

# BBC Bitesize - A Christmas Carol

## Episode 7 – Context

**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:** In this podcast, we take a closer look at some of the texts you might be studying for your GCSE in English literature. I'm Jean Menzies, author and ancient historian.

**Carl:** And I'm Carl Anka, journalist and author. And in this series, we've been diving into Charles Dickens' novella, A Christmas Carol. And today in this episode, we're going to discuss the context around in which A Christmas Carol was released.

**Jean:** The context essentially refers to the background of the text. It's important to consider this as when you're writing an exam, it can help us to understand how someone reading it at the time of publication would have a different experience and have a different understanding compared to someone reading it today. So let's get into it.

**Carl:** So where shall we start with the context of A Christmas Carol? It was written by Charles Dickens in 1843. And it was published just before the Christmas of that year. Now, something that's important to note is that 1843 were the early years of the Victorian era. Now, when I say the Victorian era, I mean the years in which Queen Victoria was on the British throne. This went from a period of 1837 to 1901. So a very large chunk of time in the 19th century. So Jean, what do we know about Charles Dickens?

**Jean:** Okay, let me get my facts out. Mr. Dickens had experienced poverty himself – his dad, along with most of his family was sent to debtors' prison when he couldn't pay back money he owed. Then Dickens had to go and work in a factory at the age of 12, because of his dad's imprisonment. So as he grew up, he actually began his literary career as a journalist. Bonus fact – because I like it – just like Scrooge in the novella, Charles Dickens actually had a sister that he called Fan.

**Carl:** Great facts – you're an excellent historian.

**Jean:** Thank you.

**Carl:** They also tell us a lot about the context of when and how A Christmas Carol came to be written. Shall we take them apart one by one?

**Jean:** Absolutely.

**Carl:** So Dickens had experienced poverty himself. And this is a really important thing to know when looking at this story, as it suggests that his commentary on poverty in the novella could be coming from a place of personal experience. Or, some might say, Dickens is writing about poor people, because he used to be one.

**Jean:** Yeah, first-hand experience, definitely. So as I said, his dad went to prison because he couldn't pay back money he owed and Dickens had to go and work in a factory, which was really common at the time.

Now, that's interesting for two different reasons. Because not only did that time teach Dickens what life was like for the poor, which we see represented in his writing. But it also meant that he was separated from his family. The importance of family and togetherness is such a key part of A Christmas Carol, that it feels really likely that was influenced by Dickens' own experience of having that taken away from him.

**Carl:** And it was actually only because his father inherited some money that Dickens could leave the factory and go back to education, which must have given him a true sense of how different life was for the rich compared to the poor, and the injustice of it all. So Dickens only eventually became an author, not through hard work, but because his dad came into a bit of money. Sheer luck. Jean, you also said he was a journalist?

**Jean:** He was, and as part of that job, he would have had to report on factual events, which it could be argued would have made him much more socially aware, and also increased his ability to deliver social commentary as he does in A Christmas Carol.

**Carl:** Also in 1834, so less than a decade before A Christmas Carol was written, the Poor Law was changed to reduce the costs of helping the poor by pushing them into the workhouses, and offering them relief that way, instead of providing direct financial support. This change was made in order to reduce costs of public funds – families were separated, the food was basic, and the work was extremely tiring in order to discourage the “lazy poor”. Listeners, please be aware that I'm saying “lazy poor” in inverted commas, because that was what was believed and recorded by some people who thought that at the time.

**Jean:** You can absolutely see why poverty and the treatment of poverty is something that Dickens would want to highlight. And he shows poverty in a number of ways. Through the Cratchit's in their household and lack of material belongings or food at Christmas, through the charity collectors at the door, and through the thieves who go through the dead man's possessions which Scrooge witnesses with the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come.

**Carl:** Absolutely. And he challenges the stereotype of poor people being lazy by creating the Cratchits. The Cratchits are hardworking and industrious. They're not poor because they're lazy. They're poor because Scrooge doesn't pay Bob a decent wage. They don't take anything for granted. And all the Cratchits have respect for themselves and each other.

**Jean:** Yeah, exactly.

**Carl:** In fact, if you look throughout A Christmas Carol, there really aren't many moments in the story where poverty or the contrast between rich people and poor people isn't obvious. There are some quotes here that might help you answer questions in your exam. In fact, here's Scrooge.

#### *EXTRACT*

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

**Jean:** Referring to the poor people that the charity is collecting for as idle really highlights the attitude that poverty is due to laziness – a choice. It also shows what was thought of charity in general because again, some thought that poor people shouldn't be helped. Scrooge's refusal to give to charity represents the selfishness of the richer elements of Victorian society. Instead of creating a community in which life can be enjoyed by all, Dickens is highlighting the injustice of wealth distribution. Here's another quote that's a great example of Scrooge's attitude to poverty at the start of the novella.

*EXTRACT*

**Ebenezer Scrooge:** If they would rather die,

**Narrator:** said Scrooge,

**Ebenezer Scrooge:** they had better do it and decrease the surplus population.

**Carl:** That quote shows that Scrooge felt poor people were a burden upon society. And when you were looking at that context that feels pretty apt at a time when things like the Poor Law had just been updated offer less help to those in poverty. Scrooge also mentioned surplus population, which echoes was some thought of as a big problem at the time. Surplus population was this idea that poverty came from a growth in population, and that those who couldn't support themselves should be left to die.

**Jean:** So there's a lot to take in when it comes to the context of A Christmas Carol. And remember, episode five of this podcast also looks at the themes within A Christmas Carol, which includes social injustice. And there's also lots more resources online – you just need to head to the BBC Bitesize website.

**Carl:** Thank you for listening to episode seven of the Bitesize English literature podcast all about the context of A Christmas Carol.

**Jean:** This is the final episode of the podcast, but you can come back and relisten at any time we'd love to have you.

**Carl:** We'd love to see you again. We've also explored more texts including Blood Brothers, Jane Eyre, and An Inspector Calls – all of which you can find in this feed on the BBC Sounds app.

**Jean:** And whilst you're in the BBC sounds app, there's also the Bitesize study support podcast, which is full of tips to help you stay focused during revision and get the best out of your exam day.

**Carl:** Good luck. You're going to be great.