

## Introduction

These materials provide guidance and activities on *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens.

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## Plot and structure

### Activity 1

A stave is the five lines on which music is written and so the five staves represent the five lines on which the story is written and at the same time suggest the five verses of a carol. The first four staves are all divided by the appearance of a ghost but the last one is called 'The End of It', leaving the reader to work out what he or she thinks it is the end of.

For each of the first four staves explain:

- a the main focus of the stave
- b how Dickens uses ghosts
- c how Dickens drives the story forwards.

### Activity 2

For the last stave explain:

- a how Dickens creates a resolution to the story
- b how Dickens ties up threads in the first four staves
- c why Dickens chooses not to feature a ghost.

Each Stave is also given a title:

- Marley's Ghost
- The First the Three Spirits
- The Second of the Three Spirits
- The Last of the Spirits
- The End of It.

### Activity 3

Explain:

- a why you think Dickens chose each of these titles
- b why you think Dickens distinguishes between 'ghost' and 'spirit'
- c why you think the story begins with Marley's ghost
- d why you think there are no ghosts or spirits in the last stave.

### Activity 4

At the same time as creating the story in five stages, Dickens uses a three part structure in the story of Scrooge consisting of:

- a triggering event
- the climax
- the resolution.

For each of these three explain:

- a how Scrooge is important
- b how he develops
- c how the ghosts are used to show his development.

Dickens uses a dual structure for his story. He:

- shows the physical action taking place in a single night but shows a metaphorical journey over a lifetime
- sets the story in London but it spreads across the country
- takes Scrooge on actual journeys but also on metaphorical ones.

### Activity 5

Make a list of:

- a the different points in the metaphorical journey
- b the London settings
- c the settings outside London
- d the stages in the actual journey
- e the stages of Scrooge's metaphorical journey of a lifetime.

### Activity 6

For each of these explain:

- a how Dickens makes them significant to the story
- b how Dickens uses them to show something about Scrooge
- c how the setting is appropriate for the events which take place in it.

### Activity 7

Explain how Dickens:

- a uses the action of a single night
- b uses various points in Scrooge's lifetime
- c uses the setting of London
- d uses other settings
- e uses the journeys
- f the aspects of Scrooge's metaphorical journey
- e uses actual journeys
- f uses the idea of a metaphorical journey.

## Context

There are several ways of thinking about contexts. Context means the situation and circumstances around something. It might be a historical context (what was going on at the time the text was set, for example, and in this case how that compares with what was going on at the time the text was written). It might be a social context (what was going on in society either when the text was set or when it was written) or a literary context (how a text relates to other texts written at the same time or in the same genre). These are all what could be called external contexts, relating what is in the text to what is outside the text.

There are also internal contexts. The Cratchits, Ignorance and Want could be considered in terms of Victorian poverty. Bob Cratchit could be seen as evidence of the ways employees were treated. The various houses could be seen in terms of Victorian living conditions. The importance of Christmas could be seen in terms of Victorian ideas about Christian festivals. The novella could be seen as a significant contribution to a debate about Victorian morality.

## Victorian society

### Activity 1

Find evidence in the text to explain how the following are used in the novella:

- a Victorian working conditions
- b Victorian living conditions
- c child labour
- d education
- e the need for charity
- f urban poverty
- g the importance of family
- h the role of women
- i Victorian ideas about money
- j the importance of religion
- k social inequality
- l class inequality.

## Victorian ideas

### Activity 2

Find evidence in the text to explain how the following ideas are used in the novella and how Dickens presents them:

- a** the survival of the fittest
- b** the responsibilities of the state
- c** the need for philanthropy
- d** optimism and pessimism
- e** ideas about growth and psychological development
- f** attitudes to death
- g** belief in ghosts
- h** attitudes to spiritualism.

## Victorian virtues

### Activity 3

Find evidence in the text to explain the use Dickens makes of commonly held Victorian virtues:

- a** church attendance
- b** good manners
- c** academic achievement
- d** professional employment
- e** family values
- f** charity
- g** the highest moral values.

