

The Dickens Trilogy

A Four-Level Literature
Parent Manual

by Michael Clay Thompson

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Four-Level Literature: General Comments

The purpose of this literature program is to immerse children in great books so that they experience literature as literature and not as a drudgery of tedious school activities. I want children's minds on the books themselves and not on attendant assignments. It is by loving to read that children become literate.

The pedagogy of this program is grown-up and reflective; it is deliberately simple, focusing entirely on the reading of the book and avoiding all traditional worksheet activities in favor of rich discussion and thoughtful writing. Busywork has been eliminated. The activities that are included are flexible options, not a rigid system requiring every step every time. In the end if the child does not love reading, we have failed.

This manual is for the homeschool parent. The homeschool environment is different in many dimensions from the traditional school environment, and the recommendations take full advantage of the

unique flexibility and purity of concentration that occurs in the homeschool setting. In writing a manual for homeschool use, however, I am mindful that the homeschool environment itself exists in many variations. Some children are homeschooled individually, others in small groups or classes. There will be homeschool children using this literature trilogy who are eight or nine years old and others who are of middle school age. There will be homeschool parents who want a grade-free, creative environment and others who want to establish a classical academic rigor that they may feel is lacking in the school system.

My strategy in this manual, therefore, is to provide paths for all of the above. I may refer to the *child*, or I may refer to the *class*, thinking of a small homeschool class. I may provide options for a fifth grader, and I may provide options for a seventh grader, who is by no means too old to read the books in this trilogy. Every activity in this manual can be conducted as an ungraded, creative activity, or it can be graded by a parent who wants the child to learn how to navigate a grading system. I do not provide any system for grading.

It is important that the approach to literature be

literary, focused on the texts, and simple. I do not want a noisy panorama of activities, worksheets, and other busywork to be the program. The program is the books. I want our approach to be deft and quiet, rather than loud. I want us to behave with literary grace. I want our activities to cuddle up to the books. We will do some creative and academic work in conjunction with the books, with our hearts turned at all times toward the books.

Accordingly, we can think about the program strategy in terms of four simple levels. The four levels are preparing, reading, creative thinking, and writing.

1. Preparing

Prior to reading the book, we might use an encyclopedia or the internet to look up the author and learn about the author's life and the place of the book in cultural history. This content, however, is secondary to the content of the book itself; it would not be important if the book were not important. An alternative is to do this research after reading the book, when the child may be even more curious about the details.

We might also prestudy the vocabulary by studying

The Dickens Trilogy Vocabulary Prestudy

Here are sixteen words common to all three novels.
Let us examine them before beginning the trilogy.

artifice: n. a clever device; deception or duplicity

comely: adj. attractive, pleasant in appearance

despondent: adj. emotionally low, hopeless

fain: adj. compelled

faltering: adj. unsteady, losing strength

homage: n. respect, honor

incoherently: adv. in an incomprehensible, confused way

lest: conj. in case

meagre: adj. lean, thin, scrawny

melancholy: adj. sad, pensive

prodigious: adj. huge, enormous

reproach: v. rebuke, blame, disapprove

spectral: adj. ghostly

supplication: n. earnest asking or begging

trifle: n. a little thing, a thing of little value

whither: adv. where

artifice: n. a clever device; deception or duplicity

“This garment hung so loosely on the figure, that its capacious breast was bare, as if disdaining to be warded or concealed by any artifice.”

A Christmas Carol

“...John Peerybingle was much too open in his nature, and too clumsy in all artifice—being a clumsy man in general...”

The Cricket on the Hearth

“With this inscrutable artifice, Toby withdrew to purchase the viands he had spoken of, for ready money, at Mrs. Chickenstalker’s; and presently came back, pretending he had not been able to find them, at first, in the dark.”

The Chimes

Blessed Are the Meek

A Comment

Let's talk about three of what are known as Charles Dickens's Christmas stories: *A Christmas Carol*, *The Cricket on the Hearth*, and *The Chimes*.

There are times when something is bothering you, and you do not know what it is. I have felt that way for days, as I have tried to begin this comment about these three stories.

It seemed an easy comment to write, on the face of it—three heart-warming stories in which tragic situations avoid tragic endings, in which sweet, helpless people survive the malice of heartless brutes. Why, in some cases the brutes are even reformed.

What could be better? Nothing to it. Write it up.

Only...I could not.

It was like living in a Dickens story, with a spectral hand holding me back every time I wanted to begin.

Something was wrong. My principal idea felt wrong.

I could not bring myself to write about the three stories. Something was bothering me, and I did not know what it was.

I know now, though.

