

AQA English Literature GCSE

A Christmas Carol Context



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Dickens' Life

Charles Dickens, who was born in Portsmouth on 7th February 1812 and died on 8th June 1870, is credited with being one of the greatest writers from the Victorian era. Dickens **wrote 'A Christmas Carol' in 1843**, 6 years into his career as a novelist.

Similar to many other writers of his time he began his literary career as a journalist, then moved on to become a **parliamentary journalist in 1833**. As part of his job he was required to report factual events and so some have argued that the experiences he had during this time may have made him more socially aware - giving him the inspiration he needed to include numerous areas of **social commentary** within his work, such as his **exploration of poverty** within society through 'A Christmas Carol'.



The novella can also be read as a piece of literature which is based on the experiences in Dickens' life as it is widely accepted that Dickens was socially conscious and sympathetic towards the lower-class, ideas which are synonymous with the conclusions drawn on in the novella.

Family Life

Dickens was born into a middle-class family and due to this he had the good fortune of being sent to school, perhaps explaining the reasons behind his value of education. However, his good fortune of being sent off to school was short lived as his father came into some financial difficulties and was put in **debtors' prison**. It is interesting to note that his father, John Dickens, was a clerk just like Bob Cratchit. Also, the Cratchit house is based on Dickens' own home growing up, which may perhaps explain why the narration is sympathetic towards the Cratchit family and idealises them to such an extent.

At twelve years old Dickens was split up from his family and was sent to **Warren's Blacking Factory** to live and work by himself. In this time Dickens **endured the appalling working conditions that many of the poor faced in the Victorian times**. This experience clearly gave him another view of society as he **experienced poverty first hand** and so went on to portray this image in many of his novels. After three years at the factory, Dickens' father inherited some money and so Dickens was able to return to education. Maybe this experience highlighted the unjust inequalities of life between the rich and the poor, as Dickens was forced to work when in financial difficulty but was able to enjoy an education after receiving money.



The negative aspects of Dickens' childhood is mirrored through his character Scrooge. Through the Ghost of 'Christmas Past' the reader is able to witness Scrooge's own childhood. He is described to be "**a lonely boy**" who "**read near a feeble fire**" which portrays him as vulnerable to the reader and causes them to be empathetic to him. The purpose of this was to show the reader how his childhood experience shaped him. While education might have been a dark time for Scrooge it also enabled him to have a successful career, something that the working class could not get the opportunity to.

Impact on the novel

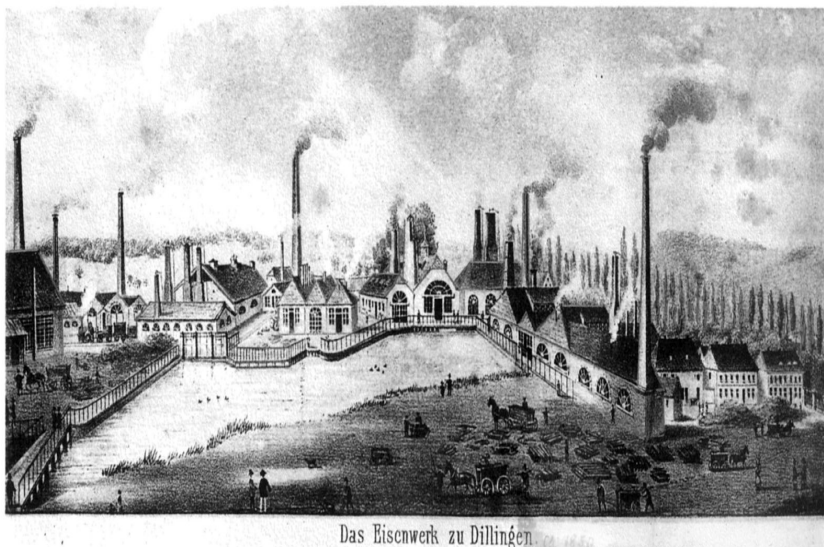
- **Journalism** - Dickens wrote 'A Christmas Carol' not only because he was a victim to the troubles of poverty but also because as a **journalist** he had to inform people about what was going on in London. 'A Christmas Carol' outlines Dickens' own beliefs on society perhaps because he felt its troubles should be handled in a way which was accessible to the public - that is, in the form of a novella.
- **Fanny** - Dickens had a sister named Fanny which also happens to be the name of Scrooge's sister. In the novel Fanny is a symbol of goodness.
- **Tiny Tim** - Another inspiration for a character which comes from Dickens' own life is the character of Tiny Tim. Dickens' sister Fanny had a son (Dickens' nephew) who was crippled similar to Tiny Tim. In the novel Tiny Tim is used as a tool for Scrooge to discover empathy. For example, at the idea of Tiny Tim's death Scrooge felt an "**interest he had never felt before**" which is significant as this is one of the few times we see the vulnerability of Scrooge, signposting his character development..
- **Education** - It is clear Dickens would not have been able to become a novelist if he had never been to school. Dickens' value of education is a clear recurring theme throughout the novel, illustrated through his linking of "**ignorance**" and "**doom**".
- **Workhouse** - It can be argued that the reason 'A Christmas Carol' brings to light the dark side of the workhouses is because Dickens lived very close to them and so would have been familiar with the stories of people inside. This closeness would enable him to be empathetic to the plight of the working class. Though the two charity workers at the beginning of the novel explains that "**many would rather die**" than attend the workhouses, this is not **hyperbole** as it was the very scary truth for many.



