

## 6.

## The Changing Face of Scrooge

Ebenezer Scrooge was first given visible form by Dickens' illustrator John Leech, with the publication of *A Christmas Carol* in 1843. Since then, the characterization of literature's most popular miser has been frequently transformed—by other illustrators, by motion picture and stage actors and directors, and by

“official” Scrooge—the only image that received Dickens' personal blessing. Leech took literally the writer's description of Scrooge's “pointed nose” and “thin lips” and the “frosty rime” of white hair on his head and eyebrows. Scrooge's costume is based on a single line of the story preceding the surprise visit of Marley's ghost: Dickens had Scrooge “put on his dressing-gown and slippers, and his night-cap” before sitting down to his unappetizing bowl of gruel.

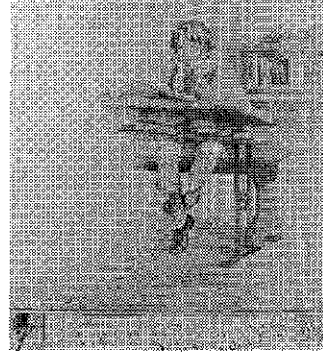
Arthur Rackham, the most famous of the late Victorian illustrators, produced his version of *A Christmas Carol* in 1915. His Scrooge is slightly more portly and a good deal more grumpy-looking than Leech's, but the description of the character's main physical characteristics, like Leech's, is based closely on Dickens' description.



film animators. It is perhaps a tribute to Dickens' extraordinary descriptive powers that almost all the faces below, as different as they seem at first sight, are recognizable as the same literary character.

As Dickens' original illustrator, John Leech had the privilege of creating the

Homer C. Appleton took a different perspective in the 1930s by sketching Scrooge as a boy. Here Scrooge daydreams of the fictional characters who were his (and Dickens') own



closest childhood companions: Robinson Crusoe, Friday, and Ali Baba.

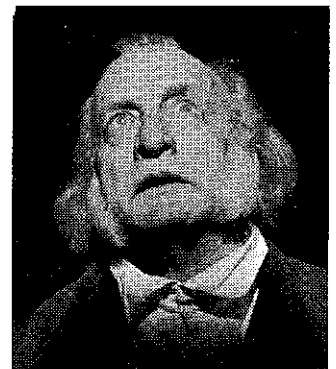


Reginald Owen, churlish and memorable, played Scrooge in the only previous full-length American version filmed in 1938.



This curmudgeonly Scrooge is Albert Finney, elaborately made up for “Scrooge,” the 1970 musical version of *A Christmas Carol*. The role was a daring departure for Finney, then known primarily as a romantic leading man.

And George C. Scott brings us a powerful, yet brooding characterization in the IBM presentation of *A Christmas Carol* which encores December 22 over the CBS Television Network. Scott let his hair and sideburns grow for the role, even plucking out a bald spot at the top of his head. He wore no makeup at all.



## 9

# Story to Film: The Adaptation of *A Christmas Carol* Part I

Charles Dickens' works have been turned into films many times, and *A Christmas Carol* is one of the two that has been most frequently filmed (the other is *Oliver Twist*). A dramatization of a story—however faithful to the original—differs significantly from the story itself. A novelist can *tell* you a story; a filmmaker or dramatist must *show* you the story. Therefore, Roger O. Hirson, the screenwriter who prepared this script of *A Christmas Carol*, had to overcome some serious problems.

Readers of Dickens' tale move two-and-a-half pages into the story before encountering the first dialogue—the cheery “A merry Christmas, uncle,” uttered by Scrooge's nephew Fred. By the time we reach that speech, however, we have learned many things: that Marley is dead, that Scrooge is tight-fisted and mean, and that it is Christmas Eve. We know these things because Dickens, in his narration, has told us so; but the dramatist has to find some way to show us visually.

Dickens' story opens with the line “Marley was dead: to begin with.” The film, on the other hand, begins with a series of what is called “establishing shots” because they depict the time of year, the location, the sense of Christmas. Here, in condensed form, are the first two pages of the teleplay. (“Ext.” means exterior, or outdoors, and “Int.” stands for interior, or indoors. “Another angle” denotes a different camera position.)

**EXT. CITY STREETS DAY**  
*A cold, dark, snowy day, near dusk. The street is filled with people buying food, fuel, ornaments, toys, and other presents.*

**ANOTHER ANGLE**  
*CLOSER on the shop windows, bursting with food and toys of all kinds. A group of boys begins a snow-ball fight.*

**ANOTHER ANGLE**  
*A man passes a quartet of boys and girls who are singing Christmas carols. The man hands a young man some money.*

*The SOUND of a passing bell. The man takes his hat off as a hearse comes down the street.*

**ANOTHER ANGLE**  
*On the hearse, as it passes by.*

## ANOTHER ANGLE

*Following the hearse. We see a sign that reads: SCROOGE & MARLEY. The sign hangs near a window facing on the street.*

