

AQA English Literature GCSE

A Christmas Carol: Themes *Morality*

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Morality

'A Christmas Carol' is a **didactic** novel with many **moral messages**. The novel gives Dickens a platform to voice his **socialist ideas** and to also show the immorality in Victorian society.



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Dickens was incredibly critical of the laws during created about the poor, in fact he had lost all hope in democracy. Policies such as the **Poor Law 1834** which created union workhouses which were cruel unforgiving places which Dickens believed to be completely unethical.

Dickens shows the importance of morality in our daily lives. In the Victorian era morality and **philanthropy** were linked and many believed that it was a moral duty to contribute to charity, especially as Christians. Contrastingly others believed

that charity actually made poverty worse (read more about this is 'Poverty and Charity' Context Notes), it is possible that some even believed that they did not have enough money to give.

Through Scrooge's change, Dickens illustrates that philanthropy (which became very popular in the Victorian era) did not have to be grand wealthy displays. Instead Dickens shows that being good and being charitable is about a change in **behaviour**, being a good person does not mean just giving money away, instead it's about the way you act.

- In Stave 5 where the results of Scrooge's transformation is seen, Scrooge is more giving and charitable as he speaks to Bob Cratchit saying **"I am about to raise your salary"**. This is of course a dramatic change from a man who was once **"tight-fisted"**.
- However, it can be argued that the biggest change is his attitude as he is filled with the **Christmas Spirit** and becomes a **"good a friend, as good a master, and as good a man"**.
- Through Scrooge's change Dickens shows the steps to being a morally good person.

Context

Many pieces of literature in the Victorian era had a **dual nature**; their purpose was to entertain but also to inform readers or act as a tool for **social conformity**.



Many of the moral ideologies of the era were heavily influenced by the Bible and Christian doctrines. Dickens was a Christian and we can see some of these views present in the novel.

- Scrooge is described as “**covetous old sinner**”. Covetousness is a sin and **Exodus 20:17** mentions it as one of the ten commandments.
- While Dickens was a Christian he had also beliefs which did not necessarily align with the Bible. For example Dickens did not believe that Christianity and salvation was the only way to change, he believed change was possible through a person's own self awareness.

Through the novel Dickens expresses many of his beliefs about religion, and how sometimes it is not necessarily authentic and moral but it is instead is overly concerned with outward appearances. Many believed that being a Christian was enough to live a moral life but Dickens was critical of this, believing that being a good person was less about going to church every Sunday but more about finding opportunities to do good deeds.

- This belief is echoed in Stave 3 by **The Ghost of Christmas Present** when he states that “**There are some upon this earth of yours [...] who lay claim to know us, and who do their deeds of passion, pride, ill-will, hatred, envy, bigotry, and selfishness in our name, who are as strange to us and all our kith and kin, as if they had never lived.**”
 - Scrooge believed that the Ghost was God, or at least related to God, and so the Ghost is essentially saying that although some people may call themselves Christians claiming that they know God but instead the way they actually act is contradictory to what “**what they lay claim to**”. The **listing** of the sins builds on each other creating an overwhelming effect on the reader. Through the voice of the Ghost Dickens hints that Christianity does not necessarily mean morality.

Consequences

Marley's Ghost - Dickens shows the eternal consequences of living an immoral life through Marley's Ghost. These consequences are grounded in Christian doctrine.

- Marley's Ghost has been trapped in **purgatory**. He explains how if a “**spirit goes not forth in life, it is condemned to do so after death**” and because of his actions during his life he is “**doomed to wander the earth**”.
- The “**phantoms, wandering hither and thither in restless haste, and moaning as they went**”. The fact that the moans of the phantoms are audible suggests the depth of their suffering, it can be argued that it even **humanises** them, the way in which another sense confirms what Scrooge is seeing with his eyes verifies the experience.
- Marley's ghost is a realisation of the Christian ideology that if you live immorally in life you will be eternally damned. Victorian society was incredibly religious and so Marley's fate would have resonated with many of the Victorian readers. Old Marley's Ghost is a deterrent not just for Scrooge but towards the reader, it confirms beliefs or even fears which they may already have.



The Ghost of Christmas Yet To Come - This Ghost shows Scrooge the effects of his death instead of people mourning people feel relief and joy because of it.

The three thieves - Dickens illustrates to the reader a **cycle of immorality** through the three thieves who come to profit off of Scrooge's effects. His wicked and cruel behaviour in life has left the same legacy after his death and, because of this, others such as the thieves believe it is justice for them to mimic that same behaviour.

- **Mrs Dilber** argues that ***“Every person has a right to take care of themselves”*** because ***“(Scrooge) always did.”***; therefore what they are doing which is stealing from a dead man is not unethical or immoral but instead is just ***“a judgment on him”***. The short 3 word sentence ***“He always did”*** expresses a stark truth, a simple fact. ***“He”*** is also **italicised** which put an emphasis on Scrooge, depicting him as the focus and showing that all which is happening to him after death is on him Scrooge bears the weight of it all.
- Through this Dickens tries to exhibit to the audience the consequences of bad behaviour and shows the reader how immorality begets immorality; it is everyone's duty to live a moral life not just for their own sake and their legacy but also for the sake of others.

