

BBC Bitesize - A Christmas Carol

Episode 3 – Characters – Ghosts of Christmas

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: In this podcast we take a look at a number of different texts that you might be studying and explore the characters, the plot, the context and the key points you might need to know to ace your exam.

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

Carl: I'm Carl Anka, journalist and author. And we are currently exploring Charles Dickens' A Christmas Carol.

Jean: So we've already discussed the plot and some of the characters in previous episodes. And in this episode, we're going to carry on looking at the characters in this novella, exploring the three ghosts of Christmas that visit Scrooge: the Ghost of Christmas Past, Present, and Yet to Come. So let's get started.

EXTRACT

Narrator: For as its belt sparkled and glittered now in one part and now in another, and what was liked one instant at another time was dark. So the figure itself fluctuated in its distinctness.

Jean: That is a description of the physical form of the Ghost of Christmas Past. It was a figure that changed constantly, although reflecting and representing different memories.

Carl: Yes, try to imagine the ghost and I guess we can all picture it in different ways. They're also portrayed very differently in loads of different adaptations. Have a listen to this quote.

EXTRACT

Narrator: It was a strange figure, like a child, yet, not so like a child is like an old man.

Carl: Right then, a strange figure, like a child yet so not like a child, as like an old man. Is that how you initially envisioned the Ghost of Christmas Past when you read this book for the first time?

Jean: Yeah, it definitely is more of like an innocent figure than the other ghosts, something a little bit more youthful and open. But, that maybe Scrooge crushed all the dreams and happiness from.

Carl: Most depictions often have the Ghost of Christmas Past in some form of white, which is the protest some form of innocence. Before Scrooge stops being innocent and becomes obsessed

with money, which, as Belle said, Scrooge used to be a kind man, but became more focused about making money than being a decent human being. And that's why she had to leave.

Jean: He forgot what was really important.

Carl: Indeed.

Jean: Something that might be fun to do just with yourself, or with somebody else in your class, is to discuss if that's how you saw the ghost.

Carl: So as we've heard, the ghost appears both young and old, and there's light streaming out of the top of its head, which symbolises the knowledge that the ghost is trying to share with Scrooge. You could see this as the Ghost of Christmas Past trying to shine a light on Scrooge's past.

Jean: So remember, the Ghost of Christmas Past is the first ghost to visit Scrooge after Marley tells him that this is all going to happen. And it takes Scrooge to different scenes from his own past. From his childhood, that wasn't very nice, to happier times when he was a younger adult and engaged.

EXTRACT

Ghost of Christmas Past: Would you so soon put up with worldly hands the light I give?

Jean: So this is the light you were talking about that streams out of the ghost as its knowledge. Here, the ghost is asking: do you want to ignore what I'm saying to you without even seeing or hearing it? Because Scrooge wants to cover that light.

Carl: The light here is a real symbol for him, actually, because when the Ghost of Christmas Past presents his final scene to Scrooge, with him losing his fiancée through his own bad choices, he again tries to put out the light of the ghost. Listen here.

EXTRACT

Narrator: The spirit dropped beneath it, so that the extinguisher covered its whole form. But though Scrooge pressed it down with all his force, he could not hide the light which streamed from under it in an unbroken flood upon the ground.

Jean: That light and its symbolism of knowledge is so important here. This quote is showing us that Scrooge is not yet ready to accept the lessons that the ghost has to teach him. So, that was the Ghost of Christmas Past, but what about our next character, the Ghost of Christmas Present?

Carl: This ghost is described very differently to the first one. It's big and vibrant with Holly wreath around his head, and loads of rich food around him. I feel as if this ghost owns a room.

EXTRACT

Narrator: In easy state upon this couch, there sat a jolly giant, glorious to see who bought a glowing torch in shape, not unlike plenty's horn and held it up, high up, to shed its light on Scrooge as he came peeping around the door.

Jean: Yeah, I agree, a real Christmassy character representing the feast of Christmas and the larger than life atmosphere. Now Scrooge is less arrogant this time. He is more humble in the presence of the second spirit and is willing to learn any lessons this ghost will show, which is a real change from his reaction to the previous ghost whose light he tried to extinguish.

Carl: Absolutely. So the Ghost of Christmas Present takes Scrooge to see the world on Christmas Day. It shows him some really wholesome Christmas scenes from Bob Cratchit's house to his nephew Fred's house, but then also shows how these scenes are under threat if things don't change. It's also important to say that when the Ghost of Christmas Present is taking Scrooge around, no one can see Scrooge. Ebenezer is not just stood at the window and everyone can see him. When Scrooge is with the ghost, he is invisible to those he is watching.

