

# The Dickens Trilogy

A Four-Level Literature  
Teacher Manual

by Michael Clay Thompson

Royal Fireworks Press  
Unionville, New York



## 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 classroom teacher. The classroom environment presents the teacher with unique limitations and opportunities. The classroom is a good environment for discussions and Socratic explorations

---

of ideas. The dynamic relationships between students and teacher provide moments of intense learning that are amplified by the group interactions. On the other hand, classroom teachers see students for limited amounts of time; teachers may have students of various readiness levels in the same classroom, and they usually have to report grades to an administration according to a system that can affect the classroom dynamic adversely. The activities that generate numerical scores may not be activities that increase student enthusiasm for content. Many of the most important things to teach are also the least scorable. Furthermore, classroom teachers have course content and test content that they are expected to cover, and this may limit the amount of time available for a literature program.

Teachers also work in a social culture that can be unintellectual or even anti-intellectual, and this may afford scant support for a teacher determined to bring rigorous, superb reading experiences to the students. The public understanding of the importance of literary classics, of long works, of works with rigorous vocabulary, and of works from previous generations or centuries is not always what a literature teacher would desire. The

---

teacher may be confronted with not only a lack of understanding but even an intractable opposition to these elements, even though these elements are the very heart of an authentic education.

All too often, great reading that includes these characteristics is rejected as “old-fashioned.” People who know literature well do not think that; it is an impediment to a credible program of literature, and it escalates the very weaknesses that our program is designed to strengthen.

Serious literature—including great children’s literature—is not old-fashioned, regardless of when it was written. High genius does not go out of fashion. Furthermore, Western civilization did not begin thirty years ago. It is no advantage to be able to read only entry-level books of the present generation. Great readers of every age read great writers of every age, and the great readers of our present avidly devour the best books of the past.

Books are the time machine of culture. Whenever they were written, it is now that we read them. It is one of the great joys of the educated mind to read back through time, to read back through the centuries, to read great

---

books written in the nineteenth century, the eighteenth century, and before. It is exciting to immerse oneself in the English of Jane Austen or of Daniel Defoe. There is a romance in the history of the English language. It is not better if one cannot read the *Declaration of Independence*, or *Gulliver's Travels*, or Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, or Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. We do not want our children's minds to be trapped in contemporary English or contemporary beginner's vocabulary.

Imagine that you lived in a spectacular mountain range, surrounded by famous peaks, but did not know it; you had a high fence, and all you had ever seen was the yard around your house.

We also do not want our children to be capable only of reading short works or excerpts. We want their attention spans to be developed and strengthened. Minds grow from struggle. Life is filled with problems that require long and complex thinking. There is a growth of intellect that occurs in following a story or argument for 300 pages that is unknown to everyone who has not experienced it, and almost all famous works are long. To eliminate long works from the educational program is to eliminate the educational program. It is to eliminate

---

almost all famous novels. It is to eliminate almost all of the reading that makes one educated. To avoid the long books is to be unread. The current emphasis on short works and excerpts, however well-intentioned, is an educational disaster. Long works are essential.

Short works and excerpts are geared to the instructional minutes available in a one-hour class period. They are not geared to the serious needs of an educated life, and there are abundant ways to incorporate long works into the classroom—ways that have been standard educational practice for centuries.

Finally, we do not want children's reading to focus on works of mere entertainment. Fun is desirable, but there is more to educated reading than fun, and fun is not the most important goal. Greater than fun is meaning. We want children to learn the excitement of thinking, of books that use fiction or nonfiction to disclose important ideas. We do not want children's reading experience to be limited to works of distraction. The educated mind is not a state of oblivion; it is a state of illumination. We want children to know the attraction of serious books with serious ideas that have the chance of being right or wrong. There are novels with memorable characters that

---

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?
-

## *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. Students are not asked to comment on every quotation but are given a choice of several, allowing them to choose their favorite quotation or the one that they think 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 students 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 students may wish to go to the book to read the context of the quotation or to use additional quotations in their essays. Choice is good, so it is also acceptable for the students 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 students' creative and imaginative interaction with the literature. I do not expect every option to be undertaken, and I would like for the students to play a part in choosing the creative activities that they 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 students. 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 students make with quotations. This means that students may use their books during the essay session in order to quote from them.

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?