## Childhood

### Activity 4

Dickens included many scenes involving children, including:

- the carol-singing child outside Scrooge's office
- Scrooge himself as a child
- the Cratchit children
- Ignorance and Want
- the children of the couple owing money to the dying Scrooge
- the child Scrooge sends to buy the turkey.

For each of these explain:

- a** how Dickens presents childhood
- b** the responsibilities of children
- c** the aspirations of children
- e** how children are treated in the family
- f** relationships between children and adults.

## Wealth and poverty

### Activity 5

Use evidence from the text to explain what use Dickens makes of:

- a Scrooge's acquisition of wealth
- b the living conditions of working people like the Cratchits
- c living conditions in the slums
- d the life of the poor and sick
- e the way the poor are dependent on the charity of the rich
- f urban squalor and deprivation
- g the need for workhouses
- h the effects of the Poor Law
- i how the poor might end up in prison
- j the fear of being sacked
- k the effect of poverty on people like the charwoman and laundress
- l the lack of education for the poor.

## Life in London

Dickens presents a detailed picture of life in London, particularly for the poor.

### Activity 6

Find evidence in the text to explain what Dickens shows about:

- a the conditions in London's streets
- b living conditions
- c diet
- d how poor people get their food cooked
- e conditions in the slums
- f the underclass of criminals, prostitutes and slum dwellers
- g the place of religion and the church
- h sanitation and cleanliness
- i London's weather and its effects.

## Christmas

Partly as a result of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert's interest in Christmas, Christmas became a much more popular celebration as the Victorian period proceeded and by the time of the novella the custom of celebrating Christmas was well established.

### Activity 7

Find evidence in the text to explain the way Dickens presents the following aspects of Christmas:

- a** a time off work
- b** a time for family celebrations
- c** the importance of Christmas dinner
- d** the giving of presents
- e** church attendance
- f** a time for charity giving.

## Genre

A Christmas Carol has been described as:

- a ghost story
- a parable
- an allegory
- a fairy tale
- a symbolic tale.

### Activity 8

Explain what elements of the novella you would comment on to show that it is:

- a** a ghost story
- b** a parable
- c** an allegory
- d** a fairy tale
- e** a symbolic tale.

## Satire

### Activity 8

Find evidence in the text to find examples of Dickens satirising the following:

- a** attitudes to poverty
- b** education
- c** the government
- d** religion
- e** common ideas about childhood
- f** attitudes to social responsibility
- g** Malthus's idea that an increase in population would lead to starvation and resources becoming scarce
- h** the acquisitiveness of Scrooge's city acquaintances
- i** friendship based only on money
- j** hypocrisy
- k** the moral failings of society.

## Character

When you are writing about a character you are being asked more than about what the character does. You might be asked about Dickens's presentation of character and/or ideas. If a character is named in the question, it may be linked to a theme so you need to make sure that you are equally well prepared to write about themes as about characters.

When you are thinking about how Dickens presents a character you should think about the choices the writer has made. It is useful to consider:

- what Dickens chooses to have the character do
- how Dickens uses one character to describe another
- what kind of speech the character uses
- how and why the character reacts in the way he or she does to other characters
- how and why other characters react to the character
- how Dickens shows what the character's attitudes are
- how Dickens show what the character's values are
- how the character conveys ideas important in the novella
- what you think the character's role is in the novella
- what functions the character fulfils
- what the character might represent or symbolise.

