A Christmas Carol (1843) Charles Dickens

FORM: NOVELLA GENRE: GOTHIC (SPIRITS, DARKNESS, FOG ETC)

ERA: VICTORIAN

# Context:

\*In Victorian society there was social injustice - there were high levels of poverty leading to disease and crime

\*The Poor Law was passed to address this - the poor were expected to go to workhouses - this was a deterrent and expected to prevent people being lazy as the conditions there were horrible (‘are there no workhouses?’)

\*Thomas Malthus was an economist who said that if the population increased we would have too many people and not enough food to sustain ourselves - this is where the idea of a surplus population comes from (‘if they would rather die they had better do so and decrease the surplus population’)

\*There was an economic depression - so money was tight and businesses were at risk - Scrooge would have been typical of business owners at the time who were being extra careful with their money

\*The industrial revolution meant lots more people were moving to London looking for employment and that there was more factory pollution causing sickness. Dickens lived in London and saw this.

# Dickens message:

# \*At 12 Dickens father was sent to a debtors prison - his family moved into the prison apart from Dickens who became a child labourer in a factory

# \*When they were out of prison Dickens went back to school and at 25 became a novelist.

\*In ACC he wanted to bring attention to the poor and encourage social responsibility.

\*Dickens read a parliamentary report on child labourers in 1843 and said he was ‘stricken down’ - he wanted to force changes in society

\*His publishers refused to pay the costs for this book so he paid them himself because he was so keen to get it out there. Christmas was gaining popularity and Christmas cards were also created that year so it became an instant hit.

\*The novella is a morality story - it encourages the readers to learn a lesson and improve their own actions. They should ‘think of people below them’ (Fred)

# Methods used:

Pathetic fallacy:

The weather at the beginning is cold like Scrooge who is cold hearted and even more formidable than the weather "No warmth could warm, nor wintry weather chill him. No wind that blew was bitterer than he”

The weather is foggy in stave 1: ‘the fog came pouring in’ which represents Scrooge’s ignorance of the poor and his forgotten memories. In stave 5 when he is more aware of his past and the people around him the fog clears: ‘no fog, no mist’

At the end Scrooge’s redemption/improved character is shown through the weather which is described as: ‘golden sunlight, heavenly sky’ with obvious links to religion, wealth and forgiveness

Verbs:

Dickens uses a lot of descriptive language - in particular he uses verbs to show characters actions which can reveal a lot about them

Scrooge in stave 1 is ‘squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching’ which are all verbs showing he is trying to hold on to money

The ghost of Christmas past uses imperative verbs (commands) like ‘rise’ and ‘walk’

Fezziwig was seen to ‘laugh’ ‘clap’ ‘dance’ and finally ‘shaking hands’ with every guest at his party - showing his joyful and kind character

In stave 5 Scrooge is ‘laughing’ ‘crying’ and ‘running’ - he is more emotional and active then at the beginning which shows how he has changed

Similies:

Scrooge is described as ‘solitary as an oyster’ and ‘hard and sharp as flint’ in stave 1 to show how isolated and hard to reach he is.

In stave 5 he feels ‘light as a feather’ and ‘happy as an angel’ - which is a great simile to compare with ‘old sinner’ which is how he was described at the beginning showing how he has become closer to God by avoiding the sin of greed.

Metaphors:

‘Mankind was my Business’ - this is said by Marley when he has realised he should have cared more about people then money

‘Another idol has displaced me - a golden one’ - this is said by Belle when she believes money has become more important then her for Scrooge - he worships (idol) money

‘the whole quarter reeked of crime, filth and misery’ - when the future spirit takes Scrooge to Old Joe’s (who buys Scrooge’s bedsheets and shirt) the streets are described this way - showing the affects of poverty

Foils:

Scrooge is described as isolated, uncharitable and closed whilst Fred, his nephew is the opposite - whilst Scrooge is linked to cold weather he is linked to warmth ‘his eyes glowed’ ‘his breath smoked’ to reflect his warm character

Fezziwig was Scrooge’s employer when he was an apprentice - he is the opposite to the type of boss Scrooge is - he is energetic, friendly and generous

Narrative voice:

The narrator in the novella speaks directly to us at points - we trust them and their attitudes towards Scrooge and the visions are the ones we uphold. They use humour and the voice is linked very closely to Dickens himself.

