**Study Guide for *A Christmas Carol* (1843)**

**by Charles Dickens (1812-1870)**

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**Plot Summary**

**Stave One: 'Marley's Ghost'**

We meet Ebenezer Scrooge, a miserly old businessman, whose partner Jacob Marley died seven years previously. Scrooge hates Christmas, and expresses his views to his nephew Fred, refusing his invitation to dine; to his clerk Bob Cratchit, who shivers beside a miniscule fire; and to two gentleman who unsuccessfully request a charitable donation from him. Upon returning home, he is visited by the ghost of his dead business partner Marley, who describes the punishment he suffers for his miserly and uncharitable life. Marley's ghost announces that Scrooge will be visited by three spirits who will seek to convince him of the error of his ways.

**Stave Two: 'The First of the Three Spirits'**

Scrooge is woken by a strange looking phantom who takes him on a trip into his past: the Ghost of Christmas Past. First he sees himself alone at boarding school, not returning home for the holidays as the other boys are, and wishes that he had been kinder to a young boy singing carols. Then he sees himself returning home as an older youth, with his beloved sister Fan, and reflects on his treatment of her son Fred. He witnesses the jovial generosity of his master Fezziwig during his apprentice days, and reflects on the contrast with his treatment of his own employee, Bob Cratchit. Finally, he sees his sweetheart parting from him, convinced that he loves money more, and is tortured by the sight of her loving, happy family, which could have been his had he not been gripped by avarice.

**Stave Three: 'The Second of the Three Spirits'**

Scrooge finds a hearty looking ghost in his apartments, surrounded by bounteous food and sitting in front of a roaring fire. It is the Ghost of Christmas Present. They travel swiftly through the London streets, witnessing the cheerfulness of all the people as the Christmas spirit touches them. Scrooge is taken to the Cratchits' house and witnesses their festivities, which are very joyful despite the small quantities of food they can afford. The only gloomy moment comes when Bob, with great magnanimity, insists on toasting his employer, to the disgust of his wife. Scrooge learns that Tiny Tim will die within a year if he is not nourished better, and is filled with penitence and grief. The Ghost then takes Scrooge to see a huge variety of people celebrating Christmas with great cheer, however humble and poor they may be. Towards the end of their travels, they visit Fred's house, where Fred and his wife and friends are enjoying a merry evening together. Fred insists that he is not angry with Scrooge. He pities him, and insists on toasting him, whatever his wife's objections. The Ghost ends with a warning, showing Scrooge two impoverished children who embody ignorance and want. Ignorance, proclaims the Ghost, is the greatest danger if it is not addressed.

**Stave Four: 'The Last of the Spirits'**

The last spirit is dark and mute, only communicating by gesture. It is the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come. This Ghost shows Scrooge various businessmen who are not moved by the death of one of their number. The only emotions inspired by his death are happy ones: the greedy delight of the servants who have plundered his house, and even the shirt from his corpse, and the relief of a family that owed him money. When Scrooge asks to be shown tenderness following a death, he is shown the manner in which the Cratchits treasure the memory of Tiny Tim, and are inspired by the patience he once showed in his sufferings. Finally, Scrooge is shown the grave of the dead man, and his own name is written upon it. He begs for the opportunity to reform, but the Ghost still does not speak. It disappears, and Scrooge is back once again in his apartments.

**Stave Five: 'The End of It'**

Scrooge is determined to make amends for his former miserliness and is delighted to discover that it is Christmas Day, and the Spirits did all their work in one night. He sends a boy to buy the largest turkey from the poulterers and has it sent to the Cratchits. He strides out on to the streets to go to church, wishing everyone a merry Christmas, and upon encountering one of the gentlemen who was collecting for charity the previous day, he donates a large sum. He goes to his nephew's for Christmas dinner, receiving a hearty welcome. The next day, he gives Bob Cratchit a pay rise. The story ends with an overview of Scrooge's reformed character: generous and charitable, and well known as someone who knows how to celebrate Christmas.

**Setting**

**Victorian London**

Serious poverty was a very obvious and widespread problem in Victorian London, as can be seen from the presence of beggars on the street, and from the symbolic children Ignorance and Want, who represent the unmet needs of the poorest in society. Scrooge walks through this city oblivious to the sufferings of those around him.

