

# BBC Bitesize - A Christmas Carol

## Episode 6 – Form, Structure and Language

**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 explore the characters, the plot, the context, some of the key things that you need to ace your revision. I'm Carl Anka, journalist and author.

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

**Carl:** And we are currently exploring Charles Dickens' A Christmas Carol.

**Jean:** We've already discussed the plot, characters and themes in previous episodes. And in this episode, we're going to take a look at the form, structure and language of A Christmas Carol.

**Carl:** So let's start with the form of this story, shall we?

**Jean:** So Christmas Carol is a novella, which is kind of the midway point between not being long enough to be a novel, but not short enough for a short story.

**Carl:** And this was published on 19th of December 1843. So, in perfect time for Christmas and this was really the perfect length to be read out loud in one sitting. Also, ghost stories were a really traditional thing to be read at Christmas at the time.

**Jean:** It's incredible, actually, that ghosts and Christmas were associated with one another in Victorian era Britain.

**Carl:** I know.

**Jean:** I would never have thought that.

**Carl:** And it did prove to appeal to the audience. It was so popular that it sold out by Christmas Eve, five days after it had been released. Well done, Dickens.

**Jean:** Shall we get into the structure?

**Carl:** So, as we've previously mentioned, this is a novella, and the structure links to the theme of Christmas. You do that by reflecting the shape of a typical Christmas carol with a clear beginning, middle and end. The clear beginning is where Scrooge is miserable and unkind to everyone. The middle is where he meets all the ghosts who helped change him. And then the end is where he is a transformed character, which really gives us a complete redemption story, which is really satisfying for the reader. In fact, lots of events from stave one, or chapter one, are revisited in stave five, or chapter five, with a different outcome

to show just how much Scrooge has changed. Like his interaction with Fred and his treatment of Bob. They're paralleled in those two chapters.

**Jean:** And the use of the three ghosts showing the past, present and future also helps with a clear structure. Dickens also called each section of the novella stave rather than a chapter. It's a reminder that this is a Christmas story. And just like Christmas carols, this is a story that contains a message for its audience, and should be read aloud as carols are sung aloud. And now it's onto the language. Now, we mentioned in another episode that we can't talk about the language in A Christmas Carol without mentioning one very famous phrase.

**Carl:** Bah, humbug.

**Jean:** Exactly. Bah, humbug indeed. A phrase that a lot of people have heard of, and actually might not instantly think of Scrooge. But he is the first man to utter those words, and he used them in response to Christmas wishes. They are really simple and memorable words that instantly show that Scrooge is dismissive of Christmas.

**Carl:** Yes, and they're words that become really synonymous with being miserable about festivities. Now, when I use the word synonymous, I mean that they are closely linked together in people's minds. I wonder if Charles Dickens knew when he wrote this, that that would be one of the standout phrases.

**Jean:** Who knows, because there is genuinely so much great use of language in this story. Let's listen to some more of it.

#### *EXTRACT*

**Narrator:** Mind, I don't mean to say that I know of my own knowledge what there is particularly dead about a door-nail.

**Carl:** So, this is a great example of how A Christmas Carol is led by first-person narrative. This narrative guides us through the story, and as that quote shows us right from the beginning, speaks directly to the audience and use the first person. Now, the first person means the character uses "I". And that lets the reader know that they're speaking of themselves, and their own point of view.

**Jean:** And in using this method of telling you this story, from their own point of view, and like they are right there in it, the narrator is able to make sure we're noticing key things that are going on.

#### *EXTRACT*

**Narrator:** Then sharp is Flint, from which no steel had ever struck our generous fire, secret and self-contained and solitary as an oyster.

**Jean:** Here the narrator describes Scrooge using a simile and saying he is hard and sharp is flint. Flint is a form of rock. So, that comparison makes sure that the reader knows that Scrooge is not generous and that he is an unpopular man.

**Carl:** Now, the narrator is instantly a trusted voice because it's guiding us through the story. So if the narrator is telling us something, we're believing it - this is a trustworthy narrator. In some books you might find you might have an unreliable narrator but not here – Dickens is playing it straight.

**Jean:** Yeah, exactly. He's guiding the reader from the beginning. And as we said, speaking directly to us, the readers suggesting that they're, or are we're, in this story together. For example, he says this.

*EXTRACT*

**Narrator:** As close to it, as I am now to you. And I am standing in the spirit at your elbow.

**Carl:** That's the Narrator saying here that we, the audience, the reader, are right in the heart of this story together.

**Jean:** I am standing in the spirit of your elbow, you're right there with him, aren't you? It's a great use of first person narration, which helps the reader to know exactly what's going on, and why. And to form the same opinions as the narrator. Charles Dickens also uses really descriptive language to create a sense of character and of place. He uses metaphors, similes, and personification, to paint a picture of, for example, Scrooge's character traits to make his change all the more obvious. Dickens does this with a lot of the characters so that we can form an image of their personality.

**Carl:** And we'll share some examples now, but there's a lot of things that you can pick up when reading this story. And it's a great idea to highlight along the way, the similes and metaphors. So you know, you've got some really strong examples to take and explore in your exam.

**Jean:** Yeah, and there's loads more about the language and everything we've discussed in this podcast on the BBC Bitesize website. So do make sure you're heading there to find even more resources to help with revision.

**Carl:** But, we can share some examples here can't we Jean?

**Jean:** Yeah, I guess.

**Carl:** So, a simile is where you compare one thing to another thing to suggest they have similar qualities. We heard one a moment ago, hard and sharp as flint. But another example I love is where Scrooge is described as solitary as an oyster. So an oyster a shut tight, isn't letting anyone in without being praised open, just like our Scrooge who doesn't want to share his life or his money with anyone.

**Jean:** And something else you could take away from that is that when you do get inside an oyster, there is often a pearl. So is that Dickens telling us that there is good in there somewhere, we just have to find it?

**Carl:** I love it. We've also mentioned that Dickens uses metaphor. So something that is described in a way that isn't literal to what it is. We've mentioned the children called Ignorance and Want, who live under the ghost of Christmas Present's cloak a couple of episodes previously. Now they are a metaphor used to show the effects of greed and not being generous.

**Jean:** And then finally, personification.

**Carl:** Jean, can I just say that the sun is smiling down on us today?

**Jean:** I see what you did there – personification. So giving an inanimate object or an animal like the sun, which is an inanimate object and not an animal, a human characteristic, like smiling. Charles Dickens used this technique to emphasise a point to the reader like this one.

### *EXTRACT*

**Narrator:** The ancient tower of a church, whose gruff old bell was always peeping slyly down at Scrooge out of a gothic window in the wall, became invisible.

**Carl:** A bell on a church cannot keep sliding down on anyone. But this use of personification helps us see that even the church isn't happy with the way that Scrooge is acting. He's getting further from the church in his ways by not displaying Christian values.

**Jean:** And actually, at the end, it helps to show the transformation when we read that the church bells then ring out the lustiest peels had ever heard. So the word peels means a really loud and clear sound of bells. And that's to represent how Scrooge is showing his Christian values again.

**Carl:** He's a clever man, is Dickens. Thank you listeners for joining us for episode six of the Bitesize English literature podcast all about the form, structure and language of A Christmas Carol.

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