

A Christmas Carol

Revision Guide

Plot Summary

A mean-spirited, miserly old man named Ebenezer Scrooge sits in his counting-house on a chilly Christmas Eve. His clerk, Bob Cratchit, shivers in the office because Scrooge refuses to spend money on heating coals for a fire. Scrooge's nephew, Fred, pays his uncle a visit and invites him to his annual Christmas party. Two portly gentlemen also drop by and ask Scrooge for a contribution to their charity. Scrooge reacts to the holiday visitors with bitterness and venom, spitting out an angry "Bah! Humbug!" in response to his nephew's "Merry Christmas!"

Later that evening, after returning to his dark, cold apartment, Scrooge receives a chilling visit from the ghost of his dead partner, Jacob Marley. Marley, looking haggard and pale, relates his unfortunate story. As punishment for his greedy and self-serving life his spirit has been condemned to wander the Earth weighed down with heavy chains. Marley hopes to save Scrooge from sharing the same fate. Marley informs Scrooge that three spirits will visit him during each of the next three nights. After the spirit disappears, Scrooge collapses into a deep sleep.

He wakes moments before the arrival of the Ghost of Christmas Past, a strange childlike phantom with a brightly glowing head. The spirit escorts Scrooge on a journey into the past to previous Christmases. Invisible to those he watches, Scrooge revisits his childhood school days, his apprenticeship with a jolly merchant named Fezziwig, and his engagement to Belle, a woman who leaves Scrooge because his lust for money overtakes his ability to love another. Scrooge, deeply moved, sheds tears of regret before the phantom returns him to his bed.

The Ghost of Christmas Present, a majestic giant clad in a green fur robe, takes Scrooge through London. Scrooge watches the large, bustling Cratchit family prepare a miniature feast in its meager home. He discovers Bob Cratchit's crippled son, Tiny Tim, a courageous boy whose kindness and humility warms Scrooge's heart. The Spirit then zips Scrooge to his nephew's to witness the Christmas party. Scrooge finds the jovial gathering delightful and pleads with the spirit to stay until the very end of the festivities. As the day passes, the spirit ages and becomes noticeably older. Toward the end of the day, he shows Scrooge two starved children, Ignorance and Want, living under his coat. He vanishes instantly as Scrooge notices a dark, hooded figure coming toward him.

The Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come leads Scrooge through a sequence of mysterious scenes relating to an unnamed man's recent death. Scrooge sees businessmen discussing the dead man's riches, some beggars trading his personal effects for cash, and a poor couple expressing relief at the death of their unforgiving creditor. The Spirit then takes Scrooge to Bob Cratchit's house, where he learns that Tiny Tim has died. Scrooge, anxious to learn the lesson of his latest visitor, begs to know the name of the dead man. After pleading with the ghost, Scrooge finds himself in a churchyard, the spirit pointing to a grave. Scrooge looks at the headstone and is shocked to read his own name. He desperately pleads with the spirit to change his fate, promising to renounce his insensitive, greedy ways and to honor Christmas with all his heart. Whoosh! He suddenly finds himself safely tucked in his bed.

Overwhelmed with joy by the chance to redeem himself and grateful that he has been returned to Christmas Day, Scrooge rushes out onto the street hoping to share his newfound Christmas spirit.

He sends a giant Christmas turkey to the Cratchit house and attends Fred's party, to the stifled surprise of the other guests. As the years go by, he holds true to his promise and honors Christmas with all his heart: he treats Tiny Tim as if he were his own child, provides lavish gifts for the poor, and treats his fellow human beings with kindness, generosity, and warmth.

Characters

Ebenezer Scrooge – The miserly owner of a London counting-house, a nineteenth century term for an accountant's office. The three spirits of Christmas visit him in hopes of reversing Scrooge's greedy, cold-hearted approach to life. He is cold, miserable and bitter at first, but as the novel progresses we see him change into a better man.