Structure:

The novella is split into staves - which are the verses in a Christmas Carol - the references to a carol suggest it is supposed to be read aloud and shared together, like a song

The text is cyclical - the same events occur at the beginning and end, but Scrooge himself has changed - for example he sees the charity collectors in stave 1 but gives them money in stave 5 and speaks with Bob and Fred differently at the beginning and end

Scrooge's transformation is foreshadowed by the change in Scrooge's father. The fact that Scrooge was more kind-hearted in his youth also acts as a hint that he will be able to change back.

On the first few pages of the novel, Dickens uses the phrase "Once upon a time", which links the story to a fairy tale and suggests that it will have a happy ending.

Personification:

The children, ignorance and want personify the problems caused when society neglect the poor. They are described as ‘yellow, meagre, ragged, scowling, wolfish’ which shows their poverty (ragged) and animalistic natures (wild/untamed/dangerous)

Christmas Past is personification of memory

Christmas present is personification of generosity and christmas spirit

Christmas yet to come is personification of death and fear

**Settings:**

The novella is set in London and the streets are foggy and dark when Dickens wants to create a fearful atmosphere

At other times, although there is a ‘dingy mist’ (due to the industrial revolution) they are full of colour and people- like the streets on Christmas day where even the vegetables are personified to appear cheerful. There is an ‘ air of cheerfulness’ to reflect Christmas spirit

The tavern where Scrooge eats his dinner is depressing/lonely ‘Scrooge took his melancholy dinner in his usual melancholy tavern’

The house Scrooge lives in reflects his personality - it is dark and cold (‘the fog and frost so hung about the black old gateway of the house’, empty and unwelcoming ‘gloomy’ ‘dreary’)

The school house is neglected - like Scrooge as a child ‘walls were damp and mossy, their windows broken, and their gates decayed’

Fezziwigs warehouse is ‘as snug, and warm, and dry, and bright’ to highlight his generosity and the cheerful atmosphere

The Cratchet house is loud and busy in stave 3 (‘two smaller Cratchits, boy and girl, came tearing in, screaming’ ) but in stave 4 when Tiny Tim has died it is described as: ‘Quiet. Very quiet. The noisy little Cratchits were as still as statues in one corner,’ to emphasise their sorrow

The graveyard is also neglected - reflecting Scrooge’s life and death ‘overrun by grass and weeds’ - there is no one to care for him after he is gone

# Ghosts:

The Ghost of Christmas Past has a light coming from its head - the light reveals Scrooge’s forgotten past and he can no longer hide in the dark

The Ghost of Christmas Present looks like father christmas and has a holly wreath on his head and carries a torch from which it sprinkles christmas spirit

The Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come looks like death/grim reaper - perhaps because the future brings death (for Scrooge and Tiny Tim) but also because it reflects Scrooge’s fear of the future

# Themes:

Redemption - being saved from your sins

At the beginning Scrooge is described as an ‘old sinner’

Belle says that ‘I have seen your nobler aspirations fall off one by one, until the master-passion, Gain, engrosses you.’ This suggests that Scrooge was ‘nobler’ when younger but that Greed has taken over him - it has become the ‘master’ which suggests he is no longer in control

By the end however Scrooge is ‘as happy as an angel’ - he has found redemption

Greed:

Marley says ‘I wear the chain I forged in life’ - he faces damnation for his sins and must pay for them in the afterlife

Scrooge is greedy and faces a similar fate if he will not change

Dickens message is that society should support the poor more and not be so greedy

Time:

The novella isn't chronological (all in time order) as it goes to the past, present and future - even when going to the past there are several years shown with jumps between times

When Scrooge goes to sleep it was after 2 and yet the bells ring at 1am and the first ghost arrives - all three also manage to visit in one night - this supernatural use of time adds to the gothic theme

The ghosts seem to have a time limit - the ghost of Christmas present only lives on day and grows old during his visit - this ghost takes Scrooge to lots of places to try and get its message across

The final ghost arrives at the end of stave 3 rather than in a new stave like the others did - perhaps it is in a hurry to get the message to Scrooge. The way it ‘approached’ Scrooge suggests the future is inevitable and unescapable.