**INT. SCROOGE'S OFFICE DAY**  
*BOB CRATCHIT is looking out the window, watching the hearse.*

## CRATCHIT

*Seven years ago today. . .*

## ANOTHER ANGLE

*Showing the whole office. EBENEZER SCROOGE, counting money in a corner, looks up.*

## SCROOGE

*What's that you say?*

## CRATCHIT

*Mr. Marley died. . . it was seven years ago this very day.*

## SCROOGE

*Thank you for that useless piece of information. Now would it be too much to ask you to return to the work for which I pay you handsomely. . .*

You may be familiar with these techniques. The camera shows us things that the novelist must describe and takes us into Scrooge's office, where we meet him and Cratchit for the first time. Curiously, though, the camera takes us to Scrooge's office by following a hearse. There is no hearse in the opening of *A Christmas Carol*, but the filmmaker needs to solve a problem: he must create a mood and convey the information that Marley is dead. So he invents the hearse that prompts Bob Cratchit's reminiscence, “Seven years ago today. . . Mr. Marley died.” No such speech occurs in the story, but here it solves the dramatist's problem. He can establish the holiday spirit with snow, carolers, and well-stocked shop windows—but how else could he convey the information that Marley had died seven years before? And, in this same brief exchange, the script writer tells us that Scrooge thinks a good deal about money and that his relations with his clerk are not cordial.

The dramatist must also find ways to tell us more about Scrooge's character; some of these are described in **Handout 10**.



# 10.

## Story to Film: The Adaptation of *A Christmas Carol* Part II

In this passage we can see the freedom of narrative to describe character from the inside, as well as the outside, to evaluate him, and to interpret his appearance. A film can show us a Scrooge who walks a certain way, or wears a certain kind of clothing, or has a mean and unforgiving expression on his face; but these visual details cannot express his pinched and soured soul as quickly or directly as the narrative passage. The filmmaker must reveal Scrooge's soul indirectly—through dialogue and behavior.

We have seen that Scrooge's first words in the film establish a concern for money and an unfeeling relationship with his clerk, Bob Cratchit. The very next lines in that scene reinforce this impression. Scrooge has just suggested sarcastically that Cratchit get back to work, and the script (somewhat condensed) continues:

### ANOTHER ANGLE

*Cratchit picks up a piece of coal with a small, very old scuttle.*

SCROOGE

*Put that down, Mr. Cratchit!*

CRAATCHIT

*The fire's gone cold, Mr. Scrooge...*

SCROOGE

*Come over here, Mr. Cratchit.*

*Scrooge shows Cratchit his shirt.*

SCROOGE

*What is this, Mr. Cratchit?*

CRAATCHIT

*A shirt...*

SCROOGE

*And this...?*

CRAATCHIT

*A vest...*

SCROOGE

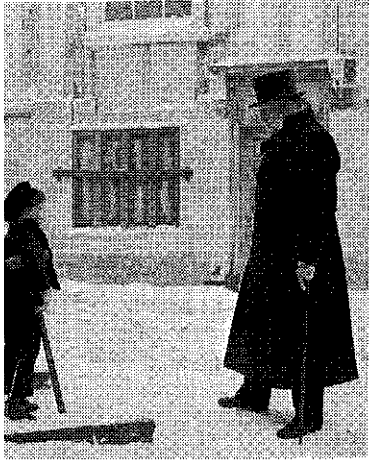
*These are garments, Mr. Cratchit. Garments were invented by the human race as a protection against the cold. Once purchased, they may be used indefinitely for the purpose for which they were intended. Coal burns. Coal is momentary. And coal is costly. There will be no more coal burned in this office today. Is that quite clear, Mr. Cratchit?*

This exchange, which does not take place in Dickens' story, displays an inner Scrooge who fully confirms the meanness of his external appearance. It also reveals a kind of energy that makes us respond to him. Because the point of *A Christmas Carol* is Scrooge's conversion, we must not despise him entirely.

A bit later on in the story, the screenwriter invents a new setting and rearranges the sequence of events in a way that both increases visual interest and emphasizes Scrooge's grasping and rapacious character. In Dickens' story, Scrooge's nephew, Fred, is followed into the office by two philanthropic gentlemen who ask for a charitable contribution from Scrooge which Scrooge refuses to give. Scrooge then grudgingly gives Bob Cratchit Christmas Day off and goes home to eat his solitary dinner. In the screenplay, however, Scrooge and Cratchit quibble over the Christmas holiday immediately after Fred leaves, and Scrooge then leaves the office for the Exchange where he does much of his business. On the way, the screenwriter has Scrooge encounter Tiny Tim, thus introducing the child much earlier than in the original story.

Scrooge arrives at the Exchange and promptly raises the cost of the corn he controls, indifferent to the fact that higher prices will hurt the poor. At this point in the film the screenwriter introduces the two philanthropic gentlemen whose request for charity Scrooge will so brutally dismiss.

