

The Night Before Christmas
--The Whole Story

Teacher's Guide

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What Happens in the Play

The Night Before Christmas: The Whole Story is a musical **play**. The **playwright** who wrote this play has a favorite **poem** called “A Visit from St. Nicholas.” This very old poem is still read and loved by people of all ages.

The playwright wondered what might have happened earlier on Christmas Eve day, before St. Nicholas comes to visit. In his play, he tells the story of how a family from long ago spends Christmas Eve day. Then, as the poem “A Visit from St. Nicholas” is **recited**, St. Nicholas brings gifts to the family’s home on Christmas Eve.

The story told in a play is called the **plot**. **Actors** pretend that they are **characters** in the play. They act out what happens to the characters in the plot. The main characters in *The Night Before Christmas* are **Father**, **Mother** and four children: **Jacob**, **Abigail**, **Jeremy** and **Annabelle**.

The play begins on the morning of Christmas Eve day. Father goes to work. Mother leaves for the market to buy food for the Christmas feast. On their way to school, the four children pass through the **market square**. There many **vendors** are selling food, gifts and Christmas decorations. In school their teacher talks about the Christmas holiday and the seasons.

After school, the children plan to stop at the clock shop. By accident, the children broke their parents’ **mantle clock**. After many months, they have finally saved enough money to buy a new clock for Christmas. But before they reach the clock shop, the children meet a man who says he has lost his wallet. Without money he will not be able to buy food and gifts for his family’s Christmas. The children decide to give their gift money to the man. They do not know that this man is a very special person in **disguise**.

On their way home the children write a letter to Santa Claus. They ask him to bring a mantle clock for their parents. Since they gave their money to the poor stranger, they have nothing left for the clock. They place Santa’s letter on the fireplace mantle.

After the children go to bed, Father recites the poem “A Visit from St. Nicholas,” St. Nick arrives at the house. Appearing from St. Nick’s toy bag are a drummer boy, Raggedy Anne and Raggedy Andy and some dancers. Along with presents for the children, St. Nicholas brings a very special gift for Mother and Father.

Staging A Play

You will see the play *The Night Before Christmas* on the large **stage** of the **Valentine Theatre**. **Scenery** has been painted to look like places where parts of the story happen. As the scenery is moved on and off the stage, you know when the family is at home and when the children are at school or in the market square. **Props** like a big Christmas tree, a fireplace and a table full of food and dishes are also used in the play. Special **lighting** shining on the stage changes for different parts of the story. Lighting changes help us understand how characters feel.

Since this play takes place long ago, the scenery and props help you understand how people lived then and how their world looked. The children visit a market place where they can buy gifts, food and clothing. In their home, the family eats and talks together at the table. **Costumes** worn by the actors help you know when the play takes place and how people dressed. Watch carefully so you can talk about how the family lived. Be ready to tell about how they celebrated Christmas in their home and their town.

Since *The Night Before Christmas* is a musical play, sometimes the actors sing about what is happening and how they feel. You may already know some of the Christmas songs in the play. Other new music is

written just for the play. In this play, **dancers** also use movement and music to help tell the story.

Going to a Performance

Seeing a play is a special experience for the **audience** and for the actors. The actors know that people are in the theater watching them. They want you and the rest of the audience to pretend along with them that they are really the characters in the plot. They want you to pretend that the scenery is real. Together the actors and the audience create the magic and fun of theater.

It is important to use your best manners at the theater. Here are things a good audience member remembers:

- Σ Carefully watch and listen to what is happening on the stage. If you are talking to someone, you and other audience members will not be able to hear the actors.
- Σ When you like something you see or hear, you can clap your hands. Applause tells the actors that you like the play. If something is funny, you can laugh.
- Σ Always stay with your group and listen to your teachers or parents. The **ushers** who seat you in the theater will also give directions before and after the play.

Clement Moore and St. Nicholas

At the end of the play *The Night Before Christmas*, you will hear the poem “A Visit from St. Nicholas.” It was written by **Clement Moore** for his six children on Christmas Eve in 1822.

