BBC Bitesize - A Christmas Carol

Episode 1 - Plot

Jean: Hello and welcome to the BBC Bitesize English Literature podcast. It's the series designed to help you tackle your GCSE in English literature.

Carl: So we take a look at number of different texts that you might be studying and then go on to explore the characters, the plot, the context, some of the key things that you might need to ace your revision.

Jean: I'm Jean Menzies, author and ancient historian.

Carl: I'm Carl Anka, journalist and author. And, that noise may well be a clue to the text that we are going to be taking a look at today.

Jean: It's A Christmas Carol by Charles Dickens.

Carl: Are you full of the joys of festive season Jean? Or are you a bit of a scrooge, as some may say?

Jean: I am very much a festive person, but I see what you did there because Ebenezer Scrooge is going to come up a lot in this series, as he is an integral character in A Christmas Carol.

Carl: Bah, humbug.

Jean: In this episode, we're going to take a look at the plot of A Christmas Carol. Now, it's worth saying that there will be spoilers. So, if you're not quite finished reading, or you're not ready for spoilers, just come back later.

Carl: Let's get into it.

Jean: So, A Christmas Carol is a story about a man named Ebenezer Scrooge, a miserable elderly man who is visited by ghosts around Christmas time. Even if you've never read it, you've probably stumbled across it at some point, because there are so many TV adaptations, films, retellings and much much more out there.

Carl: If you're studying in A Christmas Carol, I really urge you to seek out an adaptation to watch or to listen along with too. It can be really helpful to bring the story to life.

Jean: And, there is also an audiobook version on BBC Sounds that you can listen to, which we'll be hearing extracts from throughout the series to help highlight key quotes you can use in your exam. Just search for A Christmas Carol in BBC Sounds. And, we're going to hear our first quote from that audiobook now. This is Ebenezer Scrooge.

EXTRACT

Ebenezer Scrooge: I wish to be left alone,

Narrator: said Scrooge.

Ebenezer Scrooge: Since you asked me what I wish, gentlemen, that is my answer. I don't make merry myself at Christmas. And, I can't afford to make idle people merry.

Carl: And we've just heard our first quote. That quote gives us an insight into the personality of Ebenezer Scrooge. And, he's being set up as an elderly and miserable man here. It's Christmas Eve, but he has no interest in Christmas and he doesn't think anyone else should either.

Jean: Like we said, it's Christmas Eve and Ebenezer Scrooge makes his clerk, meaning his member of staff, Bob Cratchit, work in the cold because his fire is so much smaller than Scrooge's. In fact, we get a sense very early on that this is a man who only really cares about making money and doesn't care so much about people.

Carl: Scrooge also refuses an invite to his nephew's Christmas party. His nephew's called Fred. And on top of that, Scrooge also refuses to give some money to a charity collector, which reinforces everything you've just said there Jean, Scrooge likes money, he does not like people. All of this is in stave one. We'll discuss this use of stave instead of chapter in episode six of this podcast, when we look at the structure of this tale a little bit more.

Jean: So, we know that Scrooge is an old man who's set on making money. He doesn't believe in giving money to charity, and he's not interested in celebrating Christmas. But what happens next?

Carl: So, the ghost of Jacob Marley arrives. Jacob Marley was the old business partner of Ebenezer Scrooge, who died seven years earlier.

Jean: And this man Scrooge, who doesn't have time for Christmas or charity or being particularly nice, definitely does not have time for ghosts.

Carl: No, Scrooge does not. And we'll talk about this more when we discuss the character of Scrooge in episode two. But this is a moment where we really see the stubbornness in him. Now Scrooge doesn't want to believe that he's seen a ghost, so he just pretends it's not real.

Jean: Oh, but it is real. And, Marley lets Scrooge know exactly how death is for him. Listen to this.

EXTRACT

Jacob Marley: I wear the chain I forged in life,

Narrator: replied the ghost.

Jacob Marley: I made it link by link and yard by yard. I girded it on of my own free will and of my own free will I wore it.

Jean: So here, Marley is essentially telling Scrooge that Marley, just like Scrooge, spent his life obsessed with making money and not caring about anything else. But now, he's tortured by the guilt and remorse he feels for living that way and the people he failed to help.

Carl: Marley also tells Scrooge that three ghosts will visit him. But as I've said before, Scrooge is still sceptical.

Jean: And, that is where we leave stave one.

