

AQA English Literature GCSE

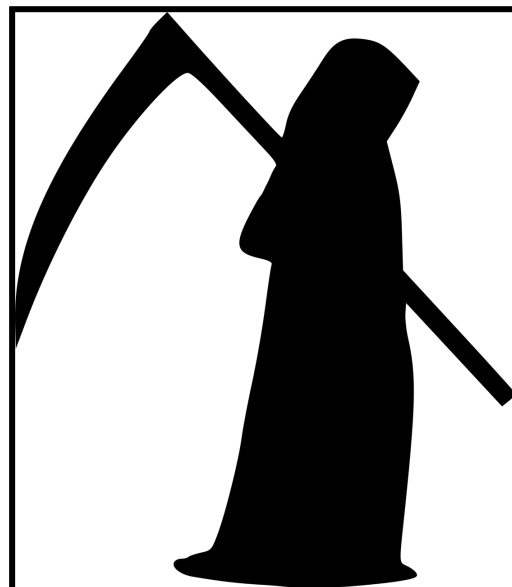
A Christmas Carol: Themes *The Supernatural*

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The Supernatural

During the Victorian era, the **Gothic genre** began to permeate literature. This encompassed **supernatural themes** which were particularly popular at the time. It is often said that the Victorian era was a '**golden age**' for these gothic and supernatural **motifs**, a trend which Dickens avidly explored. This is seen by the words of John Forster, both his close friend and biographer. In his book '**The Life of Charles Dickens**', he writes that Dickens had a "hankering" for the supernatural. This means that he was curious about the subject, perhaps explaining why he included it within his work.



Dickens branded 'A Christmas Carol' as a **ghost story**, perhaps because it was a popular tradition to read ghost stories during the festive time.

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The supernatural is a key theme in the novella as it provides a **logical structure** to the plot. This is achieved by the three Ghosts who ultimately enable Scrooge to change. It could therefore be said that Dickens uses the Ghosts as **catalysts** to Scrooge's transformation. The Ghosts also serve to heighten the dramatic effect of the novella. This effective because they introduce a **greater consequence** to Scrooge's actions, increasing the importance and urgency of his redemption.

While the Ghosts are considered to be the most explicit representation of the supernatural within the novella, Dickens includes other, more implicit, ideas surrounding this theme. For example, Scrooge's character could be described as somewhat supernatural because he is only presented as one of two extremes. Dickens presents no middle-ground for Scrooge, characterising him to be either as "**hard and sharp as flint**" or "**as light as a feather**". This emphasises Scrooge's transformation while also acknowledging his supernatural qualities. Dickens may have chosen to present him in this way to convey the idea that if it is possible for Scrooge to change then it is also feasible for his readers.

The Church

The beliefs and authority of The Church greatly influenced public perception of the supernatural. The theme is split into two different categories: ideas which follow the teachings of The Bible (these were permitted) or ideas which contradict the Word of God (these were labelled as sinful).

The idea of **purgatory** (the Christian belief of an intermediate state following death) plays a prominent role within the novella. It is a concept which Dickens recognises in Stave One



when Scrooge sees the air **“filled with phantoms”**. Crucially, Dickens adheres to the biblical teachings surrounding this idea, allowing him to publish the novella without controversy.

By using **religious doctrines** (beliefs) Dickens creates a believable narrative, particularly to religious Victorians. As a result, they were more inclined to believe in and respect the authority of the Spirits, heightening the impact of the novella. Readers who are not particularly religious are required to **‘willingly suspend disbelief’** which means to put aside their criticisms and enjoy unbelievable aspects of the novella for the sake of enjoyment.

Explicit Forms

The most obvious presentations of the supernatural are the Ghosts which appear to Scrooge. They can be regarded as **structural tools to help drive forward the plot**. However, it is important to avoid simply dismissing them as **‘plot devices’**. This is because they play a greater role than this as they are used by Dickens to **teach the reader lessons** and **symbolise key ideas within the narrative**. Each of the Ghosts can be considered a **personification** of what they are supposed to represent:

- **The Ghost of Christmas Past:** This spirit is used to show both Scrooge and the reader the actions which have led up to Scrooge becoming the man he is. Dickens presents the Ghost to be a **personification of the past**, which is reflected in his appearance.
 - Dickens describes the Ghost to be **“like a child: yet not so like a child as like an old man”**. It could be argued that the true supernatural quality of the Phantom is its effortlessly **paradoxical nature**. To be an **“old man”** but also a **“child”** is only possible through **“some supernatural medium”** which the narrator freely admits.
 - The Spirit is also presented to have a certain quality of innocence. Dickens details that he wore a tunic of the **“purest white”** which is heightened by the **“bright clear jet of light”** that the Spirit emits. This could be symbolic of the truth which is found in Scrooge’s memories.
- **The Ghost of Christmas Present:** This Phantom resembles ‘Father Christmas’ which was an image prevalent in the nineteenth century and was used to represent a festive spirit. He is described to be a **“jolly giant”** who sits on a **“throne”**. Here Dickens uses size to increase the Ghost’s impact and present him as a dominating force.
 - Dickens characterises the Spirit as **God-like** which is highlighted through Scrooge’s perception of him. He believes that the apparition is related to God in some way, claiming that **blue laws** (policies prohibiting leisure on Sundays) are observed the name of his **“family”**.
 - However, the Spirit’s true supernatural property is not his religious significance but his ability to spread joy. Dickens reveals that the Ghost **“sprinkled incense”** on the food that people were eating, causing their