St. Nicholas had been known in many forms for hundreds of years before Mr. Moore wrote his poem. St. Nicholas was first known as the **patron saint** of children because he brought joy to poor people by leaving gifts for them on Christmas Eve. In other countries, St. Nicholas was pictured in many ways. Some people saw him as a stern man with a black beard and dark robes. St. Nicholas figures were dressed in every kind of clothing, even buckskin.

Clement Moore’s poem “A Visit from St. Nicholas” changed the way people in America saw St. Nicholas. Mr. Moore probably got his idea for his St. Nicholas from Dutch workers he had seen driving wagons. These plump men had white beards, red cloaks, wide leather belts and leather boots.

Mr. Moore’s poem changed the figure of St. Nicholas, the patron saint of children, to Santa Claus. Santa became famous as a happy, jolly figure who drives a team of eight reindeer and comes down the chimney with gifts. An artist named **Thomas Nash** made drawings of a plump, jolly Santa dressed in red. Later, a drawing of Santa for a **Coca Cola** ad became the most famous picture of Santa.

“A Visit From St. Nicholas”

These words from the poem, “A Visit from St. Nicholas,” may be new to you:

Sugarplums: round or oval pieces of sugary candy. The children were dreaming of the candy that would be put into their stockings by St. Nicholas.

Sash: a frame that holds the glass pane of a window. Father “Tore open the shutters and threw up the sash” so that he could see St. Nicholas on the lawn.

Coursers: this word means “a graceful, spirited horse” but is used here for the eight reindeer that pulled St.

Nicholas' sleigh.

Ashes and soot: these were left from logs that had been burned in the fireplace. They **tarnished** St. Nicholas' clothes.

Peddler: a person who goes from place to place selling small items from a pack carried on his back. St. Nicholas looked like a "peddler just opening his pack" as he took out the gifts.

Down of a thistle: A thistle is a plant with prickly leaves and heads of white or purple flowers. Down sticks to the flower heads of thistles and blows away in the wind. St. Nicholas and his sleigh flew away "like the down of a thistle."

Meet St. Nicholas

Santa Claus is the name most Americans today use for St. Nicholas. This same character is called by different names and does things differently in other countries:

- Σ In Germany, **Kris Kringle** is a helper of the Christkind (Christ Child).
- Σ In France, **Pere Noel** (Father Christmas) is also known as **Saint Nicholas**.
- Σ In Russia, **Grandfather Frost** gives toys to children on New Year's Eve.
- Σ In England, **Father Christmas** delivers presents. He is shown with holly or mistletoe.
- Σ In Italy, Santa is called **Babbo Natale**.
- Σ In Spain, **Papa Noel** is the name for Santa.

In *The Night Before Christmas*, Santa Claus **embodies** (stands for) the **true spirit of giving**. Not only do family members receive gifts from Santa, but they also give gifts to others. Mother has packed food baskets to take to the family's "less fortunate friends." When the carolers visit and sing, each receives a small gift. And the children share the money they have saved with the stranger in the market square.

A Victorian Christmas

The Night Before Christmas takes place around 100 years ago, during America's **Victorian era**. This time in history was named after Queen Victoria of England. Before this queen ruled, children did not receive many gifts. In fact, parents believed that children would become spoiled if they got too much attention.

Queen Victoria and her husband helped change these beliefs. Queen Victoria and Prince Albert were very **loving** with their children. Like the Royal Family, other parents soon began to have fun with their children. Christmas became a happier time. During the Victorian era, many new Christmas **traditions** and **celebrations** began.

Victorians loved to decorate their homes for Christmas. They put evergreen branches on porches and doors. Wreaths were hung on the door to welcome friends. Every room inside the house was decorated. Stockings hung from fireplace mantles. Candles were placed in windows.

Prince Albert brought the custom of decorating a Christmas tree from his **hometown** of Germany. Soon fancy Christmas trees were in every home, covered with candles, tiny toys, books and decorations. Glass ornaments from Germany were popular. A Christmas doll or angel was placed at the top of each tree.