Carl: So, we go into stave two, or chapter two. This happens when Scrooge wakes up. And, just like Marley told him, the first ghost appears.

Jean: That ghosts being the Ghost of Christmas Past. So, let's hear some of what happens with the Ghost of Christmas Past.

EXTRACT

Narrator: He was conscious of 1000 odours floating in the air, each one connected with 1000 thoughts and hopes and joys and cares long, long forgotten.

Jean: So, the ghost of Christmas past takes Scrooge back in time and shows him and the reader a very different side to Scrooge that we haven't seen before. And as that quote just told us, someone with hopes and joy.

Carl: It takes Scrooge back in time and shows him scenes from his childhood and growing up. We see Scrooge being left behind at school during Christmas, we learn about his sister, who he loved very much, who has now died. Scrooge's sister ended up being Fred's mum.

Jean: We learn about the man Fezziwig that Scrooge was an apprentice for and the Christmas party that he threw at the time. And then, we meet Scrooge's fiancee Belle and learn that she broke off her engagement, because she believed Scrooge loved money more than her. The ghost shows Scrooge the bell is now happily married to someone else and Scrooge can't take it anymore.

Carl: It's through all these meetings that Scrooge starts to regret some of his behaviours, especially the way he's behaved towards Bob Cratchit, the carol singers, and to Fred and to Belle.

EXTRACT

Ebenezer Scrooge: There was a boy singing a Christmas carol at my door last night. I should like to have given him something, that's all.

Jean: We can hear him there regretting not giving something to the carol singer. He already sounds like he's changed from the man who threatened to throw a ruler at the boy singing carols earlier.

Carl: Then we head into stave three, and it's time for the Ghost of Christmas Present to take Scrooge to Bob Cratchit's house. This is where Scrooge sees Bob Cratchit's son, who is very ill, but very kind. You might know them as Tiny Tim. Scrooge then finds out that Tiny Tim may die if the future doesn't change quickly.

Jean: He also sees people across the city enjoying Christmas, including his nephew Fred, who's celebrating Christmas with his friends. And he hears Fred see this when speaking about Scrooge.

EXTRACT

Fred: He's a comical old fellow,

Narrator: said Scrooge's nephew.

Fred: That's the truth, and not so pleasant as he might be. However, his offences carry their own punishment and I have nothing to say against him.

Jean: As Fred speaks kindly about Scrooge, despite everything, Scrooge starts to thaw and as Dickens describes it, become light of heart.

Carl: Scrooge is changing.

Jean: Yep.

Carl: But, there's still more to come.

EXTRACT

Narrator: The Phantom slowly, gravely, silently approached.

Carl: In stave four, the Ghost of Christmas Yet To Come arrives. It does not speak, but just points the way to show Scrooge the future.

Jean: And the future isn't pretty. Scrooge sees horrible things. A dead man who's been stolen from and no one seems to care he's died. It also shows the Cratchit family after Tiny Tim's death. And that's awful, too. But they're all resolving to look after each other, so there's some comfort in that scene.

Carl: Scrooge doesn't want to know who the unwatched, unwept, uncared for dead man is at first. But when he does eventually face it, Scrooge finds out that it's his name on the gravestone. From then on, he vows to change things.

EXTRACT

Ebenezer Scrooge: I will honour Christmas in my heart and try to keep it all the year. I will live in the past, the present and the future. The spirits of all three shall strive within me. I will not shut out the lessons that they teach.

Jean: And then we're into stave five, where he really has changed hasn't he. He says here that he will honour Christmas and he will remember the lessons that the ghosts have given him.

Carl: He has. Scrooge goes to Fred's house to join him with Christmas and we see a lighter and happier person as they enjoy Christmas altogether. We also see Scrooge on Boxing Day back in the office, where he gives Bob Cratchit a raise in salary and offers to help Tiny Tim and the rest of the family. Jean - how does the ending make you feel?

Jean: I just think it's such a hopeful ending that somebody can change. And, that that change can then affect the lives of so many other people positively it's yeah, it's hopeful. And I think it's only right that we end on a line from stave five that really sums up who Scrooge turned out to be, because he was absolutely true to his word.

EXTRACT

Narrator: Scrooge was better than his word. He did it all and infinitely more. And to Tiny Tim, who did not die, he was a second father.

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

Jean: There's still a lot more to learn, so take a listen to the rest of the episodes of Bitesize English literature on BBC Sounds to find out more. In episode two, we'll be exploring some of the characters from A Christmas Carol.