

AQA English Literature GCSE

A Christmas Carol: Themes *Family*

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Family

The exploration of 'family' as a theme within the novella closely ties in with Dickens' greater agenda to popularise an **emotional element** to Christmas. Hence, he emphasises the importance of family during the festive time.



This is contextually significant as Queen Victoria and Prince Albert had nine children together and their family was idealised and perceived to be model. Ideas about family were changing during the Victorian era so readers were more likely to be **receptive** to Dickens' presentation of the theme.

He emphasises ideas surrounding family by exploring them in detail, highlighting the positive effects that family can have while also explaining the negative consequences which could arise due to the absence of family. He builds on this by presenting the theme of family as one which **embodies joy, strength and affection**. This is an interesting presentation as it could be argued that Scrooge begins the novella as the complete **antithesis** (direct opposite) to these ideas. This introduces the idea that the absence of family may be one of the key factors which contributed to Scrooge's initially abhorrent characterisation.

The Positive Effects of Family.

Fred

From his introduction to the novella, Fred generates a positive atmosphere which affects both Scrooge and the tone of narration. This is first highlighted when he enters Scrooge's counting-house in Stave One. Prior to his arrival Dickens focuses on cold, gloomy imagery. When Fred appears at the door, however, he **"heated himself"** and looked to be in **"a glow"**, introducing warmth to the stave. This is significant as Dickens previously asserted that even **"external heat and cold had little influence on Scrooge"** which suggests that Fred's virtue is stronger than the forces of nature. This may perhaps spotlight the **power and value** of family.

It is also interesting to note that Dickens emphasises that it is Scrooge who **isolates himself** from his family. This is seen when he refuses Fred's invitation to **"dine"** with him on Christmas. It could be argued that this directly links to his downfall, as highlighted by the Ghost of Christmas Present who takes him to Fred's party. There, he acknowledges that if he had experienced a loving family **"years ago"** then he might have **"cultivated the kindness of life"**. This presents the idea that a supportive family is **instrumental in the development of a person** and so the concept of family should be seen as paramount in society.



Bob Cratchit

Large families like the Cratchits were prevalent in the nineteenth century, so Dickens constructs the Cratchits to be a **relatable presentation of the lower class**. He idealises their family by focussing on their unity, happiness and strength despite their financial struggles. This conveys the idea that **poverty is not a barrier to happiness**.

Dickens highlights this through his description of the household on Christmas day. He details that even the potatoes **“knocked loudly...to be let out”**, emphasising the joy and excitement of the Cratchit family. Their **unity** is essential following Tiny Tim’s death, where the reader witnesses the family come together and provide Tiny Tim with a loving funeral. This starkly contrasts Scrooge’s body which lay **“unwatched, unwept, uncared for”**. The **alliteration** used here emphasises his isolation, and so highlights to the reader that family is more important than money.

Minor Characters

Dickens emphasises the value of family through even the most minor of characters. This implies that family is so essential that it should be interwoven into everyone’s lives. Dickens makes this apparent during Scrooge’s time with the Ghost of Christmas Present by including subtle comments regarding the importance of family. When he describes the setting, he writes that **“all the children of the house were running out into the snow to meet their married sisters, brothers, cousins, uncles, aunts”**. The **extensive listing** serves to **further Scrooge’s isolation** as it presents the abundance of family as invaluable.

Dickens goes on to detail that even the geographically isolated miners gather with **“cheerful company”** while a sailor far out at sea still **“remembered those he cared for”**. This accumulation of description presents the concept of family to be central to Scrooge’s time with the Spirit, and so must have some effect on his redemption.

The Negative Effects of an Absent Family

- **Fanny**: When Fanny comes to take Scrooge home from boarding school she informs him that their father is now a **“kinder”** man and that their home now feels **“like heaven”**. This is a **powerful simile** as it highlights the great power family can have, emphasising its importance. Therefore, when Scrooge glances **“anxiously at the door”** and **“mournfully”** shakes his head before Fanny arrives the reader understands that he feels great sorrow at her death. Her absence evidently had a **profound effect** on his character, spotlighted by the fact that after he is reminded of her kindness he is **“uneasy”** and begins to reflect on his relationship with Fred. This is a remarkable change in his character, considering his behaviour in the opening stave, and so it can be inferred that the absence of Fan had negative effects on his personality.
- **Belle**: When Scrooge is taken to see Belle, his once fiancée, she reveals that she has been replaced by a **“golden”** idol. This is in reference to Scrooge’s **“passion”**



and pursuit of money. Dickens presents the idea that Scrooge's inclination towards money over relationships has damaged his opportunity to kindle love and start his own family. The **magnitude of his loss** is foregrounded when he sees Belle with her children, prompting him to question what it would have been like to have children who **"called him father"**. This **pitiful sentiment** highlights the **regret** that Scrooge feels, which implies that he has come to the realisation that family is more important than money.