**The Countryside**

Although he has lived his adult life in London, it is clear in Stave Two that Scrooge grew up in the countryside. In contrast to the moral corruption of the city, the countryside represents innocence and joy, which Scrooge begins to rediscover when he returns there.

**The Weather**

At the start of the novel, the weather is foggy, which symbolises Scrooge’s moral blindness. But when he returns to the countryside of his youth, it is sunny, showing that the light of truth is dawning upon him. At the end of the novel, Christmas Day dawns bright and sunny too, symbolising Scrooge’s bright new start upon a life of generosity

**Scrooge’s Office**

Scrooge’s office is small and cramped, which represents his narrow view of life as consisting of nothing but making money. The office is also extremely cold at the start of the novel, because Scrooge does not want to spend money on coal to heat it sufficiently. However, at the end of the novel, the office is warmed by Scrooge’s newfound generosity, as he tells Bob to buy more coal for the fire.

**Fezziwig’s Warehouse**

In contrast to Scrooge’s cramped, cold office, Fezziwig’s warehouse is spacious, warm and welcoming, especially when he prepares it for a Christmas party in Stave Two.

**The Cratchit House**

The Cratchit house is small but full of life, as the Cratchits have six children. It is lovingly tended by Mrs Cratchit, who always makes the best out of what she has. It is the scene of the Cratchit’s meagre Christmas Dinner, which they nevertheless enjoy, determined as they all are to have a happy Christmas together as a family.

**Scrooge’s House**

In contrast to the Cratchit house, Scrooge’s house is dark and empty. He lives there alone, and does not even light any more candles than is strictly necessary, preferring darkness, because it is cheap. The lonely, dark and empty house makes clear that Scrooge gains no enjoyment from his wealth.

**Context**

**Economic Theory**

**Adam Smith**, one of the founders of modern economic theory, proposed that private self-interest was in the best interests of all, because it would lead to a thriving economy and a general increase in wealth.

**Thomas Malthus** proposed that economic improvements for the poor were self-defeating, because they would simply have more children and end up just as poor as before. These theories provide the basis for Scrooge's comment about the 'surplus population'.

**The Poor Law**

Inspired by Malthus’ ideas, the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 meant that relief for the destitute was only available through workhouses, which were made so unpleasant that only the most desperately impoverished would apply to them for relief.

*Note - further contextual knowledge is integrated into the theme, plot and character summaries.*

**Themes**

**Charity**

The virtue of self-sacrificial giving is at the heart of the novel. Scrooge must learn to give without any expectation of return, which goes against his principles of ‘business’.

**Forgiveness**

Grudges and resentment poison lives, and those who can forgive are able to be cheerful even in adversity. Fred and Bob Cratchit both exemplify this virtue, forgiving Scrooge for his harsh and cold actions towards them. They wish him well, however poorly he treats them. In both cases, their wives appear to be less magnanimous.

**Avarice**

Traditionally considered one of the seven deadly sins, avarice is the lust for wealth and possessions. It destroys charity and brings no joy to the evildoer, as can be clearly seen from Scrooge's miserable, lonely existence at the start of the novel, and the lonely death the future holds if he does not repent.

**Repentance and Conversion**

Scrooge's transformation shows Dickens' strong belief in human freedom, and the possibility of change and growth leading to renewal. Dickens clearly depicts the Christian idea that even the most hardened sinner can repent and change his ways, and be redeemed at the last.

**Business**

Scrooge is purely a man of business, which means that he looks after his own private interests and ignores the needs of others. Dickens does not attack business *per se*, however. There is no indication that Scrooge is planning to give it up at the end of the novel; he is merely planning to conduct his business with an eye to the public good, and use the proceeds for private philanthropy. Dickens does not present socialist views.

**Public Provision**

There are many references to public institutions such as the workhouses. They are portrayed as miserably inadequate. Based on the actions of the more virtuous characters, including the reformed Scrooge, the answer appears to lie in private philanthropy. The novel does not engage with questions of large scale public reform, which once again shows that Dickens does not have socialist ideas.

