

AQA English Literature GCSE

A Christmas Carol: Themes

Religion and Christmas

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Religion and Christmas

The theme of religion is one which inspires great debate. This is because some people interpret the novella to hold **anti-religious sentiment** while others believe Dickens presents a narrative **in support of religious ideas**. Therefore, it is important to consider your own opinions and interpretations when writing essays.

The middle-ground is the belief that Dickens is in support of religious values in **isolation** but doesn't think that religion is being practiced properly in society. Hence, he presents religious ideals in the text but still criticises some aspects of the way religion is observed. This is seen through the fact that he does idealise values such as being charitable and going to church.



However, he still challenges **religious hypocrisy** during Stave Three, when the Ghost of Christmas Present tells Scrooge that people **“claim to know”** religion but do things out of **“passion, pride, ill-will, hatred, envy, bigotry and selfishness”** in its name. This was specifically in reference to the practice of closing shops on Sundays (**Sabbatarianism**) as this prevents the lower class from enjoying the brief time they have off work (see 'Context: Religion and Christmas'). Although, it could be argued that this also applies to the wider practice of religion in society and so acts as a social commentary.

The title 'A Christmas Carol'

The theme of Christmas is evidently central to the text due to the title and it being both set and published during the festive time. A 'carol' is a piece of music sung in church and is often associated with uniting people regardless of their social status.

There are multiple interpretations of what Dickens was aiming to suggest with the title.

- Some may argue that he intended to hold the church accountable for failing to unite society. This is because he **ironically highlights** the **substantial divisions** between social classes in Victorian society.
- Others believe that Dickens endeavoured to produce a novella which would **guide** readers on how to celebrate Christmas in a manner which would **unite society** in a similar way to traditional Christmas carols. This is a secure viewpoint as it is widely accepted that Dickens attributed and popularised an emotional element to the festive time which was not apparent prior to the publication of 'A Christmas Carol'.
 - This is supported by Professor Les Standiford, author of 'The Man Who Invented Christmas, who said that *“The publication of A Christmas Carol added an emotional component to Christmas and changed it”*.



A Religious Redemption

It is interesting to note that Scrooge's redemption, which is fundamental to the text, is **inherently religious** in its nature. Firstly, when Marley's Ghost appears in the opening stave, he informs Scrooge of the **"incessant torture"** he is facing in the afterlife. Dickens reveals that he is in some form of **purgatory** as he **"cannot rest"** nor **"stay"** nor **"linger anywhere"**. According to Christian belief, purgatory is an intermediate state following death where people who have done wrong are punished for their actions in order to be purified. This introduces ideas of **judgement and accountability**, which adds a religious weight and ultimatum to Scrooge's need to change. As a result, the theme amplifies the **dramatic effect** of the novella by increasing the build-up of tension.

When Scrooge discusses Sabbatarianism with the Ghost of Christmas Present he claims that it is observed in the Spirit's **"name"** or **"at least"** in the name of its **"family"**. This makes it clear that Scrooge views the Spirits as **godlike figures**, introducing the idea of **divine intervention**. Dickens presents this as a beneficial concept as it has the ability to **inspire positive change**, as seen through the effect the Spirits have on Scrooge's transformation. This may perhaps be an effort to prompt readers to attend church or engage with religion, as this is the only method through which they too can access a sense of divine intervention. This suggestion is supported by the fact that Scrooge **"went to church"** following his redemption, implying that his attendance is a virtuous action which Dickens encourages.

Finally, it is also significant that Scrooge's redemption is centred around religious ideals. For example, one of the **defining aspects** of Scrooge's transformation is the change in his attitude towards money. He begins the novella as a miserly man who embodies the **Malthusian attitude** towards the poor. Following his transformation, however, he exhibits charitable yet modest traits. This is exemplified through his behaviour with the charity collectors (see Redemption: Charity Collectors above). Ultimately, this implies that Dickens draws inspiration from religious ideals to define 'goodness' within the novella. It could, therefore, be argued that he presents the idea that religion and virtue are **synonymous** (closely associated).