Social responsibility:

Dickens wanted people to support the poor

The charity collectors said that: ‘Hundreds are in need of common comforts’ - showing how much poverty there is

He was also against the workhouses and prisons ‘many would rather die’ then going there because they were so horrid

Fred says that Christmas is a time when people ‘Open their shut up hearts freely’ - this is a contrast to Scrooge who is closed like an ‘oyster’ and shows Dickens message that we should be more compassionate and giving (open our hearts)

Family:

It is important that Scrooge has Fred - this gives him the opportunity to have a different life, he doesn't have to be alone

Scrooge was obviously close to Fan - perhaps the death and loss of so many (Fan, Fezziwig, Belle, Marley) has led to him shutting himself away to avoid being hurt anymore

Dickens sends a message that family and companionship are important, especially at Christmas and more valuable than money - Tiny Tim is desired as being ‘as good as gold’ - showing he is worth more than money to the poor Cratchets

Scrooge is rich but by not sharing his wealth or company he hurts himself - Fred says ‘who suffers by his ill whims? - Himself always’

Regret:

Scrooge regrets his past - particularly losing Belle who he sees with a family who could have been his - he even says the daughter might have been a ‘spring time’ in the ‘haggard winter of his life’ - showing she would have bought joy and warmth to his cold dark life.

He regrets how he treated Bob and the carol singer and wishes he could have a word with them.

Scrooge is not the only one to show regret - Marley asks if there was a light that might have guided him to help others and the ghosts out Scrooges window in stave 1 are full of regret for not helping others when alive ‘The misery with them all was, clearly, that they sought to interfere, for good, in human matters, and had lost the power forever.’

Poverty:

The Cratchet family are not the only poor characters - Old Joe lives in extreme poverty, buying stolen property and is described negatively due to his criminal lifestyle

The Cratchetts are poor but described positively - they are dressed smartly, all help with the chores, are polite and go to church - Dickens wanted people to see the poor in a positive light so they would help them

Ignorance and Want represent the poverty in society - ignorance of the rich, who do not see or help the poor, ignorance of the poor who are uneducated and cannot help themselves, and the want of those in need of food and shelter. The ghost says ‘They are Mans’ which suggests these issues are created by mankind.

# Motifs:

Fire:

When there is no fire it creates a cold and lonely setting to reflect the personality of Scrooge: “a lonely boy was reading near a feeble fire.” – in the schoolroom

The small fire of Bob Cratchett also helps show his poverty compared to Scrooge: ‘the clerks was so very much smaller it looked like one coal’

In contrast when there is a positive atmosphere, like Fezziwigs party, there is a large fire: “Fuel was heaped upon the fire” (Fezziwig’s party)

When families come together there is often a fire: “A cheerful company assembled round a glowing fire.” – in the moorlands which is an isolated area

Fire and Brightness are used to symbolise emotional warmth throughout the novella. The lack of warmth in Scrooge’s life is depicted by “a very small fire” in his offices and “a very low fire” at his home.

Music:

Music is used to show joy and happiness in Fezziwig’s party and at Fred’s house. Fred’s musical family is shown in contrast to lonely, miserable Scrooge.

As well as music we see bells ringing throughout. There is a “cacophony” of “disused” bells which ring, announcing the arrival of the ghost of Jacob Marley. Bells are used in society to send a message out, to celebrate, as a warning or at funerals – these all tie into the story

On the isolated ship in the present the people are humming Christmas tunes – the Christmas spirit reaches them even out at Sea.