**Characters**

**Ebenezer Scrooge**

Ebenezer Scrooge is the hero of the novel. When we first meet Scrooge, he is completely cold, hard and uncharitable. But we learn during the novel how he once enjoyed life and even loved a woman. All of his better characteristics have been submerged under his passion for making money, however, to the point where he cares nothing for any other human being. When reminded of his former life, and shown the present and future consequences of his avarice, Scrooge seizes the opportunity to reform, and embraces generosity as the novel closes.

**Fred [surname never given]**

Fred is Scrooge's nephew and the son of his beloved sister Fan. Fred is a kind-hearted young man who endeavours to persuade his uncle to change his ways and enter into the Christmas spirit. He married for love, something of which Scrooge is particularly scornful at the opening of the novel. He remains magnanimous towards his uncle, and he welcomes Scrooge joyfully after his conversion.

**Jacob Marley**

Jacob Marley is Scrooge's former business partner, who died seven years prior to the novel's opening. In life, he shared Scrooge's avaricious attitude, but he suffers in the afterlife, and comes to warn Scrooge and persuade him to change his ways.

**Bob Cratchit**

Bob Cratchit is Scrooge's clerk, who works for low wages and in poor conditions, struggling to make enough money to feed his children adequately. Nevertheless, he insists on toasting his employer on Christmas day, thus exemplifying a charitable, forgiving attitude.

**Mrs Cratchit**

Mrs Cratchit is Bob Cratchit's wife. She works hard to make the home cheerful with Bob's meagre wages. She is less inclined to toast Bob's employer, perhaps because she cannot overlook the consequences of Scrooge's avarice for her own family, particularly Tiny Tim.

**'Tiny' Tim Cratchit**

Tiny Tim is Bob Cratchit's crippled son. Scrooge learns that Tim will die within a year if the Cratchits do not soon have a larger income so that he can be better nourished. This is a key moment in Scrooge's conversion to generosity.

**Mr Fezziwig**

Mr Fezziwig is a kind-hearted, jovial old merchant, to whom Scrooge was apprenticed as a young man. He is generous towards his apprentices, throwing a ball for them at Christmas time. Witnessing his generosity reminds Scrooge of the joys and benefits of open-heartedness.

**Fan**

Fan is Scrooge's sister, Fred's mother, whom he loved dearly when she was alive.

**Belle**

Belle is Scrooge's sweetheart in younger days, who parts from him when she sees that he loves money more than he loves her. She later marries happily and has a large family, a fact which fills Scrooge with regret for what might have been.