When you are thinking about the roles, purposes or functions of the character, it is useful to consider these possible uses:

- to give information
- to receive information
- to develop the plot
- to comment on or represent specific themes
- to act as a contrast to other characters
- to change the mood or atmosphere
- to bring about change in the plot
- to act as a mouthpiece for Dickens's views

## The humans

### Scrooge

#### Activity 1

Find evidence in the text to support the idea that Scrooge:

- a** has frozen emotions
- b** is without humanity
- c** is ruthless in business
- d** is heartless and cruel
- e** has a savage sense of humour
- f** was an imaginative child
- g** lacks social responsibility
- h** undergoes a slow transformation
- i** is the antithesis of Fezziwig
- j** learns the importance of things other than money
- k** becomes aware of the needs of others
- l** begins to understand what it means to be happy
- m** becomes fearful of dying unredeemed
- n** becomes childlike
- o** becomes a generous benefactor
- p** becomes the model of a good person.

### Bob Cratchit

#### Activity 2

Find evidence in the text to support the idea that Bob Cratchit:

- a** is exploited by Scrooge
- b** is still in touch with his child-like side
- c** is an optimist
- d** is a good father
- e** is a good husband
- e** displays an open nature
- f** represents good people living in poverty
- g** forms a contrast with Scrooge.

## Tiny Tim

### Activity 3

Find evidence in the text to support the idea that Tiny Tim:

- a** is precious to his family
- b** is optimistic
- c** is presented as a means of Scrooge's reform
- d** is presented in an overly sentimental way.

## Fred

### Activity 4

Find evidence in the text to support the idea that Fred:

- a** is happy and good-natured
- b** is generous
- c** acts as a foil to Scrooge
- d** represents the real spirit of Christmas
- e** is a link to Scrooge's past.

## Fezziwig

### Activity 5

Find evidence in the text to support the idea that Fezziwig:

- a** is presented as a role model of how an employer should behave
- b** is the antithesis of Marley and Scrooge
- c** represents enjoyment of life
- d** signifies that families can be functional.

## The Cratchit Family

### Activity 6

Find evidence in the text to support the idea that:

- a families can be functional
- b Mrs Cratchit is the ideal wife and mother
- c Mrs Cratchit is a proud housekeeper
- d Mrs Cratchit shows loyalty and affection
- e despite being poor, families can have fun
- f members of a family can be supportive
- g members of a family can be caring
- h despite provocation, there is no need for bitterness
- i represent the deserving poor.

## Minor characters

Dickens populates his novella with minor characters who are not developed but who have important functions:

- The two portly gentlemen
- Scrooge's sister Fan
- Fezziwig
- Mrs Fezziwig
- Belle
- Scrooge's niece
- Topper
- Ignorance and Want
- Mrs Dilber
- Joe
- Caroline and her husband.

### Activity 7

For each of these characters find evidence in the text to explain:

- a their role
- b their function in the novella
- c what they reveal about Victorian society
- d what they reveal about Victorian ideas.

## The Ghosts

### Jacob Marley

#### Activity 8

Find evidence in the text to explain the idea that Jacob Marley:

- a** in life was as isolated as Scrooge
- b** is used to warn Scrooge to change
- c** represents a person's misdeeds in life being replicated in the afterlife.

### The Ghost of Christmas Past

#### Activity 9

Find evidence in the text to explain the idea that The Ghost of Christmas Past:

- a** is full of contradictions
- b** represents memory
- c** is used to show the reader the reason Scrooge doesn't like Christmas
- d** selects memories most likely to affect Scrooge
- e** provokes Scrooge into thinking in a different way
- f** brings Scrooge's long-buried memories to the surface.

### The Ghost of Christmas Present

#### Activity 10

Find evidence in the text to explain the idea that The Ghost of Christmas Present:

- a** represents knowledge
- b** personifies everything good about Christmas
- c** represents peace
- d** represents the light of goodwill
- e** is used to criticise narrow-minded religious people
- f** represents some of Dickens's views.

## The Ghost of Christmas Yet To Come

### Activity 11

Find evidence in the text to support the idea that The Ghost of Christmas Yet To Come:

- a** is the ghost most like a traditional 'spook'
- b** resembles the figure of the Grim Reaper
- c** is used to show Scrooge misery and death
- d** represents the fear humans have of death
- e** reveals the awfulness of what Scrooge can expect in the future and after death
- f** seems relentless
- g** seems immovable
- h** forces Scrooge into realisation of his behaviour.

