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A Christmas Carol: A Dickens of a Ghost Story



Marley's Ghost
(Arthur Rackham)

A Christmas Carol is many things: a Christmas story of spiritual redemption, a lesson in social responsibility, a lively entertainment. It also belongs to an ancient and honorable literary genre — the ghost story.

Dickens had an early initiation into the hair-raising pleasures of the horror tale. When he was five, a thirteen-year-old girl named Mary Weller joined the Dickens family as a nursemaid for young Charles. She was an inspired storyteller, and her tales almost paralyzed her young charge with fear. Some of Mary Weller's tales Dickens later recalled and retold in print — notably, "Captain Murderer," about a sort of Bluebeard who murders and eats his wives, and "The Devil's Bargain," in which the Devil purchases his victims' souls for a variety of material goods, including a talking rat. In all, Dickens wrote about 20 "ghost" stories, among which *A Christmas Carol* is the most famous.

Stories of the supernatural have fascinated readers and listeners since ancient times. The continuing popularity of the ghost story almost certainly reflects the widespread belief that the spirit (or soul) survives the death of the body and continues to exist eternally. What could be more natural, then, than that these spirits should occasionally return and make their presence felt to warn, help, or torment the living? This is the central situation of the classic ghost story.

The First Book of Samuel in the Hebrew Bible includes a narrative (probably written about 950 B.C.) in which King Saul goes in disguise to a "medium" who lives at a place called Endor. (She is sometimes referred to as the Witch of Endor.) Saul asks her to call up the spirit of the priest Samuel. Contact is made, although Saul cannot see the spirit, and Samuel tells Saul that he will lose the impending battle against the Philistines, and that he and his sons will be killed. Of course, the spirit's prediction is accurate.

The ancient Greeks, as did the Egyptians before them, celebrated elaborate funeral rites to speed the spirits of the dead on their way properly. In Homer's *Odyssey*, one spirit (who had broken his earthly neck in a drunken fall) accosts Odysseus in Hades to complain bitterly of the shabby treatment of his remains.

In the 2500 years since Homer, the ghost story has been much abused by hacks, but many of history's greatest writers have created ghosts of their own. Shakespeare, for instance, uses ghosts on several occasions. The ghost of Prince Hamlet's father tells the circumstances of his murder, thus launching Hamlet on his hesitant path toward revenge. The descent of Shakespeare's Macbeth from heroic and loyal subject to ambitious murderer is dramatically heightened by the appearance at Macbeth's dinner table of the murdered Banquo's bloody ghost. The ghosts that Dickens raised in *A Christmas Carol*, though, play a more benevolent role.

The seed idea for *A Christmas Carol* can be found in an earlier ghost story that Dickens included in his wildly successful first

novel, *The Pickwick Papers*. Gabriel Grub is a mean-spirited churl who so dislikes Christmas that he chooses to celebrate Christmas Eve by digging a grave. He is kidnapped by the King of the Goblins and spirited to their underground caverns, where he is shown a series of scenes from life — reinforced by a series of hearty goblin kicks — that compel him to recognize his own humanity and his proper relationship with others.

The bandy-legged goblins who are the agents of Gabriel Grub's transformation are themselves transformed in *A Christmas Carol* into the four ghosts who make Scrooge's Christmas Eve so eventful. They come not so much to frighten Scrooge as to awaken him to his responsibilities as a human being before it is too late. Marley's Ghost prepares the miser for what will follow; and the Ghosts of Christmas Past, Present, and Yet to Come reawaken in him the memories of his embittered childhood, show him the good nature of those who have every right to despise him, and terrify him with a glimpse of his own solitary and unlamented death. The ghosts in this story redeem the man they haunt.



Frontispiece to Dickens'
Christmas book *The Haunted Man*. (1848)

The success of *A Christmas Carol* prompted Dickens to produce a number of Christmas books in the years that followed; in fact, they became almost an annual event. One of these, *The Haunted Man*, is thematically related to *A Christmas Carol*, especially in the idea that memories, however painful, play a significant role in helping people to maintain their humanity. In *The Haunted Man*, a spirit grants the protagonist, whose name is Redlaw, his wish to be free from the anguish of unhappy memories. But a price is attached. Anyone Redlaw comes into contact with will also forget all the painful incidents of the past. The result is an emotional disaster: Redlaw and those he touches become hardened, almost inhuman monsters. The point of the story is embodied in its final comment: "Lord, keep my Memory Green!"

But of all Dickens' ghosts, those in *A Christmas Carol* are the best known. Each of the four has his own special character, and each has a specific role to play in Scrooge's redemption. Taken together, they help to make Dickens' first "Christmas Book" a ghost story even the imaginative young Mary Weller would have envied.