As American factories were built, there were more jobs and more **products** that made life easier. With more time and money to spend, Americans had bigger Christmas celebrations. Giving gifts was an important part of a Victorian Christmas. Gifts could be bought in market places and city stores or made by hand. On Christmas morning, many children found piles of gifts under their tree. Of course, some gifts were brought by St. Nicholas. The most popular toys were dolls and dollhouses, board games, wind-up toys, rocking horses and sleds.

The Victorian Christmas season was filled with good cheer. It was a time for parties and celebrating with family and friends. On Christmas Eve, children often performed a play for the family. Families played games and sang and danced to music played on the piano. Christmas stories and even ghost stories were read by the fireplace.

Victorians did not end their season celebrations on Christmas. Next would be New Year's Eve and New Year's Day. Victorians would celebrate until the "Epiphany" on January 6.

We know that a visit from St. Nicholas was a favorite Christmas tradition in the Victorian era. Many other **Christmas traditions** that we enjoy today were created during this time.

The **Christmas Tree** tradition comes from Germany. The very first trees were oak trees, which were a symbol of good luck. In Germany, when a new house is built, a small evergreen tree would be nailed to its top. Soon people began bringing the tree inside and decorating it at Christmas time. Germans brought this tradition to America with them.

Caroling. The custom of singing Christmas carols is said to have come from Italy. A long time ago, a man named St. Francis of Assisi led songs of praise. Carolers sang in church, but they also went from house to house. It is bad luck to send carolers away without a treat, so people offered carolers food, drink or even a little money.

Stockings were hung by the fireplace. It is said that long ago Santa Claus threw three coins down a chimney at the home of three poor sisters. Each coin landed in a separate stocking left on the **hearth** to dry. Victorian children had special stockings that would be filled with food and toys.

Plum Pudding was a favorite Christmas Day treat. It took five weeks to make the pudding. It was said that a wish made while stirring the pudding would always come true. So each family member took a turn stirring. The pudding was stored in a cloth bag until Christmas Day. Before it was served, warm brandy was poured over the pudding and it was lit. This flaming dessert was the last dish for Christmas dinner.

Pre-Performance Activities: *The Night Before Christmas: The Whole Story*

These activities and discussion topics may be used before students see the play. Web sites are suggested for some topics and activities; a search will produce many related sites. Libraries contain a wealth of materials related to Christmas and other holidays.

1. Read and discuss the section “**What Happens in the Play.**”

- Σ Review the following words: **play, playwright, poem, plot, actors, characters**
- Σ Using another play with which the class is familiar, identify each of these terms in relation to that play. Explain that often a play is made from a book written by an author, but this is an original play written for the stage.

2. Read and discuss the section “**Staging a Play.**”

- Σ Review the following words: **stage, scenery, props, lighting, costumes, dancer**
- Σ Using these terms, students can share or write about other theater experiences they have had, including producing school plays.

3. Read “**A Visit from St. Nicholas**” and review the definitions of unfamiliar words. Have students outline the story, then present a brief synopsis in their own words.

4. **Write a letter to Santa. Bring the letter to Santa’s Mail Box in the Valentine Theater Lobby.**

5. **ACTIVITY:** As a class or individually, students list “**Things to Watch For**” when they see the play. Use the “What Happens in the Play” and “Staging a Play” sections to generate ideas. Explain that after they see the play, students will share their answers and observations. Following are examples of “Things to Watch For:”

- Σ What kinds of scenery and props will be used on the stage? How will the lighting help tell the story?
- Σ What kinds of costumes will the characters wear?
- Σ What kind of music and dance will we hear and see?
- Σ What happens at the children’s school? What are their lessons for the day?
- Σ What is the “mystery” about the person in disguise who asks for help from the children in the market square?
- Σ What gifts does St. Nicholas bring for the children and their parents?
- Σ How do the drummer boy, the dancers and other toys come out of St. Nick’s bag?

Post-Performance Activities: *The Night Before Christmas: The Whole Story*

Use these activities and discussion topics after students have seen the play.