The Industrial Revolution

The Industrial Revolution took place between the **18th-19th century** and was an event which characterised the Victorian era. Here, a large percentage of the rural population migrated from the countryside to the city to work in industry (e.g. factories) rather than agriculture.

Instead of farming being the biggest mode of production in the UK machines were worked which meant faster production of goods which meant higher profits.



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Alongside agriculture, the industrial revolution also impacted the textile industry as textile production moved from the home to large factories and became more commercial. In addition to this, the need for energy to fuel the factories created a greater need for coal mining as coal was used to power the machines used in these industrial processes.

Dickens wrote 'A Christmas Carol' in what was widely acknowledged as the **end of the Industrial Revolution**. The mechanisation of industry meant less demand for workers as machines were able to do their jobs. While this meant that Britain was going through an **economic boom**, it had a detrimental impact on the working class as it meant that they were no longer needed. In some ways, unlike the start of the industrial revolution, the end of the revolution exacerbated (meaning exaggerated) the inequalities within society. This is because it became increasingly difficult for the working class to earn enough to support themselves and their families.

Societal Impact

The Industrial Revolution had many impacts on Victorian society such as:

- **Overpopulation** - In order for people to find work they had to move away from the countryside and into the cities as this is where the industry and jobs were concentrated. This caused the formation of 'slums' or cramped housing in order to accommodate the large influx of people.
 - Within the novella, Scrooge dismisses the working class as simply the **"surplus population"** which is arguably a reference to the economist **Thomas Malthus** (read more about him in the poverty notes).
 - The cramped housing that the industrial revolution brought about is exemplified by



the Cratchit household: Dickens writes that Bob Cratchit and his wife with their six children live in a **“four-roomed house”** in a distinctly **matter-of-fact tone**, perhaps to illustrate how this is a simple reality.

- Additionally, the close quarters increased the spread of disease as people had to live very close together which meant that diseases would have spread rapidly.
- **Childhood** - The Industrial Revolution also meant that many workers were needed to run the factories and the cheapest way to do so was through **child labour**. The working age of a child started at only five years old so many children were exploited. Families needed their children to work so they could afford the cramped living conditions. As children were working this meant that most were unable to go to school.

Impact on the novel

There are many ways in which the Industrial Revolution can be seen to have influenced A Christmas Carol. It can be argued that the Industrial Revolution is metaphorically a character within Dickens' novel as it has a lot of power to dictate the lives of people, especially that of the working class. This is seen through the pitiful situation of the Cratchits who would have lost Tiny Tim if Scrooge hadn't reformed and helped their family.

Within the novel Dickens is highly critical of the **darker consequences** of the industrial revolution. He presents these attitudes in Scrooge through the way that he treats his worker Fred before his redemption, highlighting that they are unfavourable characteristics which do not benefit society.

The majority of Scrooge's speech is **hyperbolic** in nature perhaps **to exaggerate Scrooge's ignorance**. He says, **“...every idiot who goes about with ‘Merry Christmas’ on his lips, should be boiled with his own pudding, and buried with a stake of holly through his heart...”**. Here he may even be directing his distaste towards the reader, making them aware of their own ignorance and causing them to question their own character. This is important as **contemporary readers** of Dickens were likely to be rich and so may hold the same views and opinions as Scrooge. By confronting readers with ideas that they too may be ignorant, Dickens ensures they **will benefit and learn from the messages carried within the novella**.

Poverty and Charity

Poverty

Poverty is defined as **the lack of basic necessities that are needed for a person to live**; for example, food, water, and clothing. At the beginning of the novel the two charity workers reference this idea, saying that **“many thousands are in want of common necessities”**.



Although poverty was rife in the city, many of the rich were willingly ignorant to the struggles of the working class. Many people believed the ideas of **Thomas Malthus** (1766-1834), an economist, who believed that poverty was a natural product of population growth and there was nothing we could do to help the situation. He believed that because the population in the city was growing quickly there would inevitably be a lack of food supplies and other necessities. Many argue that Scrooge's beliefs regarding the **"surplus population"** are taken from this **Malthusian growth model**.