**Key Quotations**

*Page numbers refer to the Wordsworth Classics edition.*

*In British English, ‘quote’ is a verb. The abstract noun is ‘quotation’.*

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| **Quotation** | **Character** | **Theme / Setting** |
| **Stave One: ‘Marley’s Ghost’** |  |  |
| **1.** p8 'Oh! but he was a tight-fisted hand at the grindstone, Scrooge! a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, 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.' | Scrooge | Avarice |
| **2.** p9 'Scrooge had a very small fire, but the clerk's fire was so very much smaller that it looked like one coal.' | Scrooge | AvariceScrooge’s Office |
| **3.** p9 '"Bah!" said Scrooge. "Humbug!"' | Scrooge |  |
| **4.** p9 '"If I could work my will," said Scrooge indignantly, "every idiot who goes around with "Merry Christmas" on his lips should be boiled with his own pudding, and buried with a stake of holly through his heart."' | Scrooge |  |
| **5.** p11 'His nephew left the room without an angry word.' | Fred | Charity |
| **6.** p12 '"I wish to be left alone [ . . . ] I don't make merry myself at Christmas, and I can't afford to make idle people merry."' | Scrooge | AvariceBusiness |
| **7.** p12 '"If they would rather die," said Scrooge, "they had better do it, and decrease the surplus population."' | Scrooge | Charity |
| **8.** p12 '"It's enough for a man to understand his own business, and not to interfere with other people's."' | Scrooge | Business |
| **9.** p19 '"I wear the chain I forged in life [ . . . ] I made it link by link, and yard by yard"' | Marley | AvariceRepentance |
| **10.** p20-21 '"Mankind was my business. The common welfare was my business”’ | Marley | CharityBusiness |
| **Stave Two: ‘The First of the Three Spirits’** |  |  |
| **11.** p35 Belle's parting with Scrooge: '"another idol has displaced me [ . . . ] a golden one."' | ScroogeBelle | Avarice |
| **12.** p38 Belle's husband saw Scrooge in his office, alone: '"His partner lies upon the point of death, I hear; and there he sat alone. Quite alone in the world, I do believe."' | Scrooge | Scrooge’s Office |
| **Stave Three: ‘The Second of the Three Spirits’** |  |  |
| **13.** p41 Scrooge is becoming more humble: 'Scrooge entered timidly, and hung his head before the Spirit. He was not the dogged Scrooge he had been' | Scrooge | Repentance |
| **14.** p49 '"I see a vacant seat," replied the ghost, "in the poor chimney corner, and a crutch without an owner, carefully preserved. If these shadows remain unaltered by the Future, the child will die."' | Tiny Tim | Avarice |
| **15.** p49-50 The Ghost of Christmas Present uses Scrooge's words against him: '"What then? If he be like to die, he had better do it, and decrease the surplus population." // Scrooge hung his head to hear his own words quoted by the Spirit, and was overcome with penitence and grief.' | Scrooge | Repentance |
| **16.** p50 '"Mr Scrooge!" said Bob. "I'll give you Mr Scrooge, the Founder of the Feast!"' | Bob Cratchit | Charity |
| **17.** p50 'He was the Ogre of the [Cratchit] family' | ScroogeCratchits | Avarice |
| **18.** p54 '"I am sorry for him. I couldn't be angry with him if I tried. Who suffers by his ill whims? Himself always."' | Fred | Charity |
| **19.** p56 Scrooge enters into the party at his nephew's: 'he begged like a boy to be allowed to stay until the guests departed.' | Scrooge | Repentance |
| **20.** p57 Fred toasts his uncle: '"A merry Christmas and a happy New Year to the old man, whatever he is!" said Scrooge's nephew. "He wouldn't take it from me, but he may have it, nevertheless. Uncle Scrooge!"' | Fred | Charity |
| **21.** p59 Scrooge pities Ignorance and Want: '"Have they no refuge or resource?" cried Scrooge. // "Are there no prisons?" said the Spirit, turning on him for the last time with his own words. "Are there no workhouses?"' | Scrooge | AvariceCharity |
| **Stave Four: ‘The Last of the Spirits’** |  |  |
| **22.** p71 '"And I know," said Bob, "I know, my dears, that when we recollect how patient and how mild he was; although he was a little, little child; we shall not quarrel easily among ourselves, and forget poor Tiny Tim in doing it."' | Tiny Tim | Charity |
| **23.** p71 'Spirit of Tiny Tim, thy childish essence was from God!' | Tiny Tim | Charity |
| **24.** p72 '"Men's courses will foreshadow certain ends, to which, if persevered in, they must lead," said Scrooge. "But if the courses be departed from, the ends will change."' | Scrooge | Repentance |
| **25.** p72 '"I will honour Christmas in my heart, and try to keep it all the year [ . . . ] Oh, tell me I may sponge away the writing on this stone!"' | Scrooge | Repentance |
| **Stave Five: ‘The End of It’** |  |  |
| **26.** p74 'Best and happiest of all, the Time before him was his own to make amends in!' | Scrooge | Repentance |
| **27.** p75 '"I don't know anything. I'm quite a baby. Never mind. I don't care. I'd rather be a baby."' | Scrooge | Repentance |
| **28.** p77 At Fred's: 'He passed the door a dozen times before he had the courage to go up and knock. But he made a dash and did it.' | Scrooge | Repentance |
| **29.** p78 Fred welcomes the reformed Scrooge: 'He was at home in five minutes. Nothing could be heartier.' | Fred | Charity |
| **30.** p78 'Make up the fires and buy another coal-scuttle before you dot another i, Bob Cratchit!' | Scrooge | RepentanceScrooge’s Office |
| **31.** p78 To Bob: '"I'll raise your salary, and endeavour to assist your struggling family" | Scrooge | CharityRepentance |
| **32.** p78 'He did it all, and infinitely more; and to Tiny Tim, who did *not* die, he was a second father.' | Scrooge | CharityRepentance |
| **33.** p79 'it was always said of him, that he knew how to keep Christmas well, if any man alive possessed the knowledge.' | Scrooge | Repentance |