

HISTORICAL SETTING FOR A CHRISTMAS CAROL

Directions: Read the historical background below to **A CHRISTMAS CAROL**. As you watch the film, identify the aspects of the times in which Dickens wrote.

London and the Victorian Age

Charles Dickens wrote during the Victorian Age, an era that took its name from Queen Victoria, England's titular ruler from 1819-1901. During Victoria's tenure, London reigned as the world's preeminent metropolis and the country's unparalleled center of commerce, culture, and government. In the realm of British art, Dickens was joined by such literary luminaries as Alfred, Lord Tennyson, William Wordsworth, and Anthony Trollope. In government, the age witnessed the fortuitous ascendancy of two brilliant statesmen and political rivals, Benjamin Disraeli and William Gladstone. In business, London's Industrial Age contributed the lion's share of the manpower and capital that brought the country to a position of world economic dominance. In short, London under Queen Victoria was the acknowledged seat of global power: a vital, densely populated, urban settlement of enormous national and international consequence.

But there was a downside to the Industrial Age. By the time Charles Dickens had published his first novel, *The Pickwick Papers* (1836-1837), industrialization had profoundly altered the physical, social, and cultural landscapes of Great Britain. The emergence of the factory system had drawn rural laborers to the great urban centers in numbers unparalleled in history, creating dangerous conditions of overcrowding and feeding incipient "modern" problems of social dislocation, crime, and poverty. Social critics spoke of the dangers of "surplus

population," and debated the relative merits of proposed solutions.

In London, the Thames River filled with sewage and industrial waste. The air was dense with soot and pollution choked from residential and industrial chimneys. Inside the factories, which had replaced the home as the place of economic production, unscrupulous owners paid poverty-level wages for 14-

hour days, and employed young children in dangerous, even lethal, work environments.

Predictably, poverty and ignorance flourished, driving a deep wedge between the richest and poorest classes in England. At one extreme, wealthy businessmen and vestigial royalty operated with virtually unlimited financial resources; at the other, indigent beggars roamed the streets, and working class ghettos arose in the filth of decay and urban neglect. Class divisions became an abiding symbol of the Victorian Era.

Dickens and London

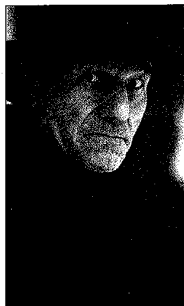
Dickens' novels are early witnesses to these disturbing urban phenomena. In works such as *David Copperfield*, *Great Expectations*, *Nicholas Nickleby*, and *Oliver Twist*, Dickens casts a jaundiced eye on the social and physical conditions of Victorian London. Invariably, seedy pockets of urban decay and poverty are juxtaposed in meaningful contrast with scenes of fantastic wealth and opulence. Beggars, thieves, and miscreants—like *Twist's* Fagin or *Great Expectations's* Magwitch—haunt the alleys of forgotten neighborhoods, and pollution, overcrowding, and ugliness are ubiquitous reminders of London's seamy underside. The rich and the poor kept their distance, and often looked upon the other with mutual suspicion and loathing.

The Victorian conception of poverty allowed for little compassion. The poor were generally considered to be of inferior moral character and as such, their indigence was held to be symptomatic of their innate deficiencies. Exceptions to this rule were made for the physically incapacitated – the blind and the physically challenged, for example. Consistent with these beliefs, British law provided for two kinds of welfare, dispensed under the guidelines of The Poor Laws. The "undeserving poor," those who could work but were indigent as a consequence of moral infirmities, were employed in state sponsored "workhouses." These dubious institutions were specifically designed to be uncomfortable – to provide a dirty, backbreaking day of labor. In this way, the undeserving poor would be taught to dislike state welfare, and would seek their own means of solvency. Persons who spent beyond their means were faced with the prospect of debtor's prison, a humiliating ordeal in which whole families took up temporary residence in dingy prisons until the patriarch's financial difficulties could be resolved.

The "deserving poor," by contrast, were allowed "in-house" charity, consisting of handouts of food, clothing, and other basic necessities. This broader generosity with respect to the deserving poor was justified by their physical or mental disabilities. The deserving poor wanted to work but could not.

