

# AQA English Literature GCSE

## A Christmas Carol: Themes *Materialism and Wealth*

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## Materialism and Wealth

Materialism is defined as ‘the preference of material things and physical comfort over spiritual values’. It is a concept which Dickens presents as wrong within the text. He explores the idea of wealth in greater depth and portrays it as having **both positive and negative** effects within the novella.

Stave Two is central to Dickens’ message as Scrooge points out the **paradoxical nature of wealth**. He describes it as **“the even-handed dealing of the world”**. He continues by asserting that there is nothing on earth as **“hard as poverty”** but the **“pursuit of wealth”** is one of the things people **“condemn”** the most. This belief is used by Scrooge to justify his actions; however, Dickens may have included this perceptive observation to comment on the attitudes towards wealth in Victorian society.



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Dickens ultimately shows the reader that wealth is **not exclusively amoral** as in some areas of the novella it is presented in a positive light.

### Materialism as wrong

When Marley’s Ghost appears before Scrooge in the opening stave he insults him by calling him a **“man of the worldly mind”**. This could be interpreted as alluding to Scrooge’s **materialistic attitude**, a significant reference as it occurs in the first stave. This is interesting as it highlights that Dickens wanted to establish materialism as wrong from the very offset of the novella.

Dickens furthers this through the revelation that the other spirits in purgatory had a **“misery within them”** because they wanted to **“interfere, for good, in human matters”** but had **“lost the power forever.”** Here, Dickens highlights that **material things and physical comfort are unimportant**, challenging the concept of materialism. Instead, he presents the idea that spiritual values, such as helping those around you, are more essential and beneficial from both a moral and religious standpoint.

This viewpoint is reinforced in Stave Three when the Ghost of Christmas Present takes Scrooge to Fred’s Christmas party. Fred observes that Scrooge’s **materialistic pursuits of wealth** are of **“no use to him”** as he doesn’t **“do any good with it (his money)”**. Here Dickens outlines that as materialism doesn’t benefit anyone, it is **purposeless** and should be abandoned, solidifying its portrayal as a worthless concept within the novella.



## Negative Presentation of Wealth

In addition to his negative portrayal of materialism, Dickens uses Marley's character to **highlight the unfavourable effects of wealth**. When Marley's Ghost appears, Dickens writes that he was tied in chains. He details that they were made of "**cash-boxes, keys, padlocks, ledgers** (a book of financial accounts), **deeds** (a legal document for property), **and heavy purses**". This **semantic field** (a group of words with similar meanings) of money highlights how it is Marley's misuse of wealth which has caused him to become **trapped in purgatory**. Through this Dickens presents a **didactic** (moral) lesson for readers, perhaps causing them to understand that wealth can cause the downfall of a person if it is not used properly.

This idea is furthered by the breakdown of the relationship between Scrooge and Belle. Belle tells Scrooge that she is leaving him due to his "**eager**" and "**greedy**" attitude towards money. She recognises that he no longer has any noble "**aspirations**" as "**gain**" is what "**engrosses**" him. This highlights that the deterioration of their relationship is a **direct consequence** of Scrooge's **fixation with wealth**.

## Positive Presentation of Wealth

Fezziwig, Scrooge's employer when he was young, is presented as a character who used money in a praiseworthy and exemplary way. Therefore, it could be argued that Dickens uses his character to act as an example to readers, presenting the idea that it is indeed possible to be **both wealthy and moral**.

- Scrooge recognises that Fezziwig uses his money to make people "**happy**". He ensures that the working conditions in the warehouse instil a sense of "**pleasure**" in his employees. Consequently, Scrooge acknowledges that it is not the amount of money a person has which is important but the happiness that they can create because of it.

In the final stave, Scrooge also uses his money to benefit those around him. He makes a donation to the charity collector from Stave One and sends a turkey to Bob Cratchit's house for Christmas dinner. Following these **altruistic** (selfless) actions, the narrator repeatedly uses the word "**good**" to describe his character. This shows how Scrooge has been able to use his wealth to become a better person. The Narrator reinforces this by revealing that his "**own heart laughed**" suggesting that he is content and happy. This ultimately presents the idea that wealth can be used to **honour spiritual values** in order to develop into a better person.