Bob Cratchit – Scrooge's clerk, a kind, mild, and very poor man with a large family. Though treated harshly by his boss, Cratchit remains a humble and dedicated employee.

Tiny Tim – Bob Cratchit's young son, crippled from birth. Tiny Tim is a highly sentimentalised character who Dickens uses to highlight the problems of England's poor and to cause the reader to feel sympathy for him in the society he lives in.

Jacob Marley – In the living world, Ebenezer Scrooge's equally greedy partner. Marley died seven years before the narrative opens. He appears to Scrooge as a ghost condemned to wander the world bound in heavy chains. Marley hopes to save his old partner from suffering a similar fate.

The Ghost of Christmas Past – The first spirit to visit Scrooge, a curiously childlike apparition with a glowing head. He takes Scrooge on a tour of Christmases in his past. The spirit uses a cap to dampen the light coming from his head.

The Ghost of Christmas Present – The second spirit to visit Scrooge, a majestic giant clad in a green robe. His lifespan is restricted to Christmas Day. He escorts Scrooge on a tour of Holiday celebrations. He also uses Scrooge's words against him to make Scrooge feel terrible.

The Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come – The third and final spirit to visit Scrooge, a silent phantom clad in a hooded black robe. He presents Scrooge with an ominous view of his lonely death.

Fred – Scrooge's nephew, a friendly man who loves Christmas. He invites Scrooge to his Christmas party each and every year, only to be refused by his grumpy uncle.

Fezziwig – The cheerful merchant with whom the young Scrooge apprenticed. Fezziwig was renowned for his wonderful Christmas parties.

Belle – A beautiful woman who Scrooge loved deeply when he was a young man. Belle broke off their engagement after Scrooge became consumed with greed and the lust for wealth. She later married another man.

Peter Cratchit – Bob's oldest son, who inherits his father's stiff-collared shirt for Christmas.

Martha Cratchit – Bob’s oldest daughter, who works in a milliner’s shop. (A milliner is a person who designs, produces, and sells hats.)

Fan – Scrooge’s sister; Fred’s mother. In Scrooge’s vision of Christmases past, he remembers Fan picking him up from school and walking him home.

The Portly Gentlemen – Two gentlemen who visit Scrooge at the beginning of the tale seeking charitable contributions. Scrooge promptly throws them out of his office, not giving them a single penny. Upon meeting one of them on the street after the spirits have visited him, he promises to make great donations to help the poor.

Mrs. Cratchit – Bob’s wife, a kind and loving woman.

Context points linking to the novel

Dickens uses the novel to highlight the poverty of working-class London.

- He contrasts the wealth of Scrooge with a poverty of Bob Cratchit. Scrooge lives alone in a large building the grand staircase, while the Cratchits are crammed into a four-roomed house.
- In Stave four, Scrooge visits a part of London that “reeked with crime, with filth, and misery”, and the people who live there are described as “half-naked, drunken slipshod ugly”.
- The death of Tiny Tim, and the appearance of the doomed children, Ignorance and Want, highlight the suffering of children who live in poverty.

Dickens uses the novel to argue against the belief that poverty was inevitable and helping the poor made the situation worse.

- In Stave one, Scrooge tells the charity collectors that it would be better if poor people would die and in doing so ‘decrease the surplus population’. This is a direct reference to Malthus’ theories that poverty is inevitable - Dickens is highlighting how cruel Malthus’ views seemed to be.
- In Stave three, the ghost of Christmas Present takes Scrooge to bustling shops where it shows him the huge amount of food on display. This lengthy, mouth-watering description emphasises Dickens’ point there was plenty of food to go around - the problem was that it wasn’t shared with poor.
- Dickens attacks what he saw as an uncaring attitude towards the poor. In Stave one, Scrooge tells a charity collectors that he can’t afford to ‘make idle people merry’, and he says he supports the prisons and workhouses. His views seem cruel and unfeeling.
- When Scrooge expresses sympathy for Tiny Tim and Ignorance and Want, the spirit quotes Scrooge’s harsh comments from Stave one about ‘surplus population’ and sending the poor to prisons and workhouses. Dickens shows that Scrooge realises that his beliefs about the poor were wrong.

