

## Episode Title: O Holy Night

### Synopsis:

In this episode, the Alchemy podcasters dive into the rich history behind the beloved Christmas song *O Holy Night*. What seems like a simple holiday “jingle” actually has a surprising and remarkable origin story, stretching back to France in the mid-19th century. This episode explores how it came to be, the surprising influence it had, and how it can inspire writers to find the “thrill of hope” even in the most unexpected places. We also look at how familiar things—whether a song, a tradition, or a story—can have an intriguing and often overlooked history that makes them even more meaningful, and can inspire deeper backstories for creative writers.

### Discussion Questions

*Use these questions to spark conversation and reflection in the classroom:*

- *O Holy Night* is considered one of the most powerful Christmas carols. What do you think makes it so enduring and impactful?
- The carol has an unexpected origin story, with a French poet and a composer bringing it to life in the 19th century. How can writers use surprising historical elements to create a deeper meaning in their own stories?
- In the podcast, Tim talks about how *O Holy Night* captures the “thrill of hope.” How does hope play a role in storytelling? Can it appear in unexpected places or through unlikely characters?
- The song has undergone many versions, from its controversial debut to its eventual acceptance. How can writers use “controversial” ideas in their stories to challenge norms and spark conversation?
- The episode discusses the theme of finding inspiration in unexpected places. Can you think of a time when you found creative inspiration from something you thought you knew well? How does familiarity sometimes hide deeper meaning?

### Writer’s Prompts

*Creative exercises to help students apply the themes of the topic:*

- **Prompt 1: Prompt One: A Strange Stagecoach Ride.** Write about Placide de Cappeau's frantic, probably wine-fueled stagecoach ride as he scrambles to finish *O Holy Night* before meeting the composer. Picture the drama, the comedy, the missed connections, the inevitable setbacks (maybe a lost pen, a flat tire on the stagecoach, a brief philosophical debate with the driver about the meaning of Christmas).
- **Prompt Two: The Thrill of Hope.** Take a shot at writing about that thrill of hope and how it might come alive for one weary soul on Christmas Eve (or any other weary day of the year), or what kind of strange event would trigger a weary world to rejoice. Aliens? The ability to

travel faster than the speed of light (especially welcome at Christmastime airline and airport snarls)?

*More general creative exercises:*

- **Prompt 1:** Write about a character who stumbles upon a piece of forgotten history—whether a song, a story, or a tradition—that completely changes the way they see the world. What unexpected impact does this discovery have on their journey or self-identity?
- **Prompt 2:** *O Holy Night* was once controversial and faced opposition before becoming a Christmas classic. Write about a character who must fight for an idea, belief, or project that is initially rejected by others. How do they push forward, despite the resistance?
- **Prompt 3:** Imagine a world where *O Holy Night* never existed. Write a scene where a character's life or a pivotal moment is changed because they never heard the song or it never became part of their culture. What do they miss out on?
- **Prompt 4:** The song speaks to the "thrill of hope" in the face of darkness. Write about a character who finds hope in an unlikely place—perhaps in a situation where hope seems impossible. How does this discovery change them?
- **Prompt 5:** Write a scene where a character hears a song (any song) for the first time, and it resonates with them in a way they didn't expect. How does this song inspire them or change their course of action?

### **Class Activities**

These activities will help expand on the themes of the episode:

- **Group Discussion:** Divide the class into small groups and have each group research the history of *O Holy Night*, looking at the events that can make a writer's words blow up into something so much bigger than they ever expected.
- **Creative History Exercise:** Have students write about an everyday object or tradition (e.g., a holiday, a family heirloom, a well-known song) from their life and create a surprising or unexpected history for it. This encourages students to think outside the box and find meaning in the things they take for granted.
- **Debate:** Have the class debate whether controversy helps or hurts a creative work. Can pushing against societal norms lead to something greater? Or does it simply create unnecessary conflict?
- **Song Analysis:** Listen to a few different versions of *O Holy Night* (the original French version, a traditional version, and a modern rendition). Discuss how the song has evolved over time and how changes in music reflect the times. What impact does this have on its message?

**Closing note from the Podcasters, Tim & LeeAnna**

*As we explored in the episode, O Holy Night is a perfect example of how even something familiar can have a surprising and deep history. It's a reminder that inspiration, meaning, and creativity can often be found in the places we least expect—whether it's a centuries-old song or a moment of quiet reflection in the midst of chaos. Writers should feel free to dive into the unexpected, embrace controversy, and always be open to finding new meaning in the familiar. Remember, it's not just about telling a story—it's about uncovering the hidden truths that make it worth telling.*