## Language

### Description

There are many vivid and detailed passages of description in the novella.

#### Activity 1

Choose some of these and explain how Dickens creates atmosphere by using some or all of the following:

- a adjectives
- b metaphor
- c light and dark
- d sight
- e sound
- f time of day
- g colour
- h simile
- i details to create suspense
- j dramatic irony
- k pathetic fallacy
- l personification
- m repetition
- n repeated phrase and sentence structures.

## Humour

#### Activity 2

Although *A Christmas Carol* is a ghost story, Dickens infuses it with many moments of humour. Make a list of occasions when he uses the following to create humour:

- a wordplay
- b puns
- c humorous comparisons
- d hyperbole
- e digression
- f verbal irony
- g situational irony
- h dramatic irony
- i the use of vivid, unexpected phrases
- j the piling on of adjectives
- k bathos.

### Activity 3

For each of your examples explain:

- a** the nature of the humour
- b** the effect of the example of the reader
- c** why you think Dickens has used humour at this particular point.

### Recurring motifs

#### Activity 4

Make a list of the occasions when Dickens uses the following in *A Christmas Carol*:

- a** light
- b** darkness
- c** food
- d** the weather
- e** fog
- e** the cold
- f** religion
- g** music.

#### Activity 5

Explain how Dickens uses each of these to:

- a** create atmosphere
- b** create suspense
- c** suggest ideas
- d** suggest characters' feelings.

## Weather

Dickens uses the weather a great deal in the novella. Often it establishes the mood and the atmosphere of the scene that is taking place. Sometimes it acts as pathetic fallacy, where human emotions and sympathies are attributed to nature or reflected in the weather.

### Activity 6

Here are some examples:

- The paragraph beginning 'Once upon a time' near the beginning of Stave 1
- The fog, darkness and cold in the middle of Stave 1
- The first paragraph of Stave 2
- The paragraph beginning 'The house-fronts looked black enough', about four pages into Stave 3
- The paragraph beginning 'By this time it was getting dark, and snowing pretty heavily' in the middle of Stave 3
- The paragraph beginning 'Running to the window, he opened it, and put out his head' on the second page of Stave 5

For each of these instances explain:

- a how the weather is appropriate for the events taking place
- b any aspects of metaphor in the description
- c any aspects of symbolism in the description
- d how Dickens establishes suspense.

## First person

Although the novella is primarily told by using a third person omniscient narrator, there are several occasions where the first person is used, the writer or narrative persona often addressing the reader directly.

### Activity 7

Here are some examples:

- The first page of Stave 1
- ‘You may talk vaguely about driving a coach-and-six up a good old flight of stairs, or through a bad young Act of Parliament; but I mean to say you might have got a hearse up that staircase, and taken it broadwise, with the splinter-bar towards the wall, and the door towards the balustrades: and done it easy’ just before the middle of Stave 1
- ‘the fiddler (an artful dog, mind! The sort of man who knew his business better than you or I could have told it him!) struck up “Sir Roger de Coverley.”’ (at the Fezziwigs’ in Stave 2)
- ‘If that’s not high praise, tell me higher and I’ll use it’ in the next paragraph of Stave 2
- Parts of the paragraph beginning ‘They were in another scene and place’ about two pages before the end of Stave 2
- The second paragraph of Stave 3
- The second half of the third paragraph of Stave 3
- The short paragraph in Stave 3: ‘If you should happen, by any unlikely chance, to know a man more blest in a laugh than Scrooge’s nephew, all I can say is, I should like to know him too’ Introduce him to me, and I’ll cultivate his acquaintance.’
- ‘And I no more believe Topper was really blind than I believe he had eyes in his boots. My opinion is, that it was a done thing between him and Scrooge’s nephew; and that the Ghost of Christmas Present know it’ about four pages before the end of Stave 3.

