

AQA English Literature GCSE

A Christmas Carol: Themes *Poverty and Social Injustice*



Poverty and Social Injustice

The thematic focus on poverty and social injustice **underpins the novella**. This theme is introduced from the very offset of 'A Christmas Carol' through the charity collectors, who come to visit Scrooge. They immediately make the readers aware of the **"poor and destitute"** in society who are suffering **"greatly"**, setting the tone for the remainder of the novella. Dickens is widely accepted to be an author who had a strong **social commitment** which translated into his work. He believed in the use of literature to convey **ethical and political statements** and so it is unsurprising that these undertones exist within the text.



The most prominent way in which Dickens conveys this theme is through the exploration of his characters, perhaps as this is a technique which is both **practical** and **emotive**. This is because characters can act as an example for readers to emulate or be warned against, while also acting as a source of sympathy or distaste. Ultimately, this allows readers to become **more receptive** to Dickens' message and learn from his characters, provoking **internal change**.

Social Responsibility and Scrooge's Transformation

Initially, Scrooge is used by Dickens to represent the **selfish attitude** of the upper class within Victorian society. This is made apparent when he argues with the charity collectors in Stave One as he refers to the poor as **"the surplus population"**. This **Malthusian assertion** (see 'Context: Poverty and Charity') appears after the unsympathetic description of Scrooge's character. This highlights Dickens' disapproval of this widespread viewpoint from the opening of the text.

As the novella progresses Scrooge begins to transform. Following his redemption in the final stave his **attitudes towards social injustice have also changed**. This highlights the idea that being **socially conscious is the ideal**, as this is a quality which is present in Scrooge *after* his redemption.

Dickens presents the impact that social responsibility can have in a **hyperbolic** (exaggerated) fashion. He achieves this through the fate of Tiny Tim, who would have died if it were not for Scrooge's financial support and intervention. Through this, Dickens makes it clear that social responsibility is an **essential component** to society, and should be practiced for the wider benefit of all those in the community.



Setting

Dickens uses the setting to highlight two different aspects of poverty and social injustice which act alongside each other to present a greater **social commentary**.

- London is described to be filled with **“fog and darkness”**, covered in **“misanthropic ice”**. By **personifying** the ice, describing it as **“misanthropic”** (which means ‘to dislike other people’), Dickens uses the **setting to reflect the attitudes of the inhabitants of London** as well as the gloomy atmosphere.
- He moves on to describe an **“obscure”** area of the city as **“wretched”** and filled with **“filth”** and **“dirt”**. This reflects how the Industrial Revolution brought about **economic and environmental problems** (see ‘Context: The Industrial Revolution’), causing overcrowding and smog.

Descriptions of the setting are used to expose the harsh realities of poverty in Dickensian London.

In addition to this, Dickens uses the setting to **dispel negative and widespread stereotypes surrounding the impoverished in society**. Despite the terrible conditions of London, the people created an **“air of cheerfulness”** and **“laughed heartily”** as they went about their day. This establishes the idea that regardless of the amount of money they have, the lower classes are still happy and amicable which challenges prejudices against the poor. In this way, Dickens presents the idea that there are challenges that the poor face which need to be dealt with but those in poverty should not be discriminated against. This is an approach which **holistically** addresses poverty in Victorian society (takes into account all the factors which contribute to the problem).

Characterisation

There are three main characters that Dickens uses to present ideas of social injustice and poverty alongside the protagonist:

- **Ignorance and Want** - These two children link closely to the idea of social responsibility, as the Ghost of Christmas Present reveals that **“they are Man’s”**. This presents the idea that mankind needs to collectively take responsibility for them. It could certainly be argued that their existence ties in closely with the **abandonment of the poor** in society.
 - The children may be representative of the ‘ignorance’ that many of the upper class had towards the plight of the poor. Additionally, the idea of ‘want’ may represent the selfishness that they display and their uncharitable attitudes.
 - Dickens heightens the effect that this has by detailing that both ‘Ignorance’ and ‘Want’ are children. This is likely to **provoke a powerful response** from readers due to the subverted descriptions and protective instinct that readers are likely to feel towards them.
- **Old Joe** - Dickens uses Old Joe and the three thieves to **expose the harsh realities of poverty** in Victorian society. Both the people and the environment are described



negatively (see 'Character Profile: The Charwoman, Laundress and Undertaker's man) which suggests that poverty has **far-reaching** and **extensive** effects.

- Dickens presents the idea that poverty breeds crime and so reminds the reader that their actions have wider societal impacts - instilling a sense of social responsibility.
 - Furthermore, Dickens challenges Scrooge's **Malthusian attitude**, as this is what causes the **isolation** in his death. This is outlined by the charwoman's assertion that he should have been "**natural in his lifetime**". Ultimately, this characterises 'A Christmas Carol' as an **Anti-Malthusian** novella.
- **Bob Cratchit and Scrooge** - The dynamic between Bob Cratchit and Scrooge is perhaps a **metaphor** for class relations. In the opening stave Bob works in fear of Scrooge; he is helpless to even "**replenish**" the coal for his fire despite it being "**very much smaller**" than Scrooge's. This may be symbolic of how the rich dominate the lower class. However, following Scrooge's transformation, he becomes more socially conscious, raising Bob's salary and trying to "**assist**" his "**struggling family**". This acts as a perfect example of social responsibility, explaining to readers how they should aim to act within society.
 - **The Cratchit Family** - Furthermore, Dickens provides an insight into the lives of those living in poverty when Mrs Cratchit shares her anxieties about Christmas dinner. She worries that someone might have "**got over the wall of the back-yard and stolen it**". While this may appear to be a criticism of the poor, it is entirely more plausible to argue that Dickens is simply highlighting the **realities of poverty in Victorian society**. He portrays the lengths that people are forced to go to in order to feed themselves and their families, contributing to the idea that **poverty breeds crime**. Through this, he is once again able to present the idea that poverty is an issue which causes multiple different problems and so should be prioritised and dealt with.