By this time, even viewers unfamiliar with Dickens' story will expect no other response from Scrooge. The miser's physical appearance, his selfish refusal to let his clerk add coal to the fire, his treatment of his nephew, his attitude toward Tiny Tim, his hard dealing on the Exchange, and his sneering response to a request for charity—all have firmly established the sour, miserly, grasping character that has become synonymous with the word *Scrooge* in our time. Therefore, because this version of *A Christmas Carol* is not a written narrative but a film, Scrooge's character has been established in purely *dramatic* terms.



Here is a portion of Dickens' description of Scrooge in the first part of *A Christmas Carol*:

Oh! but he was a tight-fisted hand at the grindstone, Scrooge! a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, 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, shrivelled his cheek, stiffened his gait; made his eyes red, his thin lips blue, and spoke out shrewdly in his grating voice.

# 11.

## Filming *A Christmas Carol* Conversations with George C. Scott and Clive Donner



Clive Donner

Academy Award-winning actor George C. Scott plays Ebenezer Scrooge in IBM's presentation of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, and Clive Donner is the director. Together with screenwriter Roger O. Hirson, these men had the primary creative responsibility for translating Dickens' tale to film.

Below are excerpts from interviews with Mr. Scott and Mr. Donner.  
*Q. When you both began to conceive *A Christmas Carol* as a film, what were the basic values you wanted to bring to it?*

DONNER: There are, of course, the obvious ones: that we had a story about a man who seemed to be filled with greed and dislike for the human race, and who, through a supernatural experience, found a kind of redemption. And so we began by thinking about the characters, and since Scrooge is the chief character, he received our first attention.

We always think of him as being the prototypical miser, a recluse, just scratching away for worldly gain. But in reading the story again, we found ourselves facing the young Scrooge as Dickens wrote him, an outward-looking, bright young man with great opportunities in life, who went through two devastating emotional experiences. First, his mother died when he was very young, and second, his fiancée turned him down because he chose to work and save as a more important priority than getting married. Of course, she was right from her point of view and he was right from his.

SCOTT: It's important, as Clive says, to realize that Scrooge thinks he's right. He thinks he's right to live as he does up to the very end. I look on him as a very tired man who is weighted down by avarice and loneliness and isolation, but he's tough and he keeps on going. And when the Spirits begin to try to change him, he puts up a real fight. He's quite a battler. It's only at the end, when he's faced with the inevitability of his own death, that he begins to shape up and to make a real effort to change his life.

DONNER: And, of course, that leads us to the underlying social message, which was probably Dickens' main concern. He was a real social crusader, and he cared desperately for the plight of the poor. Dickens knew very well that Christmas was not a very cheerful time of year for many

people. And what he wanted to do was to reestablish Christmas as a time of fellowship and benevolence and good will toward all, but especially those who are less well off. Because he was a great writer, he did all this through a story that people love all over the world and that practically dramatizes itself.

SCOTT: He's a great storyteller, and quite a bit of the dialogue in the script is word-for-word from the book. He writes excellent dialogue, maybe because he was always interested in the theater. Nonetheless, there are a few scenes that aren't in the book. For example, we have a scene with a poor family who are forced to spend Christmas Eve sheltered under a bridge. It's not in Dickens, but it underlines his social point.

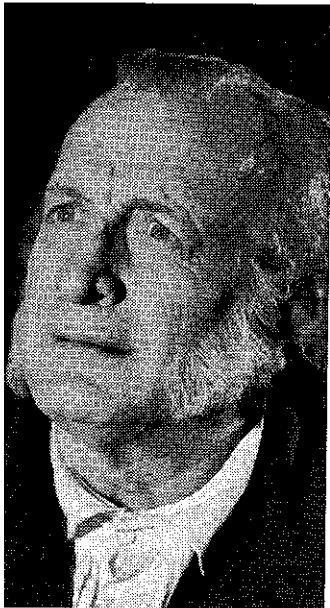
*Q. What about the other characters? Scrooge isn't the only person in the story.*

DONNER: They've got to be well-acted, or there's a danger of their coming across as stereotypes. And they're *not* stereotypes. Cratchit, for example, played by David Warner in our film, is not a "Milquetoast." He recognizes his position, but he doesn't think of himself as a perpetual underdog being bullied by an old sadist. He knows that Scrooge has his problems, but he needs that job, and basically he thinks of himself as a happy man. He's got a family he loves very much and they are fortunate enough to be together.

And for Scrooge's nephew, Fred, we got a wonderful actor named Roger Rees. Fred is in some ways the crux of our view of the story. He's the son of Scrooge's beloved sister, who died giving him birth, and who loved Scrooge very much. Despite the fact that his uncle is embittered and probably detests him, Fred invites him to Christmas dinner every year. And you must understand that this comes from his love of his mother, and this kind of forgiving love, without hope of any reward, is exactly what Dickens is trying to inspire in his story.

Without getting sloppy or sentimental, I think that the sense of love is what gives *A Christmas Carol* some of its enduring quality.

SCOTT: You've got to give some of the credit to the story line; it's probably the strongest point. And, like Shakespeare, Dickens just doesn't seem to date.



George C. Scott