For each of these explain:

- a why you think Dickens chooses to write this in the first person
- b what effect it has on the reader
- c how Dickens creates satire
- d how Dickens creates social criticism
- e the kind of relationship Dickens establishes between the narrator and the reader.

## Direct speech

Dickens creates and develops character not only by means of description but also by the use of direct speech.

## Activity 8

Look at each of the following quotations of direct speech and attribute each speech to the character who said it. Then give as many reasons as you can for your attribution by analysing the uses of language in the speech and how these details of language create character.

- a** 'I don't know what to do! I am as light as a feather, I am as happy as an angel, I am as merry as a school-boy. I am as giddy as a drunken man. A merry Christmas to everybody! A happy new year to all the world! Hallo there! Whoop! Hallo!'
- b** 'But I am sure I have always thought of Christmas time, when it has come round - apart from the veneration due to its sacred name and origin, if anything belonging to it can be apart from that - as a good time: a kind, forgiving, charitable, pleasant time: the only time I know of, in the long calendar of the year, when men and women seem by one consent to open their shut-up hearts freely, and to think of people below them as if they really were fellow-passengers to the grave, and not another race of creatures bound on other journeys. And therefore, though it has never put a scrap of gold or silver in my pocket, I believe it *has* done me good, and *will* do me good; and I say, God bless it!'
- c** 'Oh! Captive, bound, and double-ironed, not to know, that ages of incessant labour by immortal creatures, for this earth must pass into eternity before the good of which it is susceptible is all developed. Not to know that any Christian spirit working kindly in its little sphere, whatever it may be, will find its mortal life too short of its vast means of usefulness. Not to know that no space of regret can make amends for one life's opportunity misused! Yet such was I! Oh! Such was I!'
- d** 'I wish it was a little heavier one, and it should have been, you may depend on it, if I could have laid my hands on anything else. Open that bundle, old Joe, and let me know the value of it. Speak out plain. I'm not afraid to be the first, nor afraid for them to see it. We knew pretty well that we were helping ourselves, before we met here, I believe. It's no sin. Open the bundle, Joe.'
- e** 'They are Man's. And they cling to me, appealing from their fathers. This boy is Ignorance. 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, unless the writing be erased. Deny it! Slander those who tell ye! Admit it for your factious purposes, and make it worse. And bide the end!'
- h** 'As good as gold and better. Somehow he gets thoughtful sitting by himself so much, and thinks the strangest things you ever heard. He told me, coming home, that he hopes the people saw him in the church, because he was a cripple, and it might be pleasant to them to remember upon Christmas Day, who made lame beggars walk and blind men see.'
- i** 'Yo ho, my boys! No more work tonight. Christmas Eve, Dick. Christmas, Ebenezer! Let's have the shutters up before a man can say Jack Robinson!'
- j** 'What else can I be when I live in such a world of fools as this? Merry Christmas! Out upon Merry Christmas! What's Christmas time to you but a time for paying bills without money; a time for finding yourself a year older, and not an hour richer; a time for balancing your books and having every item in 'em through a round dozen of months presented dead against you? If I could work my will, 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. He should!'

## Tension and suspense

### Activity 9

Find evidence in the text to show how Dickens builds tension and suspense by using the following:

- a** accumulating description
- b** ghosts and the supernatural
- c** the sequence of the spirits
- d** the use of the weather
- e** dramatic irony
- f** manipulation of sentence structures
- g** accumulation of adjectives
- h** repeated phrases
- i** repeated sentence structures
- j** exclamations
- k** the use of the gothic
- l** undercutting the tension with humour
- m** undercutting the tension with bathos.

## Themes

### Poverty and wealth

#### Activity 1

Find evidence in the text to support the idea that:

- a** Scrooge represents the acquisition of wealth for its own sake
- b** the wealthy exploit the poor
- c** poverty is wrong in a Christian society
- d** the government does little or nothing about poverty
- e** the Cratchits represent the deserving poor
- f** Dickens bemoans the need for workhouses and prisons for the poor
- g** poverty continues through lack of education
- h** poor people can turn to crime
- i** slums can be the breeding ground for crime and corruption
- j** Dickens makes the reader feel revolted by the results of poverty.