1. STUDENT ACTIVITIES: Review Pre-Performance discussions about “What Happens in the Play” and “Staging a Play.”

- Σ Follow up the Pre-Performance Activity “**Things to Watch For**” by discussing or writing about the list of things you watched for in the play.
- Σ Write an original short play or a fable that extends the “Whole Story” told in this play (e.g., “How does St. Nicholas’s get ready on Christmas Eve Day for his nighttime ride?” “What happens ‘behind the scenes’ [the mother prepares the food and cleans the house. What kind of work do you think the father does? How long do you think the schoolmistress has been a teacher?] in the family’s house on Christmas Eve Day?” “How does the mouse mentioned in the poem spend his Christmas Eve?”)

2. STUDENT ACTIVITIES related to “A Victorian Christmas.” To help with these activities and provide additional information, teachers and students can access many good web sites related to Victorian Christmas, such as www.victoriana.com/christmas and www.historychannel.com/exhibits/holidays.

- Σ Research the **Christmas traditions** of the American Victorian era and discuss how some of these Victorian traditions are carried on today in modern America. How do American families decorate their homes, what holiday foods do they eat, what entertainment do they enjoy, what kinds of gifts are exchanged?
- Σ Compare, through writing and/or artwork, the traditions and celebration of the family in the play with your family’s celebration of Christmas or your favorite winter holiday.
- Σ Find out about, and then describe or write about, some of your family’s holiday traditions. Interview members of your family to discover more about the background of family traditions and how holiday celebrations have changed through the years.
- Σ Favorite Christmas toys from the Victorian era included dolls and dollhouses, board games, wind-up toys, rocking horses and sleds (www.victoriana.com). List and describe the current favorite toys and games. Older students can use web sites (www.consumerreports.org) to find out about top-selling toys. Compare Victorian era toys with modern toys. Do children play with toys the same way now as they did in the Victorian era?
- Σ This advice called “Tasteful Giving” was printed in the December 1892 issue of *The Ladies World* magazine (www.imagitek.com/xmas/ideas/victor):

Above all, in sending presents do not send articles that cost money and are vulgar and tawdry. A piece of music, a note written on Christmas Day, wishing many happy returns, or a few flowers entail no obligation, require no work, and do their own work of love as well as costly gifts—and show a delicacy of breeding.

Talk with students about this advice and the meaning of gifts and giving. Do people today make and give “simple” or hand-made gifts, or is this a lost art?

- Σ In the play, St. Nicholas “embodies the spirit of giving.” Discuss this term, using what you have read about St. Nicholas. Provide examples of other ways in which the “spirit of giving” is portrayed in the play. (The children share their savings with the stranger. The family offers treats to the carolers. Mother packs baskets of food for the family’s “less fortunate friends.”)
- Σ Discuss or write about ways in which Americans today practice the “spirit of giving” as individuals and groups, in schools, communities, and as a country.

Share ways in which you personally share with and give to other less fortunate people. Describe service projects through which your school and community help others. Research and report about organizations through which others are helped, especially in times of emergency.

- Σ Investigate the American Girl web site (www.americangirl.com) to find out more about Samantha, who lives with Grandmary in a Victorian house in Mount Bedford, New York. You can visit Samantha’s home and bedroom, Mrs. Hawkins’ kitchen and Miss Crampton’s Academy. The family in the play owns a home like the one in which Samantha lives. Using the American Girl information, create a picture of a part (kitchen, bedroom, nursery) of the family’s home that is not seen in the play.
- Σ Talk or write about the role children play in holiday celebrations. You read that Queen Victoria and Prince Albert were the first “Royal Family” to publicly express love for and pay much attention to their children. Compare what Christmas might have been like for children living before the Victorian era with the way the children in the play were treated at Christmas time.
- Σ The children in the play attended school on Christmas Eve Day. Compare their school experience with what happens in today’s schools.
- Σ Research and report on other holidays (Hanukkah, Kwanzaa) that are celebrated in America during the winter time. How are traditions from these holidays similar to and different from what happens at Christmas (gift giving, food, clothing, etc.)?
- Σ Compare various ways that Americans in different regions of the country celebrate Christmas.
- Σ Report on how people in other countries throughout the world celebrate Christmas or other important holidays.

