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**CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE  
FOLKLORE OF CHRISTMAS:  
EXPLORING CULTURAL DIVERSITY  
WITH A CHRISTMAS CAROL**

**Sarah Henderson**

Helping students enjoy and appreciate literature is one of the rewards of teaching English, but English teachers now often face new challenges as they teach the classics of the traditional curriculum to students in an increasingly multicultural society. Yet good literature of all kinds can evoke a personal response from students and foster sensitivity to other people, including the people of a different time or culture. As an English teacher, I believe that folklore can provide a bridge to make literature more accessible to students. Integrating a study of folklore with the study of literature can not only help students appreciate a literary text but also embrace their knowledge of themselves and deepen their understanding of other people.

Indeed, analyzing folklore and cultural practices as part of literary study can even help students develop what Paolo Freire calls "critical consciousness." Critical consciousness is a form of awareness which allows one to stand back from one's surroundings, one's culture or subculture, and discern and analyze relationships and patterns (including patterns of exploitation) and the implicit or explicit values that inform them. Developing critical consciousness is an essential step in becoming a person who can think and act in an autonomous fashion. To foster the formation of critical consciousness, Shor and Freire suggest that teachers encourage students in a supportive environment to examine and question the culture around them—in the nation as a whole and in their neighborhoods and families. I have designed a short two-day unit on Charles Dicken's *A Christmas Carol* which makes a start towards that kind of examination and questioning.

In my unit, students learn more about the folklore and the folklore genre of calendar customs as they study and write about Charles Dicken's

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*A Christmas Carol*. Folklorist Jan Harold Brunvand defines a custom as "a traditional practice—a mode of individual behavior or a habit of social life—that is transmitted by word of mouth or imitation, then ingrained by social pressure, common usage, and parental or other authority" (329). *Calendar customs*, Brunvand explains, are those customs linked to holidays (329).

Although this unit is appropriate for all secondary grades, I have designed it with 9th and 10th graders of varying abilities in mind because *A Christmas Carol* is commonly part of the curriculum of those grades. Although student interest in the novella may have been dulled by overexposure to the story in cinematic and television versions, few students have actually read the work itself. Students in 9th and 10th grades are usually learning about literature in general and reading short, more easily understood literary works. This unit could be adapted for use with other often-studied literary works—Dylan Thomas's *A Child's Christmas in Wales*, for example. Both high school and college teachers who are interested in teaching contemporary fiction or black literature could incorporate this unit into a curriculum with Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*, a work in which the candle walk, a Christmas-season celebration of blacks living on Willow Island off the southeastern coast of the United States, plays a prominent role.

First, let me provide an overview of the unit. It calls for students to identify the calendar customs associated with Christmas in Victorian England as Dickens describes them in his novella. Then they will look around them at American popular culture and determine what the similarities and differences are between the Christmas customs of Victorian England and those of the United States of the 1990's. Finally, since I believe all units in the English curriculum should lead to writing, I first have the students observe and reflect upon their home lives and how they celebrate Christmas or other winter holidays in their families and then write an essay in which they describe that holiday celebration. As part of this writing project, they each choose a favorite holiday calendar custom and explain why they find that custom meaningful.

I chose to make calendar customs part of this unit because I felt most students would enjoy discussing holiday customs, especially during the Christmas season, the time this work is usually read. Christmas or other holiday customs of one kind or another are celebrated to some extent by almost everyone. In fact, in the novella, Scrooge is visited by frightening spirits (another aspect of the novella that would be a rich source of folkloric

inquiry) because he does not practice any Christmas customs, considering them nothing but "humbug." Having students study the neighborhood and community around them and its Christmas calendar customs encourages them to be careful observers of what may appear to be a non-academic subject, although the study of customs turns out to be quite relevant to understanding *A Christmas Carol*. Also, allowing students an opportunity to tell how they and their families celebrate a holiday and why that way of celebrating is meaningful to them invites them to become personally involved in the lesson activities and to share of themselves with their classmates. I have found that students like talking and learning about themselves, each other, and the different cultural customs and practices in the society around them as long as the class atmosphere is a relaxed and accepting one.

The two-day plan I describe below assumes that a 55-minute period is available. Teachers who feel their classes need more time to work through the unit could expand it over several days. The plan also assumes that students have already had an introduction to Charles Dickens and Victorian England and have finished reading *A Christmas Carol*.