Society's responses to Poverty

'A Christmas Carol' was **written in a post-Industrial Revolution society**, a time where poverty had become more and more distinct. The novella tries to show the reader that society needed to collectively try to tackle the issue of poverty before it spiralled out of control. Some of the most prominent responses to poverty at the time included:

- Workhouses** - In **1834 'The New Poor Law'** was introduced which stated that for the poor to receive money or support they must go to the **workhouses** which were essentially harsh and unforgiving prisons. The rich believed this was a viable option, as represented through Scrooge's happiness to hear that the "prisons" and "union workhouses" were in **"full vigor"**. Scrooge's tone here is cruel, and Dickens uses him as a voice to reflect the apathetic beliefs of the rich and how truly problematic they are, challenging the law and reader's own views surrounding the workhouses.



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- Charity** - Some thought that a way to fix poverty was through charity. The Victorian era produced one of the most intense times of philanthropy and charity, reflected in the novella by the two **"Portly gentlemen"** who ask Scrooge for a donation in the opening stave. However, many also believed that charity made poverty worse as it was rewarding 'bad behavior'. People believed that poverty was a choice and as they believed that poverty was a choice. to live in poverty you chose to live in it.



- **Ignorance** - A common attitude among the rich was that the lower-class deserved to live in poverty because they were lazy. This is highlighted by Scrooge's assertion that he cannot afford to make "*idle people merry*". The **adjective "idle"** encompasses this prejudice as Scrooge uses it interchangeably with the word 'poor', implying that they are the same thing. Another belief that many had was the notion that they wasted any money they had on drinking and gambling. Due to this, **many thought that the poor should not be given any sort of charity**.
- **Education**: Some people, like Dickens, believed that the only way to eradicate poverty was through education. Due to this, **ragged schools** were set up to provide basic education; this was done through **social policies** (read more about this in childhood and education).

Impact on the novel

It is clear that Dickens was very **concerned about the struggles of the working class**, perhaps due to his own experience of poverty as a child (read more about this in Dickens' life notes). The novella opens with two charity collectors asking Scrooge for donations for the poor. However, he rudely replies that poverty is "*none of (his) business*" and that the poor might as well die to decrease the "*surplus population*". Scrooge's views exemplify the selfish beliefs of the upper class in Victorian society. Here, Dickens uses Scrooge as a voice for the harsh beliefs of the upper class towards the working class.

The description of the setting is used to illustrate the poverty that is blatant in society. Dickens writes that the whole "*quarter reeked with crime, with filth and misery*". The **rule of three** is used to create a negative image in the readers' minds as the words encapsulate the impact poverty has had on the city.

Furthermore, the characters "*Ignorance and Want*" are used to represent **the effects of poverty** on children in addition to Dickens' belief that education is the way to solve it as the best way to cure ignorance is to educate, (read more about this in Education and Childhood notes). Dickens believed that poverty was a real problem in society but unlike the upper class, he did not believe it was the fault of the poor. Instead he believed that the working class were victims of poverty not the creators.

Education and Childhood

During the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, children were an **economic asset** as they were able to work and therefore add money to the household income.

However, the **Elementary Education Act of 1880 required all children to attend school until the age of at least 10 years old**. Children were therefore viewed as an **economic liability** as they could not go to work.



Other social policies were created to help protect children in the Victorian era. Aside from compulsory education, in 1833 **'The factory Act on Child Labour'** was put into effect which essentially meant that children had to be at least 9 years old to work. Before these laws' children were a highly exploited demographic and so it can certainly be concluded that the Victorian era brought about a change in the perception of both childhood and education.

Children were very important to Dickens, this is evident through the way that they always **played an instrumental role in his works**; the stories that he presented were greatly influenced by his own childhood.

Impact on Education and Childhood

Education changed the nature of the childhood that Victorians knew, as poor children were able to be given a basic education instead of living the rest of their lives as menial labour:

- **'Ragged Schools'** - Some Victorians, including Dickens, believed that **education was the answer to poverty** and due to this 'Ragged Schools' were created to not only provide a basic education to poor children but also to supply their material needs. **Before this time, only the rich went to school**: boys were sent to boarding school while upper-class girls were expected to stay at home to learn domestic work in order to prepare for maternal duties.



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- **Career** - Education meant that children would be able to work and achieve real careers instead of working as menial labour. This is exemplified by Dickens himself who had the privilege of going into education which ultimately allowed him to have a career in literature. (Read more about this in Dickens' life section.)