3. STUDENT ACTIVITIES related to “A Visit from St. Nicholas” (“The Night Before Christmas”)

- Σ Review the poem and discuss how what happens in the poem is tied to the earlier scenes in the play. Why did the playwright title his play *The Night Before Christmas: The Whole Story*?
- Σ Describe or create a drawing of embellishments to the poem that are introduced in the play. Include performances by the dancers, the drummer boy and Raggedy Anne and Andy, who appear from St. Nick’s toy bag.
- Σ Read and/or recite other holiday poems (www.Christmas-poems.com) or write your own original poem or Haiku.

- Σ You learned that St. Nicholas, or Santa Claus, is pictured many different ways throughout the world (www.religioustolerance.org/santal is an informative web site). Investigate and report about one of these other figures (Father Christmas, Pere Noel, Grandfather Frost).

Create your own St. Nicholas, or “gift bringer,” and illustrate how he looks and talks, how he travels and what gifts he brings.

- Σ Write and illustrate an original poem or story entitled “The Day of Christmas,” “Christmas Night” or “The Day After Christmas.” Use the characters from the play, writing from the point of view of a family member, or St. Nicholas, or even one of the sleepy mice from Mr. Moore’s poem.
- Σ Create an original Christmas card based on the poem and/or the play.
- Σ Download the poem “The Night Before Christmas” from the Valentine Theatre Web Site--www.valentinetheatre.com -- Students can fill-in the missing words.

4. STUDENT ACTIVITIES: Music and Dance

- Σ Traditional Christmas songs heard in the play include “Bring a Torch, Jeannette Isabella,” “Oh Christmas Tree” and “The Holly and the Ivy.” An original song created for the play is “How Do I Know There’s a Santa Claus?”
- Σ Discuss how music is an important part of holiday celebrations. Compare religious and secular music.
- Σ List and sing some of your favorite Christmas carols and songs from other holidays.
- Σ Victorian children often made up little plays to present to their family on Christmas Eve. Work with a group to create a play that could be performed for a at school or for your family group during the holiday season.
- Σ Some of the dancers who perform while the poem is being read represent the sugarplums, visions of which danced in the children’s heads in “A Visit from St. Nicholas” How did the Sugarplums’ dance and the other dances help you understand the poem?
- Σ Use movement and mime to tell the story of “A Visit from St. Nicholas” while the poem is being read. Students can play parts, including family members, St. Nicholas, the reindeer, and gifts that are placed beneath the tree.

Credits

Teacher’s Guide created by Jule Horn, Ph.D.

Dear Teacher,

The Valentine Theatre is pleased to welcome you to its production of *The Night Before Christmas: The Whole Story*. Created and directed by Dale Vivirito, Executive Director of the Toledo Cultural Arts Center at the Valentine, this musical for young audiences was inspired by Clement Moore's classic poem, "A Visit from St. Nicholas."

After reading this favorite holiday poem, Mr. Vivirito wondered what might have happened in the busy lives of a typical Victorian-era American family during Christmas Eve day, preceding St. Nicholas' visit. *The Night Before Christmas: The Whole Story* follows a father, mother and four young children through their Christmas Eve day preparations at home and in their town. The production culminates in Santa's visit, accompanied by Moore's poem, and the family's delight in discovering and sharing their gifts.

Musical arranger and orchestrator Greg Owen collaborated with Mr. Vivirito and composer/arranger Bonnie DeLuca to create original musical numbers, which are combined with traditional holiday music in *The Night Before Christmas*. Performers include local young actors, dancers and singers, as well as professional actors. Colorful period sets and costumes reflect the era in which the play is set.

To prepare your students for this production, you will want to read and discuss "A Visit from St. Nicholas," which is included in this guide, along with definitions of several words from the poem. The guide also includes information about *The Night Before Christmas* and activities and discussion topics appropriate for preparing students to see the performance. Other activities can be completed after the show in order to build on and extend the experience.

I wanted to create a first-time theater experience that children could relate to. We hope this performance will engage the natural curiosity of children and help them discover the excitement and wonder of a live theater experience designed for young audiences.

Sincerely,

Dale Vivirito
Executive Director