On the first day, we begin by defining folklore. Brunvald's definition of *folklore* may prove useful: "the traditional, unofficial...part of a culture...[which] encompasses all knowledge, understandings, values, attitudes, assumptions, feelings, and beliefs transmitted in traditional forms by word of mouth or by customary examples" (4) . Next, I define *custom* and *calendar custom* for students and ask them to come up with examples. It's often helpful when asking students to think of ideas and examples to ask them to think for a minute and then jot down their ideas on a piece of scratch paper before sharing them in class. Students should be able to come up with such items as watching fireworks on the Fourth of July.

When I am sure the students understand what the terms *custom* and *calendar custom* mean, I have them meet in small groups, asking each group to come up with a list of Christmas customs of the English people in Victorian times as those customs are described in *A Christmas Carol*. To help groups work productively, I pass out a typed list of questions to help guide their search. The list includes such questions as the following:

- What special customs associated with foods (dress, home decoration, music, games and pastimes) are described in *A Christmas Carol*?

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- What customs appear to affect work, social, religious, and family relationships in a special way at Christmas?
- How are customs practiced differently by the different classes of Victorian society (the affluent class as represented by Fred, Scrooge's nephew, and the poorer class as represented by Bob Cratchit and his family, for example)?

After the groups have met for a short time, we meet again as a whole class and share the lists. I then show pictures of Victorian Christmas celebrations. (For books which give background information and provide illustrations, see Sue Samuelson's *Christmas: An Annotated Bibliography*.) Next, I assign the small groups to come up with answers to this question: What are the major calendar customs associated with Christmas in the United States today? The groups select recorders to write down their ideas and present them later to the whole class.

After a few minutes, we get together as a class and listen to the recorders report what customs each group has thought of. The class can now discuss the similarities and differences between Christmas in Victorian England and in the United States today. Students might consider that the Victorians decorated their houses with greens, sang Christmas carols, and gave to charity, while in the United States these customs continue but have also become part of business and commercial life (as a visit to any shopping mall during December will reveal). In addition, students might consider that Santa Claus, ever-present in American advertisements at Christmastime, plays no role in *A Christmas Carol*.

I point out to students—if they do not make the observation themselves—that Christmas is celebrated differently in different parts of the United States. Local celebrations often take on the flavor of the ethnic groups which settled in different regions. Christmas in Santa Fe with its Spanish and Native American influence is celebrated in different ways than it is in Minnesota with its Scandinavian heritage.

Next, I guide the students through a discussion about what functions the calendar customs served in Victorian England and now serve in the United States. As we attempt to analyze the functions of customs they may take for granted, the students are free to express their personal feelings about

the customs; however, I try to keep the focus at this time on the analysis of the customs' functions in order to encourage the students' higher-order thinking skills. Analyzing one's culture is part of developing critical consciousness. The functions the students suggest will probably be the more obvious ones: that family gatherings serve to strengthen family ties. Discussing an obvious function is fine at this time. The emphasis in this discussion is on analysis, and even simple analyses are steps in the right direction.

As the discussion proceeds, I push students to broaden and deepen their thinking about functions that may not be obvious. (Teachers can enrich their own knowledge of the functions of festivals by reading Robert Jerome Smith's article "Festivals and Celebrations.") Students may not realize, for example, that some behavior during a holiday celebration serves to redistribute wealth in a community (Smith 166). Students might consider the importance given to contributing to charity at Christmastime both in Victorian times and today. In fact, one sign that Scrooge is a different man after his encounter with the spirits is his financial generosity to others.

Before students leave class the first day, I have them write for at least five minutes as prewriting and preparation for homework assignment. I ask them to jot down answers to the following questions: (1) What winter holiday do you celebrate in your family? and (2) How do you celebrate it? Then I have them do a focused freewriting on the following question: What customs are most meaningful to you?

As homework the first day, I assign students to write a first discovery draft of a several-paragraph essay. In one paragraph, the students are to tell the winter holiday their families celebrate and describe the major ways they celebrate it. In another paragraph, they are to select one custom that is the most enjoyable or meaningful one to them and tell why they find that custom meaningful. They are to be sure to list specific reasons. In a third paragraph, they are to tell what functions they think that custom serves for them and their families.

