

Study Guide to 'A Christmas Carol'

Introduction

This is a self-contained guide to Charles Dickens' 'A Christmas Carol'. It is written to help students who are reading this book for work in school, and is suitable for pupils and teachers in England and Wales who are working in the National Curriculum.

Getting started

There are various ways to get to know the story. You may be able to read it, on your own, or you may listen to an audio recording or live reading. Alternatively you may watch a dramatisation.

'A Christmas Carol' is unusual in the huge range of versions that have been made - as well as Dickens' original there are books in print, radio and TV dramatisations, feature films and animations. Some are very true to the original, while others may be very loose adaptations.

All of these may help you learn the outline of the story and the characters. The very free adaptations are useful, for seeing what things from the original are kept. Those that use Dickens' narrative and dialogue will give you a more accurate idea of what the novella is about. But to understand the story in enough detail to respond to it - in writing or speaking - for an assessment, you will need to look at some or all of the original text. You can get printed editions published for schools, which have simple glossaries (explaining unusual words and phrases).

You can find many electronic versions of the text on Web sites - these enable you to quote, or copy from, 'A Christmas Carol' without having to enter the text for yourself. These may also have notes and commentaries that will help you understand the story, its themes and characters.

Some background information

'A Christmas Carol' is a long story of the kind sometimes called a novella (big for a story but too short to be a novel). Charles Dickens wrote it in 1843, the first of a series of what he called Christmas Books. It quickly became popular, and it has influenced the way people in Britain think of Christmas - indeed, some people think that Dickens almost invented our ideas about the season. Ebenezer Scrooge has become perhaps better known than the book he appears in - as has his catchphrase, 'Bah, humbug'.

An outline of the story

'A Christmas Carol' is a story about change. Ebenezer Scrooge is a selfish and hard-hearted old man. One Christmas Eve the ghost of his former business partner, Jacob Marley, appears to him. Marley was almost as selfish as Scrooge, and now his spirit is being punished. He tells Scrooge that he must change his ways, and explains that three more ghosts will visit him. These three spirits show Scrooge his past, his present and a possible future.

In the past lies the start of Scrooge's selfishness, which is completed in the present. The third ghost shows a glimpse of a future where Scrooge dies, unloved and unlamented. Many people are harmed by Scrooge's hardness of heart, but we read most about the family of Scrooge's employee, Bob Cratchit, and his disabled son, Tiny Tim, whose death the second spirit describes, while the third spirit shows the effect of the death on his family.

Scrooge wakes after the visit of the last of the spirits, to find it is Christmas Day, and that he is able to change things for the better. He immediately sets out to help the Cratchit family, and others, while beginning to put right the wrongs of the past and the present. Tiny Tim does not die, and Scrooge becomes as kind as he once was selfish.

Responding to the text for assessed work

This guidance is aimed at students studying the novella for assessment in GCSE exams. (This is a type of exam used in most parts of the United Kingdom, except Scotland.) You need to know what you are meant to do, and how you can present it. This section is particularly relevant to the Prose Study task of the AQA's Specification A exam.

What do I have to do?

Broadly speaking you have to do three things. You need to comment on, or explain:

- What the novella is about - its characters, incidents and themes.
- The author's technique - structure, style, characterisation.
- The author's use of language (really this is a part of his technique, but examiners think it so important that it has its own section in the criteria for assessment).

How can I present this work?

You can respond to the text in writing, or by a spoken presentation. If you do it this way, you can either do it live, or make a recording.

- In the first case, your teacher will listen to your presentation and assess it at the time, keeping a record of the assessment for the examiners.
- In the second case, your teacher can make the assessment at any time, and can also present the recording to the examiners, if they wish to look at your folder of work. While this is not very practical using analogue recording technology, it is well-suited to use of digital audio recording.

Different forms of response

You can show your understanding of the story in many different ways. Very simply, you can write an essay or commentary, which shows what you think of the themes, characters and incidents of the story, and the writer's technique, with a focus on language.

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Alternatively, you could use an imaginative response - such as writing Ebenezer Scrooge's obituary, or a statement by one or more of the characters about his or her view of events.

You could present your response as an interview - with the help of a friend or teacher, to ask questions. (Using digital audio recording, you could even ask the questions and give the answers, in a different voice...) In this case, you can answer simply as an expert on the novella, or you could do so in the character of, say, Scrooge, Bob Cratchit, Tiny Tim and so on.

Ideas for responses

A general commentary

This could be done in speaking or writing. You may want to give it a title, such as 'How does Dickens present Ebenezer Scrooge in 'A Christmas Carol'?' or 'How does Dickens show the process of Scrooge's redemption?' - the important word here is 'how'. Examiners will often value comments about the writer's technique more highly than descriptions of what the book is about.

You may find this general outline helpful.

An introduction

Can you explain what the novella is about in a sentence or two? (You can use the information which appears in this guide.)

The theme or themes of the story

This is the underlying subject, as opposed to the obvious outward story. Here are some suggestions for themes. Do you agree that the novella is about any of them? Or do you have a different idea?

The novella is about:

- moral responsibility
- the possibility of change
- the real meaning of Christmas
- our duty to our fellow man and woman
- redemption
- the right and the wrong ways to use money
- that man's offences carry their own punishment.