“**humours**” to be “**restored directly**”. Incense were used to amend disagreements, an interesting choice as this was available to Dickens’ readers. By choosing such an accessible method for a supernatural being, Dickens emphasises that readers too should **endeavour to spread joy** and Christmas Spirit

- **The Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come:** The last spectre to arrive is described not as Ghost but as a “**phantom**”.
 - Dickens draws parallels between the ghost and the Grim Reaper who is a **personification of death**. He outlines that it wears a “**deep black garment which concealed its head, its face, its form and left nothing visible except one outstretched hand**”. The reaper is a well-known symbol of death and so by likening the two characters Dickens **establishes a sense of doom** through the spirit. This heightens the tensions before the climax of the novel, adding gravity to the situation that Scrooge is in.
- **Ignorance and Want:** The children are described as “**wretched, abject, frightful, hideous, miserable**”, perhaps to symbolise the disease of Ignorance and Want in society. It is interesting to note that while these are supernatural beings they are **grounded in reality**. This is because the effects that they have on society are very real and could cause disastrous consequences if they are not addressed (see ‘Poverty and Social Injustice’ above).
- **Marley’s Ghost:** The narrator repeatedly emphasises the fact that “**Marley was dead**”, perhaps to heighten the effect of the appearance of his Ghost. Marley’s Ghost is described as being chained with “**cashboxes, keys, padlocks, ledgers**”. This is significant as the things that Marley created in his life become the things which keep him trapped in the afterlife. This has a **didactic purpose** as Dickens is trying to illustrate to the reader, through supernatural means, that the way they live their lives dictates their eternal resting place.

Implicit Forms

Dickens also presents more implicit explorations of the theme which are highlighted through the characters below:

- **Scrooge:** There are implicit forms of the supernatural in the way that the characters are described. In Scrooge’s introductory description, the metaphors and similes that are used to define him have a supernatural undertone. The narrator says that “**No warmth could warm him, no wintry weather chill him**”. The use of **alliteration** here encapsulates the extent of Scrooge’s apathy, suggesting there is something almost superhuman about him. This is furthered by the fact that “**even the blindmen’s dogs appeared to know him**”. This suggests yet another supernatural property within Scrooge, as he goes beyond being simply unsociable.



- **Fred:** Fred's goodness can be seen as supernatural as he is unchanging. Dickens uses lots of imagery of light to describe Fred.
 - He arrives at Scrooge's counting-house "**all in a glow**", an interesting description as the light that surrounds him is suggestive of his goodness and the Christmas spirit within him.
 - Dickens also writes that his "**eyes sparkled**". This mirrors the Ghost of Christmas Present who has a "**sparkling eye**", perhaps to symbolise Christmas Spirit and the positive light that comes from it.
 - This can also be seen as a **Biblical allusion** (reference) as in **John 8:12** Jesus says that he is "the light of the world". The fact that the Ghost and Fred have a sparkle suggests that they are of **similar nature**, attributing a supernatural quality to Fred.
- **Tiny Tim:** The little boy is filled with an almost supernatural spirit. This is highlighted when the narrator asserts that Tiny Tim's "**childish essence was from God**". This is interesting as it could be said that a child-like spirit is the foundation of Christmas Spirit.
 - Dickens reinforces this through the character of Scrooge. In the final stave, when Scrooge is filled with Christmas spirit, he says that he is "**as merry as a school-boy**". Here the childish essence that fills Scrooge is something which Dickens encourages the reader to adopt.
 - This same instruction aligns with Biblical words as Jesus says in **Matthew 18:3** that people must be "like a child" to inherit the kingdom of God.

Theme Development

Ideas surrounding the supernatural develop as the novella progresses. This is because with each supernatural experience Scrooge is learning more about himself and hence grows closer towards his redemption. Structurally, this means that each stave becomes more intense until the **climax** is reached, causing each supernatural experience to be more dramatic than the last.

The first **explicit form** of the supernatural is seen when Scrooge's door-knocker transforms into "**Marley's face**". This is a more **conventional appearance** from the supernatural as it aims to instil feelings of "**horror**" within Scrooge – highlighted when the narrator reveals he felt a "**terrible sensation**".

As Scrooge continues on his journey however, his experiences with the supernatural become more **meaningful**, teaching him how to amend his ways. Dickens ends with the **climactic moment** of Scrooge witnessing a "**neglected grave of his own name**". This **transcends** Scrooge's character as it encompasses, in a powerful and emotional stave, the ultimate message of the novella. It reveals to readers why change is so necessary,

reminding them of their own mortality.