Dickens uses the novel to promote charity and believed the rich should do more to help the poor.

- In Stave one Marley's ghost warns Scrooge that he must pay more attention to those around him. He can't walk among 'crowds of fellow beings' with his 'eyes turned down' like Marley did.
- In Stave one, Scrooge is presented as a wealthy man who ignores the poverty around him, including that of his employee, Bob Cratchit, which mirrors the views of many wealthy people in Victorian Britain.
- By the end of the novel, Scrooge has learnt his lesson and changed his attitude towards charity – he gives a large sum of money to the charity collectors.
- Scrooge also learns to generously reward other people's work – he gives Bob Cratchit a pay rise and pays a boy a large fee to run and fetch the prize turkey from the shop. Dickens uses Scrooge's actions to suggest that if people are paid fairly there will be less need for charity
Dickens beliefs new line

Dickens believed education was the solution to poverty.

- In Stave three, Dickens uses the child, Ignorance, to show how the poor are doomed to a life of want by a lack of education. The Ghost of Christmas Present suggests that without education, those who live in ignorance and want have no refuge except prisons and workhouses.

Dickens uses the novel to promote the importance of Christmas.

- The novel focuses on charity, forgiveness, goodwill and generosity - values which are an important part of the spirit of Christmas and also reflect Dickens views of Christianity. A key message in a novel is that people should try to observe these values all year round, not just at Christmas - Scrooge promises, 'I will honour Christmas in my heart and try to keep it all the year'.
- Despite their poverty, the Cratchits celebrate Christmas joyfully, enjoying the pleasure of family, and are thankful for what they have.

Themes

- Compassion and Forgiveness
- Isolation
- Transformation (both physical and emotional)
- Choices
- Time
- Family
- Memory and the Past
- Guilt/Blame
- Rich and Poor

What examples can you think of from the text that link to the above themes? Which characters link to each theme and why?

Example Exam Question

You are advised to spend about 45 minutes on this question.

You should use the extract below and your knowledge of the whole novel to answer this question.

Write about Scrooge and the way he changes throughout the novel.

In your response you should:

- refer to the extract and the novel as a whole;
- show your understanding of characters and events in the novel;
- refer to the contexts of the novel. [40]

He dressed himself "all in his best," and at last got out into the streets. The people were by this time pouring forth, as he had seen them with the Ghost of Christmas Present; and walking with his hands behind him, Scrooge regarded every one with a delighted smile. He looked so irresistibly pleasant, in a word, that three or four good-humoured fellows said, "Good morning, sir! A merry Christmas to you!" And Scrooge said often afterwards, that of all the blithe sounds he had ever heard, those were the blithest in his ears.

He had not gone far, when coming on towards him he beheld the portly gentleman, who had walked into his counting-house the day before, and said, "Scrooge and Marley's, I believe." It sent a pang across his heart to think how this old gentleman would look upon him when they met; but he knew what path lay straight before him, and he took it.

"My dear sir," said Scrooge, quickening his pace, and taking the old gentleman by both his hands.

"How do you do? I hope you succeeded yesterday. It was very kind of you. A merry Christmas to you, sir!"

"Mr Scrooge?"

"Yes," said Scrooge. "That is my name, and I fear it may not be pleasant to you. Allow me to ask your pardon. And will you have the goodness"—here Scrooge whispered in his ear.

"Lord bless me!" cried the gentleman, as if his breath were taken away. "My dear Mr Scrooge, are you serious?"

"If you please," said Scrooge. "Not a farthing less. A great many back-payments are included in it, I assure you. Will you do me that favour?"