The Victorian Era also saw early reform efforts with respect to issues of child labor, unfair factory wages and work schedules, voting rights, and prison reform. Reform bills in 1832, 1867, and 1885 dramatically reduced the financial and property qualifications of voters, allowing a broader franchise and diminishing the power of the moneyed elite. In the mid-1800's, reformers began to demand reductions in the standard 14-hour workday for industry. Complex bargaining processes, the harbinger of modern labor relations practices, effectively established shorter working days and weeks, safer work environments, and restrictions on child labor.

Activity: Explain the paradox of London in the Victorian era to your students: the richest country of that time with some of the worst conditions imaginable. Ask them to watch the film with an eye toward these conditions. Tell them to listen carefully to Scrooge. What sorts of attitudes does he display toward the poor?



CHARLES DICKENS: Life, Work, and Themes

Directions: Read the following and explore the relationship between Dickens' life and the story he tells in *A Christmas Carol*. Identify a prominent theme in your own life; it may be the role of family or education, the importance of friendship, or the difficulty of resisting peer pressure. Write a story that fictionalizes your chosen theme. Be creative and use your imagination.

A Brief Biography

Charles Dickens was born in 1812, in Portsmouth, England. He spent his formative years in London, and began his schooling at age nine. In 1824, his father, John, chronically incompetent in financial matters, was stripped of his house at the behest of anxious creditors. As was the custom, the entire Dickens family was banished to debtor's prison at Marshalsea until John Dickens' fiscal problems could be rectified. Young Charles was spared the indignity of prison, but was removed from school and forced into the role of family breadwinner as a menial worker in a shoe polish factory. A sensitive child gifted with an artist's imagination, Dickens spent an enormously painful period in the stultifying atmosphere of a mid-nineteenth century industrial warehouse, affixing labels to shoe polish canisters. The conditions of factory life were so traumatic that he was unable to talk about it for decades.

In 1827, a short apprenticeship as a legal clerk in London led him to a job as a court and Parliamentary reporter. Writing suited Dickens, and, in 1833, he published a series of well-received sketches of London life. His reputation as a fine writer and brilliant observer of the social scene was established, and he quickly capitalized on his good name with the publication of a comic novel called *The Pickwick Papers* (1836-1837). Works now canonized in the annals of great fiction followed. *A Christmas Carol*, *Little Dorrit*, *Bleak House*, *Oliver Twist*, *Nicholas Nickleby*, *David Copperfield*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, and *Great Expectations*, are among his masterworks.

Fact and Fiction

While it is true that fiction is an imaginative milieu, and often transmutes as much as it reflects "real life," the fictional works of Charles Dickens are profoundly intertwined with the real events of his past. Themes that are pervasive in his works often prove to have powerful reference points in his personal experience, particularly to those of his youth and adolescence. The warehouse work at age 12, the humiliating shadow of prison and familiar indebted-

ness, questions of money and social rank, and topical issues of law and reform preoccupied him in early life - but they rankled and haunted him through his later years as well, and are present in various forms in all of his writings.

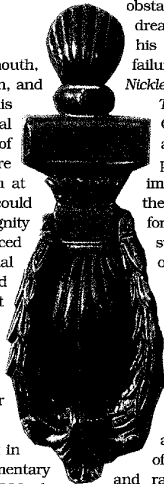
Over and over again, as if to exorcise the demons of his past, Dickens' fiction turned to his earliest memories. The issue of the latent potential of children and the myriad obstacles that they face in bringing their desires and dreams to fruition, play a prominent role in many of his best works. Powerful, deeply moving motifs of failure and redemption arise from the pages of *Nicholas Nickleby*, *Great Expectations*, *David Copperfield* and *A Tale of Two Cities*, to mention only a few. Overcrowded prisons, poorly organized schools, and impoverished street urchins and beggars populate his narratives. In all of these fictional imaginings, drawn from the turmoil of his own life, the reader senses Dickens' compassion for the less fortunate and his desire to find real meaning and substance behind the treacherous measurements of individual worth favored by society: wealth, class, power, and knowledge.