The obstacle was that I wanted the stories to be what I had expected them to be before I read them, but they were not what I expected, and deep down, I sensed it. I had expected these stories to be like Dickens's great novels, like *Oliver Twist* or *Great Expectations* or *A Tale of Two Cities*.

But these stories are not like those. These are different.

In fact, by the standards of other famous novels or novellas, these stories do not measure up. Even though they moved me, they seemed flat and one-dimensional, almost like pedantic allegories. Their simplified villains are patent personifications of single evils, such as greed. Their protagonists are not protagonists at all in any usual way; they are not drawn with depth or complexity. They seem like pitiful victims, with nary a hero in sight. One searches in vain for a David Copperfield, a Pip, a Charles Darnay. I was accustomed to Dickens's intelligent, alert, ambitious, young characters, dodging calamities, foiling

A Christmas Carol

Language Illustration Questions

The following questions concern the language illustrations that appear in this edition of Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*. These questions will promote a thoughtful involvement with what the illustrations reveal about Dickens's writing.

1. What do you think is the most interesting language illustration in Stave One? Please explain why.
 2. Look at the first language illustration in Stave Two, about the grammar of the clause “the curtains of his bed were drawn.” Do you understand the point of this illustration? How would you explain it to someone who did not understand it?
 3. Which of the language illustrations in Stave Three is the best tip for how to be a great writer? Why?
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A Christmas Carol

Character Quotations for Quote Quizzes

The following quotations from Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* are for reflection and discussion, which could take the form of essay writing if that is one's preference. The child is not asked to comment on every quotation but is given a choice of several, allowing him or her to choose a favorite quotation or the one that he or she thinks is most interesting or meaningful.

These quotations are selected for their richness and potential for interpretation. There is not an answer key because there is not a right answer. These are open-ended Socratic reflections, not convergent questions that require the child to copy right answers onto a worksheet.

We want to foster extended, uninterrupted reading before pausing for reflection. This affords a more authentic reading experience than if we required paperwork after each chapter. We do not want these quotations to become major assignments that interrupt

the flow of the book.

In other words, this assignment should not be heavy or overly time-consuming. The idea is good reflection without anxiety. This is an open-book assignment, and the child may wish to go to the book to read the context of the quotation or to use additional quotations in his or her essays. Choice is good, so it is also acceptable for the child to select and discuss an interesting quotation not given here, instead of the ones that I provide. Each quotation is accompanied by the chapter number where it can be found.

1. What right have you to be dismal? What reason have you to be morose? You're rich enough.
- nephew

1. I want nothing from you; I ask nothing of you; why cannot we be friends? - nephew

1. I don't make merry myself at Christmas and I can't afford to make idle people merry. - Scrooge

A Christmas Carol

Creative Questions and Activities

These options are designed to expand the child's creative and imaginative interaction with the literature. I do not expect every option to be undertaken, and I would like for the child to play a part in choosing the creative activities that he or she will do. If you assign these as written essays, first person is acceptable.

1. Scrooge never mentions it, but he is a great reader. What kinds of books does he like to read? What makes you think so?
2. Imagine that for reasons known only to himself, the anonymous narrator of *A Christmas Carol* left one of the ghosts out of the story. There were really four. What was the other ghost, what did it look like, and what did it show Scrooge?

A Christmas Carol

Academic Writing Practice

Here are open-ended study questions about *A Christmas Carol*. Each question is to be the basis for an essay that incorporates quotations from the novel.

In my own courses I use open-book essay questions exclusively as the assessment for literature. I insist that essays be written in standard academic English. They must be true essays, with introductions, bodies, and conclusions centered on single ideas. Students must use the standard conventions of formal style: no contractions, no first person. *Essay Voyage* and my *Advanced Academic Writing* books provide the guidelines for the essays. I like to provide four or five study questions in advance, and I give students several days to prepare for the essays. The actual essay test presents students with three of the study questions, with one being mandatory. Each student chooses one of the remaining two to answer. Making one question mandatory causes students to prepare for

all of the study questions, requiring substantial thought and rereading. I do not spring surprise questions on the students. I do believe that some student choice is important.

I provide more than five questions here, and you can select those that you wish to give to the child. You also may replace any of these questions with questions of your own.

These are Socratic questions that do not favor one answer over another; the evaluation of the essays is based on the English, the essay structure, and the force of the case that the child makes with quotations. This means that the child may use his or her book during the essay session in order to quote from it.

1. Who is a more admirable person: Bob Cratchit or Scrooge's nephew? Why?
 2. What event in *A Christmas Carol* has the strongest effect on Scrooge?
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