"My dear sir," said the other, shaking hands with him. "I don't know what to say to such munifi—"

"Don't say anything please," retorted Scrooge. "Come and see me. Will you come and see me?"

"I will!" cried the old gentleman. And it was clear he meant to do it.

"Thank 'ee," said Scrooge. "I am much obliged to you. I thank you fifty times. Bless you!"

He went to church, and walked about the streets, and watched the people hurrying to and fro, and patted children on the head, and questioned beggars, and looked down into the kitchens of houses, and up to the windows, and found that everything could yield him pleasure. He had never dreamed that any walk—that anything—could give him so much happiness. In the afternoon he turned his steps towards his nephew's house.

He passed the door a dozen times, before he had the courage to go up and knock. But he made a dash, and did it:

"Is your master at home, my dear?" said Scrooge to the girl. Nice girl! Very.

"Yes, sir."

"Where is he, my love?" said Scrooge.

"He's in the dining-room, sir, along with mistress. I'll show you upstairs, if you please."

"Thank you. He knows me," said Scrooge, with his hand already on the dining-room lock. "I'll go in here, my dear."

Key Quotes

1. "But he was a tight-fisted hand at the grindstone, Scrooge. A squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous old sinner!"
2. "No warmth could warm, no wintry weather chill him."
3. "'A merry Christmas, uncle! God save you!' cried a cheerful voice."
4. "And therefore, Uncle, though it has never put a scrap of gold or silver in my pocket, I believe that [Christmas] has done me good, and will do me good; and I say, God bless it!"
5. "A poor excuse for picking a man's pocket every twenty-fifth of December!"
6. "If they would rather die they had better do it, and decrease the surplus population."
7. 'Business!' cried the Ghost, wringing its hands again. 'Mankind was my business.'
8. 'A solitary child, neglected by his friends, is left there still.' Scrooge said he knew it. And he sobbed."
9. "Remember it!" cried Scrooge with fervour; "I could walk it blindfold."
10. "Our contract is an old one. It was made when we were both poor and content to be so...You are changed. When it was made, you were another man."
11. "'Oh, a wonderful pudding!' Bob Cratchit said, and calmly too, that he regarded it as the greatest success achieved by Mrs Cratchit since their marriage."
12. "I should like to be able to say a word or two to my clerk just now! That's all."
13. "He hoped the people saw him ... to remember... who made lame beggars walk, and blind men see."
14. "I'll give you Mr Scrooge, the founder of the feast!"
15. "I am sorry for him; I couldn't be angry with him if I tried. Who suffers by his ill whims? Himself always."
16. "This boy is Ignorance and this girl is Want. Beware them both, and all of their degree, but most of all beware this boy for on his brow I see that written which is Doom."
17. "The Phantom slowly, gravely, silently approached... Scrooge bent down upon his knee; for in the very air... it seemed to scatter gloom and mystery."
18. "I fear you...but... as I hope to live to be another man from what I was, I am prepared to bear you company, and do it with a thankful heart."
19. "Scrooge crept towards it, trembling as he went; and following the finger, read upon the stone of the neglected grave his own name."
20. "I don't mind going if lunch is provided."
21. "Why wasn't he natural in his lifetime? If he had been, he'd have had somebody to look after him when he was struck with Death..."
22. "It would be a bad fortune indeed to find so merciless a creditor in his successor. We may sleep to-night with light hearts, Caroline."

23. "I will live in the Past, the Present, and the Future! ...The Spirits of all Three shall strive within me... I say it on my knees, old Jacob, on my knees!"

24. "I am as light as a feather, I am as happy as an angel, I am as merry as a schoolboy. I am as giddy as a drunken man."

25. "Scrooge regarded every one with a delighted smile."

26. "An intelligent boy! A remarkable boy!"

27. "Make up the fires, and buy another coal-scuttle before you dot another *i*, Bob Cratchit!"