Jean: Shall we have a listen to some quotes that are really helpful then here?

EXTRACT

Ghost of Christmas Present: I see a vacant seat,

Narrator: replied the ghost.

Ghost of Christmas Present: In the poor chimney corner and the crutch without an owner carefully preserved. If these shadows remain unaltered by the future, the child will die.

Jean: So this is the ghost telling Scrooge that Tiny Tim wouldn't survive if things keep going as they are. And Scrooge really struggles with this, as his softer side starts to show.

EXTRACT

Ghost of Christmas Present: This boy is ignorance. This girl is want. Beware them both.

Carl: This is at the very end of stave three, where the ghosts introduces Scrooge to the two children. One of these children is called Ignorance, and one of these children is called Want. Both of them are hiding under his cloak. And they are another warning for Scrooge to change his ways. We're gonna get more into this in Episode Seven, when we look at the context of when this novella was written and published. This is because Ignorance and Want are also symbols of what Dickens felt needs to change in Victorian society as a whole. Scrooge represents the rich, and Dickens says that the children are man's. And therefore, Dickens is saying that everyone needs to take in more responsibility for looking after the poor and the vulnerable in society.

Jean: That's one way to give a warning, isn't it? Now let's get into our final ghost - the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come. Now this one is one that made me nervous when I read this when I was younger, I really wouldn't want this ghost to visit me at night. Listen.

EXTRACT

Narrator: It was shrouded in a deep black garment, which concealed its head, its face, its form and left nothing of it visible save one outstretched hand.

Carl: Yep, this is the Grim Reaper ghost, isn't it, this one? Doesn't speak, doesn't even walk, just glides and points at things ominously.

Jean: Just lets the future reveal itself, right? Like, let the picture speak for itself. And I totally picture this one as a really scary character. Bring back the Ghost of Christmas Present please and all its lovely food. Scrooge is also clearly afraid of this ghost. He's seen enough now to fear the consequences of his actions. So he's afraid of what the ghosts will show him.

Carl: The Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come does not show nice things either. It's very on brand with the scenes he shows taking Scrooge to the funeral of a dead person and loads of businesspeople wondering where the dead person's money has gone.

Jean: He takes Scrooge through dark alleyways, naturally. And we see people picking through the belongings of the dead man. None of it's very nice, is it?

Carl: No, no. And Scrooge can see that. And things only get worse when the ghost and Scrooge head to Cratchit's house and they find out that Tiny Tim has passed away. Now, the ghost may not say much themselves, but there's some good quotes to remember for this character.

EXTRACT

Ebenezer Scrooge: If there is any person in the town and feels emotion caused by this man's death,

Narrator: said Scrooge quite agonised.

Ebenezer Scrooge: Show that person to me spirit, I beseech you.

Jean: So this is when Scrooge realises he could be just like this dead man – if he doesn't change.

EXTRACT

Narrator: Scrooge crept towards it, trembling as he went. And following the finger, read upon the stone of the neglected grave, his own name: Ebenezer Scrooge.

Carl: That quote you just heard is from the end of the time where Scrooge and the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come are together. It's the moment where Scrooge finds out that the dead person that nobody cared about was actually him.

Jean: Yeah, it really hits home. It's enough to make Scrooge vow to change everything and avoid this ending and the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come leaves him with that thought.

Carl: Wow, that was a lot to take in. Three different ghosts, three different appearances, and three different ways to make Scrooge think about what he's done.

Jean: And his reactions really show how Scrooge changes across the course of the novella. From trying to extinguish the light of the Ghost of Christmas Past, because he isn't ready to learn the lessons the ghost wants to share, to his more humble openness to the Ghost of Christmas Present. And, then finally to decide to change his ways once and for all with the Ghost of Christmas Yet To Come.

Carl: Remember, you can go back and listen to these and any other episodes that you want on BBC Sounds.

Jean: We've also explored more texts in this podcast including Blood Brothers, Macbeth, and An Inspector Calls, which you can also find in this feed on the BBC Sounds app.

Carl: 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.

Jean: In the next episode, we'll carry on looking at more characters in A Christmas Carol: Scrooge's nephew Fred and everyone's favourite, Tiny Tim