A Christmas Carol

A Christmas Carol is an uncharacteristically short work, but it showcases Dickens' signature themes. In the character of Scrooge, Dickens treats the issues of the proper roles of money and work in life, and, in Bob Cratchit, he provides an instructive counterpart to the Scroogian values of selfishness and money hoarding. Money, class, and rank are unreliable guidelines for determining human worth in Dickens' fictional world; and true merit is often hidden among the rags and ignorance of the poor and the abandoned.

Tiny Tim is a Dickensian reminder of youthful potential spoiled by poverty. Encumbered by his metal scaffolding, the child is also an unforgettable image of youth in thrall to industry: He is literally trapped in metal parts in a way that summons pictures of children working endlessly at factory machines. The heartlessness of industrial society - which Dickens loathed - broods over the story as a whole, and is effectively personified in the person of Scrooge.

Moreover, *A Christmas Carol* turns upon the issue of redemption, perhaps the most pervasive of Dickens' major themes. Scrooge is, after all, a terrible man who is fortunate enough to view the arc of his bleak life in harsh relief. Like many Dickens protagonists, Scrooge seizes the chance to start again, and remakes himself as Dickens undoubtedly believed that he had done.



EXPLORING THEMES IN DICKENS' WORKS

Directions: Charles Dickens explores many of the same themes throughout his works. The following chart examines Dickens' treatment of these themes in *A Christmas Carol*, *A Tale of Two Cities* and *Great Expectations*. After watching TNT's *A CHRISTMAS CAROL*, read or watch the film adaptation of one of these other stories and compare Dicken's approach to these themes.

TNT and Hallmark Entertainment present DAVID COPPERFIELD FALL 2000				
Theme	<i>A Christmas Carol</i>	<i>A Tale of Two Cities</i>	<i>Great Expectations</i>	<i>David Copperfield</i>
Error and redemption	Scrooge's journey from miserly misanthrope to enthusiastic philanthropist.	Sydney Carton's selfless act of substitution at the guillotine.	Pip's revelation that he has been heartlessly arrogant, and his subsequent acceptance of his true origins.	The marriage of Dora and David is a mismatch - Dora dies, and David travels abroad for 3 years. David realizes that Agnes Wickfield has been his true love.
Class divisions	Scrooge versus Bob Cratchit and the enormous gap between the poor and the well to do.	The "carriage scene": In which a wealthy member of the royal class huris coins as "payment" for killing a child of poverty.	Young Pip's world, as juxtaposed with the rarefied world of Ms. Havisham, Jaggers, and others.	Emily wanting to become a lady and being recognized as one when she learns a new language.
The perils of wealth versus the virtues of poverty	Scrooge's pursuit of money is his spiritual downfall; Bob Cratchit's priorities are properly focused on family, love, and companionship.	The novel centers on the injustices of institutionalized castes of the wealthy and the poor.	Pip's money is the catalyst for his descent into shallow and self-destructive pursuits; Joe Gargery is the book's moral anchor, a poor but virtuous blacksmith.	The symbolism of the perils of wealth as represented by Uriah Heep; and the virtues of poverty as represented by Mr. Micawber.
The fallacy that law is synonymous with justice	Scrooge's wrong-headed insistence that the poor deserve their fate; and his belief that the meager remedies for poverty provided by law work houses and prisons - are sufficient.	In revolutionary Paris, the law maintained the vestiges of a feudal system, by which the royal few prospered at the expense of the disenfranchised many; bloodshed inevitably followed.	Mr. Jaggers frequently declaims that law and justice do not go hand in hand; Magwitch, for example, is both a good man and a prisoner of the state; Miss Havisham is both a witch-like purveyor of evil and a well-respected member of the community.	The never-ending debt problems of Mr. Micawber always end with him in debtor's prison. Where is the justice if there is no resolution?
The squandered potential of the young; social neglect of the young	Tiny Tim is a helpless victim of poverty; his health will fatally deteriorate if his situation does not change.	The precarious future of Jerry Cruncher's child; the young man is saddled with a criminal father incapable of true guidance.	Young Pip is hectorated and beaten by an abusive sister; young Magwitch is an orphaned out-cast raised as a thief; young Estella is deeply scarred by the evil Miss Havisham.	David's return to the Murdstones, after his mother's death, and how they totally ignored him, represents one example of the cruel neglect of children.