Food:

Food is used to show that there is plenty (an abundance) and that the poor do not need to go hungry

The Ghost of Christmas Present appears on a throne of food – despite the ‘Want’ that is felt by many they could be fed ‘ Heaped up on the floor, to form a kind of throne, were turkeys, geese, game…red-hot chestnuts…luscious pears…” (Ghost of Christmas Present)

Scrooge eats gruel – which is cheap and plain – because he is greedy in stave 1 – but at the end he buys a turkey for the Cratchett family which symbolizes his transformation and generosity

# Things you might have missed:

Dickens has an older sister called Fanny and a disabled nephew called Harry - visiting them in Manchester and seeing the poor on the streets made him realise the difficulties poor people faced

# \*Dickens had tried raising peoples awareness of the issues through political speeches and leaflets but didn't feel this was working - so he wrote a christmas story that families could enjoy together and would send a moral message

\*A Christmas Carol is an allegory - a story that gives a message

\*Scrooge’s fireplace has religious images around it - including angelic messengers (perhaps the ghosts are also angels sent to change Scrooge)

\*After seeing Marleys head in the door knocker Scrooge also imagines a ghostly hearse pulled by horses going up his staircase - these carried the dead bodies

\*The image of Death as a Grim Reaper was created by the Victorians - it was a way for them to cope with the deaths from the plague - he wore a black cloak like the priests who collected dead bodies and carried a scythe like the farmers

\*Marleys chain has items on it: ‘cash-boxes, keys, padlocks, ledgers, deeds, and heavy purses’ - these are all used to hold or record money - showing his sin is greed

\*It doesn't take till the end of the story before Scrooge begins to change - even when the first ghost takes him to his school his lip is ‘trembling’ - he changes a bit at a time, first feeling sorry for himself and then regret for his actions

\*The ghost of Christmas Present appears on a throne of food - representing abundance - there is plenty of food for the poor

\*The ghost of christmas present also takes Scrooge to isolated locations - the miners, a lighthouse and a ship at sea - although the people are all isolated, they have found companionship and christmas spirit and the miners and lighthouse have a fire for warmth. Scrooge lives in the city but is more lonely then these people because he chooses to shut himself off from others

# Other Key quotes:

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| ‘as solitary as an oyster’ | An oyster lives at the bottom of the sea – and so is isolated  It has a hard shell like Scrooge’s exterior  It has a pearl inside – like Scrooge protecting his money and holding it tight  It also has beauty inside it – showing Scrooge has potential to change |
| ‘open their shut up hearts freely’ | Society should be more ‘open’ – kind and charitable  Shut up hearts reminds us of Scrooge who is shut up like an oyster |
| ‘A solitary child neglected by his friends’  ‘a lonely boy sat by a feeble fire’ | When seeing him in the school house in the past we feel sorry for Scrooge – he has learnt to be alone from a young boy and the small fire he had then is similar to the small fire he now allows himself |
| “I will honour Christmas in my heart, and try to keep it all the year. I will live in the Past, the Present, and the Future. The Spirits of all Three shall strive within me. I will not shut out the lessons that they teach.” | Scrooge has redeemed himself – he is going to ‘honour’ Christmas and learn from the spirits. The metaphor that he will not ‘shut out’ the lessons they teach reminds us of how closed he was at the beginning of the novella |
| ‘hundreds are in want of common comforts’ | The charity collectors ask Scrooge to help the poor – this links to context of the workhouses and poverty due to the industrial revolution. The use of the noun ‘hundreds’ shows how many need help. ‘Common comforts’ shows they are not looking for luxuries – just the basics that everyone should have. |
| ‘ a kind, forgiving, charitable time’ | Fred uses these adjectives to describe Christmas – this list shows how Dickens feels about Christmas |
| "a solemn Phantom, draped and hooded, coming like a mist along the ground towards him" | The Ghost of Christmas Past appears like the grim reaper – perhaps because Scrooge fears the future. The fact it comes with the mist, which has been present throughout the novella, suggests that this fate has always been there due to his current actions |
| ‘There was an eager, greedy, restless motion in the eye, which showed the passion that had taken root, and where the shadow of the growing tree would fall.’ | This is how Scrooge is described when he is with Belle – the list ‘eager, greedy, restless’ shows how his eyes are already looking for more, he is caught in his sin of greed. The metaphor ‘passion that had taken root’ suggests Greed had begun to form and would grow bigger and stronger as Scrooge gets older |