1857).

In *A Christmas Carol*, Dickens continued the deep commitment to social reform he had begun in novels like *Oliver Twist* (1837–1839) and *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838–1839), both of which sought to expose poverty and privation. In *Nicholas Nickleby*, Dickens exposed the notorious Yorkshire Schools and their scandalous treatment of the children who were abandoned to them. Unwanted or illegitimate children were sent away to these schools by people who never wanted to see them again. Many of the children died, while those who survived were kept in sub-human conditions. In *Oliver Twist*, Dickens hit out at the *Poor Law Amendment Act*, which had done away with the system of parish relief, whereby paupers were given aid so that they could remain in their own homes. In the past, those who had fallen on hard times were encouraged to live among their neighbours and to get themselves back on their feet.