On the next class day, the students begin class by meeting in small groups for peer reading and response to their drafts. Students are free to talk about how their families celebrate holidays, but the group should also respond to the strengths and weaknesses of the essays themselves. Each student should read his or her essay to the group and get feedback on it.

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I provide a handout for students to use as a guide in responding as a peer to other students' essays. Sample items on the handout might be the following:

- Does the writer clearly describe how the holiday is celebrated?
- Does the writer use effective, specific examples and details?
- Which details or examples do you find most vivid?
- Does the writer explain why the custom he or she picked is an enjoyable or meaningful one?
- Is the analysis of the function of the custom a thoughtful one?
- Does the writer use clear and vivid language?
- Write at least one question or comment you have about the analysis.
- Circle any mistakes you see in spelling and grammar.

After the groups have read each other's essays, we meet as a whole class to discuss the various holiday calendar customs the students wrote about. I show pictures of Christmas celebrations around the world and pictures of groups celebrating other winter holidays (Hanukkah or Tet, for example). I push students to describe the similarities and differences among these customs (many winter holidays in the northern hemisphere zones focus on light symbolism, for example) and to determine what functions these customs might serve in the cultures that practice them.

For homework, I assign students to revise their essays using the feedback they received in their small groups and bring the revised version to class the next day as a typed or neatly handwritten final draft to turn in before class moves to another unit. I give them a handout with a short list of guidelines for them to use when revising. The guidelines include questions that concern the whole essay, such as "Do you describe the calendar custom and analyze its function accurately and completely enough that someone from another culture or country could understand it and what importance it has for your family?" Also included in the revising guidelines are questions

that address editing skills (for example, "Is every sentence a complete sentence?").

My short-term goals in this unit include using information and discussion about Christmas and other holiday customs to make *A Christmas Carol* seem more interesting to students and more relevant to their everyday lives. The unit should help them make connections between Christmas and the social life of Victorian England and American popular culture today. In making these connections, students will understand more about both *A Christmas Carol* and the culture around them, increasing their sense of the text's accessibility and importance.

We know that students often do their best thinking and writing when they can write about personal topics. One of the strengths of this folklore unit is that it uses the concept of calendar customs to introduce an expressive and expository writing assignment that is based on students' own lives and values. Most students celebrate holidays in some way and find holiday customs engaging to talk about; most would feel they had something to say in an essay about how their families celebrate a holiday and why one particular custom is especially meaningful to them. Students doing the project learn about their families and themselves as a result of examining a family calendar custom in terms of the values that custom represents and the functions it serves. Students will also learn about people who lived (and live) in other times and places by participating in all the activities of the unit.

My long-term goals in this unit are to have students begin to understand and appreciate that cultures have different customs for different holidays, some of which continue over time and space, others of which do not. This understanding should help reduce the egocentrism and ethnocentrism that are so common in adolescents. Having students think not only about customs but also about what functions customs serve in cultures and in their families will increase their analytical and other higher-order thinking skills. Ultimately, this increased multicultural understanding and appreciation, combined with this practice in analyzing cultural practices as they have been exercised in many contexts over time, can help students think more deeply about their own lives and values.

In addition, since folklore is sometimes part of popular culture and part of art, but not usually the same thing as either one (not that all these are always easily distinguished), learning what folklore is can help students



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understand differences among folklore, popular culture, and art. Students sometimes have great difficulty appreciating just what might make an object or literary piece a work of art instead of an entertaining or pleasing folk creation or product of popular culture. Helping students develop an understanding and appreciation for art (including folk art) is one of the central long-term goals of many English teachers, and this unit could provide a foundation for a later examination of the relations among folklore, popular culture, and art.

A final long-term goal of the unit is to increase students' interest in folklore and their understanding of its relation to literature. Discussing folklore is an excellent way to make connections between students' everyday lives and the literature they are reading. Folklore topics and themes are often found in literature since literature is written about people, usually people who live in a society and thus have beliefs, customs, and practices that the artist depicts consciously or unconsciously as he or she creates the world of literary work. All students have folklore in their lives, and pointing out and discussing the folklore in a literary piece and the similarities and differences between it and the folklore that is part of the students' lives can be an excellent way to foster a critical consciousness about culture while making literature come alive for students.

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