

BBC Bitesize - A Christmas Carol

Episode 5 – Themes

Carl: Hello, and welcome to the BBC Bitesize English literature podcast. This is the series designed to help you tackle your GCSE in English literature.

Jean: So we take a look at a number of different texts that you might be studying and explore the characters, the plot, the context, the key things that you need to ace your exam. You can use this podcast however you like to help with your revision, whether that's listening on a walk, or making notes as you go - find what works for you. I'm Jean Menzies author and ancient historian.

Carl: I'm Carl Anka, journalist and author. And in this series, we're taking a closer look at Charles Dickens' novella A Christmas Carol.

Jean: So, we've already discussed the plot and characters in previous episodes, and in this episode, we're going to be taking a look at the themes of A Christmas Carol, which are: Christmas, redemption, and social injustice.

Carl: Now let's start with Christmas.

Jean: So first, let's talk about the basics of Christmas. It's a Christian celebration of the birth of Christ, although it does also encompass Greek, Roman and various other pagan traditions that have been around for thousands of years, like gift-giving and feasting around the winter solstice. A few years before this novella was written, in fact, Queen Victoria had married Prince Albert, and he had brought over some new German traditions including the Christmas tree.

Carl: This story really takes in that theme of Christmas being a time for friends and family. It really takes in the fact that Christmas is the time for sharing food and drink together and the fact that Christmas is meant to be a joyful time. When Charles Dickens published this novella, it happened just before Christmas in 1843. If you're listening to this and wondering why we keep using the term novella, that's because A Christmas Carol is pretty short. And the term for a short novel is a novella.

Jean: The clues in the title really. And I know we know the story is set in and around Christmas, but the why is actually really interesting because using this time of year, which some people often associate with joy and generosity and cheerfulness, really highlights that Scrooge has... none of these things. Listen to this quote.

EXTRACT

Ebenezer Scrooge: Every idiot who goes about with "merry Christmas" on his lips should be boiled with his own pudding and buried with a stake of holly through his heart. He should.

Carl: Yeah, I don't think Scrooge likes Christmas.

Jean: Yeah, it's not exactly subtle is it? But it also means that the characters who absolutely embody Christmas, like Fred and Tiny Tim, stand out even more against Scrooge's miserable attitude.

EXTRACT

Fred: A merry Christmas Uncle, God save you!

Narrator: Cried a cheerful voice.

Jean: So that's Fred, and his happy, cheerful nature juxtaposes, which means it contrasts, Scrooge's grumpiness even more.

Carl: Christmas also helps make Scrooge's transformation very obvious. He goes from a man who won't even wish someone a merry Christmas – and is totally offended by the phrase Christmas – to this. Dickens is showing the power of Christmas. And the togetherness and generosity represented to improve people's lives. This is Scrooge towards the end of the story.

EXTRACT

Ebenezer Scrooge: I am as light as a feather. I am as happy as an angel. I am as merry as a schoolboy. I am as giddy as a drunken man. A merry Christmas to everybody. A happy new year to all the world.

Jean: And I think that leads us nicely on to our next theme. Redemption.

Carl: Redemption. A great word. A redemption story is when something bad or negative leads to someone doing something good or positive.

Jean: So, for Scrooge, we see his redemption being someone who has changed from a greedy, selfish man into a cheerful generous character at the end. And it's the ghosts who visit him who give him that ability and openness to change. Let's listen to his redemption through a couple of quotes. This is at the beginning of the novella when Scrooge is very dismissive about people dying.

EXTRACT

Ebenezer Scrooge: If he be like to die, he had better do it and decrease the surplus population.

Jean: He mentioned how it will decrease the surplus population, which we'll discuss more in episode seven of this podcast, but refers to a belief at the time that a growth in population had meant a growth in poverty. Now this next quote really shows Scrooge's redemption story as it shows us who he is as a man by the end of the novella.

EXTRACT

Ebenezer Scrooge: I'll raise your salary, and endeavour to assist your struggling family and we will discuss your affairs this very afternoon.

Jean: Here we hear him make plans to increase Bob Pratchett's wage and ask him how he can help his family.

Carl: And it all works to highlight the moral of the story, which is that anyone can change and we all have the ability to be kinder to each other. Anyone can be redeemed or have their own redemption story. All we have to do is try.

Jean: Now, should we take a look at our final theme, social injustice. I think we'll look at this even further in episode seven, when we discuss the context of this novella, but Charles Dickens felt very strongly that Victorian society, which is when this was written and set, did not do enough to solve poverty.

Carl: Yes, and Dickens was right to highlight this. He wanted to show the rich having their comfortable luxurious Christmases, with feasts and whatever they wanted against poor people, including children, who had to live and work in awful conditions.

Jean: And Scrooge is a perfect representation of the selfishness that existed in some of the rich Victorians. Let's listen.

EXTRACT

Ebenezer Scrooge: I don't make merry myself at Christmas. And I can't afford to make idle people merry.

Carl: Scrooge has money, he has his own business, but he refuses to give to charity or pay Bob Cratchit, a member of his staff, a decent wage. Scrooge wants to keep it all to himself. Scrooge also refers to a stereotype at the time where he says he can't afford to make idle people merry. It's this idea that poor people are idle, or in other words, lazy. This was a stereotype at the time around poor people and laziness, which we'll explore further in episode seven of this podcast.

Jean: And it doesn't even make him happy, does it? All that money?

Carl: Not at all. Here, Dickens is highlighting the injustice of wealth distribution, or indeed, the lack of wealth distribution. There's no need for Scrooge to hoard or the money's accumulated throughout A Christmas Carol. Really think to the start of the book, where Cratchit takes the shovel and he's trying to put more coal into the fire. And Scrooge says no, because Scrooge believes he's the one paying for it and therefore why should Cratchit be warm? Scrooge doesn't necessarily benefit from having all that money, because he doesn't really use it to do anything. However, by spending just a little bit of money, he could have helped warm Cratchit and improve Cratchit's family life. But, Scrooge chooses not to.

Jean: I love that Bob who has so much less, is actually so much happier than Scrooge. Dickens also really doesn't highlight social injustice in just a subtle moral way of the story. He makes physical characters to highlight this.

EXTRACT

Ebenezer Scrooge: This boy is Ignorance. This girl is Want. Beware them both and all of their degree. But most of all, beware this boy. For on his brow, I see that written which is doom, unless the writing be erased.

Jean: So these children, who are hidden under the cloak of the Ghost of Christmas Present are representations of ignorance and want and the society caused by social injustice. The ghost tells Scrooge that he should fear them, but also they are the responsibility of all mankind, highlighting that everyone needs to be aware of making a fairer, more just society.

Carl: I love that. That's Dickens going just in case you didn't get a hint here at two characters that I'm telling you, very literally, you cannot ignore. It's a brilliant way to get the themes of your novella across. We're going to discuss this more than episode seven. But something should also consider when you're studying and Christmas Carol, is that it was written at time when the Poor Law was changed to reduce the costs of helping the poor. So, Dickens was also addressing the audience with something very real and something very timely. Dickens wants everyone who's reading A Christmas Carol to really think about the responsibility they have for people who have less than them in society.

Jean: And, I think that's something that still applies in the 21st century, not just the 19th.

Carl: Absolutely. Thank you for listening to episode five of the Bitesize English literature podcast that's been all about the themes of A Christmas Carol.

Jean: There's still a lot more to learn. So, take a listen to the rest of the episodes of this series on BBC Sounds to find out more. In episode six, we'll be taking a look at the form, structure and language in A Christmas Carol.