Impact on the novel

Ignorance and Want are arguably used to portray the effects that **a lack of education** would have on the poor. The Ghost of Christmas Present describes the two children, warning Scrooge that **"This boy is Ignorance...beware of this boy...on his brow I see that written which is DOOM"**. Dickens' portrayal of Ignorance and Want as children is intended to illustrate that they are the ones which suffer the most from society's issues. In addition to this, Scrooge's ignorance of the poverty



and desperation that filled society is narrated in a critical way, highlighting that Dickens disapproves of this attitude. Perhaps this conveys that Ignorance furthers the issues surrounding poverty as it prevents people from taking action (read more about this in the Poverty and Charity notes).

Dickens tries to underline the fact that **education is a solution** to the issues of society. Indeed, within the narrative Scrooge himself goes through a learning process, in some ways reflecting a student who is taught valuable lessons by the Spirits. This allows his character to reverse his bad fortune, highlighting the true value of education.

Religion and Christmas

The Victorians are often credited for the transformation of Christmas into the festival it is today. Before the 19th century, it was hardly celebrated by businesses and wasn't considered a holiday. If it was celebrated it was primarily to celebrate the Christian belief in the birth of Jesus.

The Royal family revolutionised this concept of Christmas as in 1848 **'The Illustrated London News'** published a drawing of the Royal Family around a decorated tree - a tradition which originated from Prince Albert's childhood in Germany.



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Following the publication of the image, the general population embraced Christmas and started the tradition of **decorating Christmas Trees**. This was followed by the tradition of **sending Christmas cards**, invented by **Henry Cole in 1843**. While Dickens did not invent the Victorian Christmas his book 'A Christmas Carol' is credited with **helping to popularise the spread of the traditions and festivities** associated with it as its themes of family, charity, goodwill, peace, and happiness encapsulate the **spirit of Victorian Christmas**.



Religion

From a religious standpoint, Victorian society is considered very conservative and in some respects 'strict' as they had many rules in order to consider themselves *good* Christians. Some of the rules included going to church every Sunday, giving to charity and not working on Sunday – an expectation known as **Sabbatarianism**.

Dickens disagreed with **blue laws** (laws prohibiting leisure on Sundays). This can be seen in Scrooge's conversation with the Ghost of Christmas Present, who arguably represents Dickens' **authorial voice**. When Scrooge points out that it is unjust for shops to be closed on Sunday as it "**deprives**" the working class from their means of making money, the Ghost is critical of societies misplaced religiosity. He informs Scrooge that there are some "**who lay claim to know us**" but instead they act out of "**passion, pride, ill-will, hatred, envy, bigotry, and selfishness in our name**". The **collective pronoun** of "**us**" and "**our**" is used because Scrooge perceives the Spirit as a representation of God, and assumed because of its relationship to God it would be in support of the blue laws.

By having a **religious and morally superior character highlight the hypocrisy of some of the religious expectations imposed on Victorian society**, Dickens powerfully and effectively challenges the idea of Sabbatarianism. The Spirits act as a social commentary within the novella.

Christian beliefs are also present in the novel, as Scrooge's story is one of **redemption which is a foundational belief of Christianity**. Through Marley's Ghost who lives in **purgatory** the reader is able to see the consequences of not being a good person.

Impact on the novel

- **'The Ghost of Christmas Present'** - The Victorian views of Christmas are reflected through 'The Ghost of Christmas Present' who predominantly focuses on the way the people around Scrooge choose to celebrate Christmas. The Ghost is the ultimate symbol of Christmas as he is described as sitting on "**a kind of throne**" made up of "**turkeys, geese...juicy oranges (and) luscious pearls**". Here Dickens uses **listing** to show the overflow of food, a common association with Christmas. However, the food displayed is very extravagant which only the rich could afford, a stark **juxtaposition** (contrast) to the Cratchit family and their modest meal which all the children helped to prepare: "**Master Peter mashed the potatoes...Miss Belinda sweetened up the apple-sauce**".
- **Sabbatarianism** - The Ghost of Christmas Present **sprinkles the poor with water "from his torch"** and demonstrates Dickens' opposition to keeping Sunday free from work. Sprinkling incense was meant to be a way of making disagreements vanish and spreading good things and good spirits.
 - Scrooge asks the Ghost why he "**should desire to cramp these people's opportunities of innocent enjoyment**" by closing places such as restaurants on "**the Seventh Day**". By doing so the poor, who likely worked long hours during the



week, would have very little opportunity to enjoy themselves. Dickens was anti-Sabbatarian and believed that the poor should be able to enjoy their Sunday as they already had fewer chances to do so than the upper-class.

- Dickens tries to prove in the novel that the **principles of Christmas**, which were established in the Victorian times, should **always be honoured**.
 - At the end of the novel Scrooge is presented as a better man as he vows that he “**will honour Christmas in my heart, and try to keep it all year**”, presenting this viewpoint as the ideal.
 - Dickens prefigured this with the Cratchit family who “**contented with the time**”. Although the Cratchit’s had little they were content with what they did have, encapsulating the meaning of Christmas, family, and goodwill.