## Greed and generosity

### Activity 2

Find evidence in the text to support the idea that:

- a** Scrooge represents greed
- b** greed can be transformed into generosity
- c** Dickens presents generosity as financial
- d** Dickens presents generosity as moral and spiritual
- e** Dickens presents greed and generosity by means of figurative language
- f** Dickens presents greed and generosity by means of symbolism
- g** Dickens uses characters to contrast greed and generosity
- h** Dickens unmasks the hypocrisy of the greedy.

## Women

### Activity 3

Find evidence in the text to support the idea that:

- a** women are presented as the backbone of the family
- b** women are sometimes wiser than men
- c** women are sometimes misused by men
- d** women are as likely to be as greedy as men
- e** women belong in the domestic sphere
- f** Dickens suggests that women have a good influence on men
- g** the absence of women highlights the men's repressed desires.

**Good and Evil****Activity 4**

Find evidence in the text to support the idea that:

- a evil is seen in terms of greed
- b good is seen in terms of generosity
- c Dickens is interested in social evils in the novella
- d good is seen in terms of Christian values
- e Dickens points out that not all Christians are good
- f Dickens's presentation of the transformation of Scrooge is sentimental.

**Youth****Activity 5**

Find evidence in the text to support the idea that:

- a Scrooge's character is shown by the carol singing boy being chased away
- b Tiny Tim represents the sufferings of the young without money
- c many young people suffer through ignorance and want
- d Scrooge's character is formed by his neglect as a child
- e the Fezziwigs, Fred's family and the Cratchits are presented as a contrast to the deprivation of youth
- f good education is vital for young people
- g Dickens satirises bad education.

**Age****Activity 6**

Find evidence in the text to support the idea that:

- a age is represented by Marley and Scrooge
- b the old grandfather in the mining family is the opposite of the miser
- c it is never too late to change
- d Scrooge learns to make the most of the rest of his life
- e the threat of eternal punishment is represented by Marley
- f it is never too late to adopt Christian virtues.

**Families****Activity 7**

Find evidence in the text to support the idea that:

- a a strong society depends on a stable family
- b Scrooge rejects his family
- c Fred encourages family life
- d Scrooge's lack of functional family represents his dysfunctional isolation
- e a strong family can make unhappiness bearable
- f The Fezziwigs represent an important model for Scrooge
- g families provide support, protection, nurturing, education and assistance with employment.

**Christmas****Activity 8**

Find evidence in the text to support the idea that:

- a** Christmas is a time for family celebration
- b** Christmas should be characterised by feasting, music, dancing and playing games
- c** Christmas is a time for forgiveness
- d** Christmas is a time for generosity
- e** Dickens contrasts young Scrooge in his schoolroom with the Fezziwig's Christmas ball
- f** Belle signifies what Scrooge missed out on
- g** Christmas can be celebrated anywhere: in a lighthouse or at sea
- h** Christmas is a time for charity
- i** Christmas is a time of plenty
- j** religious observance is important at Christmas
- k** Scrooge's refusal to accept Christmas is a metaphor for his lack of feelings
- l** the story of Scrooge is a parable for the idea of Christian redemption.

**The urban landscape****Activity 9**

Find evidence in the text to support the idea that:

- a** Dickens uses the setting of urban London to combine the ordinary and the extraordinary
- b** the detail about London life roots the fable in reality for the reader
- c** Dickens uses a great deal of detail documenting Victorian Christmas
- d** the atmosphere of dimly-lit streets and night-time shadows complement the themes in the novella
- e** the squalor of the slums represents the squalor of the life of the poor
- f** *A Christmas Carol* documents Victorian social behaviour
- g** *A Christmas Carol* documents Victorian city living.