The characters of the novella

It is possible, but not very helpful, to describe them at length. A better idea might be to focus on a few characters, and show how they change or stay the same. Marley is beyond the possibility of change, but Scrooge can be saved. We see how Scrooge has changed for the worse, before the novella starts, but how he changes very much for the better in the course of the story.

You can also look at how what happens to Scrooge changes things for others - such as the Cratchit family.

Finally, you might look at the people in the story - not really fully-drawn characters - who are there to show the reader something about Scrooge: Bella, Dick Wilkins, Mr. Fezziwig, Caroline, and so on.

The supernatural elements

Why are these important in the story? They are not like ghosts in a conventional ghost story (that are meant to be frightening) but they are powerful, and each is very different from the others.

The structure of the story

Comment on the way the story has two chapters which are like a prologue and epilogue, framing the three central chapters (or staves) where the three spirits visit Scrooge.

How does each visit build on the previous one?

More techniques

Comment on such things as:

- imagery and symbolism
- irony
- contrasts (wealth and poverty; cruelty and kindness; Marley's damnation and Scrooge's salvation...)

The importance of Christmas

- The story is named 'A Christmas Carol'. Could it have been set at any other season? Is Christmas used simply as a seasonal setting, or is it an important idea in the novella?
- How far does the Christmas season, or the way people behave then, help Scrooge to see that he must change?
- Comment on the way that Dickens uses details of Christmas in the story - for example, food, decorations, parties, Christmas customs, and charity.

Language

There are far too many features of language to list them all here. You will need to find your own examples, but look for things like these:

- **Dialogue.** How does Dickens use conversation and speech here to show character and situation? You might compare various conversations - Scrooge's rather defiant manner with Marley, the seriousness of Scrooge's conversations with the spirits, the friendliness and love of the Cratchits' talk at home, the way Scrooge talks to Bob at the start and the end of the novella, and so on.
- **Poetic comparisons.** The novella is full of vivid metaphor and simile - you can find examples in almost every paragraph. Look for some that you particularly like, and explain why.
- **Repetition.** Look at the number of times that Scrooge says 'Good afternoon' to his nephew in the first stave - why does he do this? What effect does this have on the reader? Can you find other uses of repetition? If so, explain how they work.
- **Humour.** The story has many examples of verbal humour. There is one below. Can you explain it? Dickens is describing the apartment where Scrooge lives. Does Dickens want the reader to believe this literally? Or is something else happening here?

'They were a gloomy suite of rooms, in a lowering pile of building up a yard, where it had so little business to be, that one could scarcely help fancying it must have run there when it was a young house, playing at hide-and-seek with other houses, and forgotten the way out again.'

Interviews and hot seating

Another way to show your understanding of the novella is in one or more interviews - you could speak as:

- yourself, giving your opinion of the book that you have read, or as
- the writer, Charles Dickens, explaining some of the things that you have written, or as
- one or more of the characters in the novella, speaking about events that happened to you, or of which you have since learned.

If you do this, you will need to have some ideas about how to answer questions or respond to prompts. You may also need someone else (your teacher or another student) to ask these questions or conduct the interview.

- You can present this as a live activity, which your teacher will assess at the time, or shortly afterwards.
- You can also use digital audio recording and editing software, to produce the interview in a more polished form - that is, you can take more time to prepare each answer or comment. But the resulting interview could seem more fluent and natural to the listener, as you can edit out any awkward gaps, or replace things you do not like.

Hot seating is a more improvised kind of interviewing - you prepare to speak in character (for example, to be Tiny Tim or Ebenezer Scrooge) - and other people (pupils and your teachers) fire questions at you.

In English GCSE, if you use this approach, your work can be assessed both for speaking and listening, and for reading.

Mixed media

You could use an approach that uses both written text (and possibly images) and spoken comment. This is possible using computer software such as presentation graphics or digital movie making.

One possible approach here would be to combine spoken commentary, and reading of some of the text of the novella, with explanations or comment that appear as text (which could be static or moving) within the digital movie.

Ideas for original writing

Scrooge's obituary

When a well-known person dies, an account of his or her life is published in newspapers (with a brief report of the death). This is an obituary. To see how these are written, you may wish to look at some real obituaries. You can write two versions of Ebenezer Scrooge's obituary: one, as it would have appeared if he had not changed (the vision of the future that we see in Stave 4) and his real obituary, after his change for the better at the end of the novella.

Adapting the story

Dickens' stories, especially this one, have frequently been made into feature films, animations, stage-plays, musicals and comic strips. You could try re-telling part of the story in another form.

- You could use dialogue (conversation) with some linking bits of narrative (story) to create a play for voices (you could record this as a digital audio file, too).
- Alternatively, you could design a storyboard for a film or animation.

If you can think of other ways of re-working the story, you may be allowed to try these, too: ask your teacher for guidance. Alternatively, you could compare the original story with one or more of the adaptations, discussing the ways in which other people have interpreted Dickens' work.

Letter writing

This novel suggests some interesting possibilities for letters that might be written. You might wish to write some of these, using evidence in the story where you can, and using guesswork to fill in gaps. Possible letters are as follows:

- a letter from Scrooge's creditor (Caroline's husband; Stave 4) asking for more time to repay his debt, and Scrooge's reply
- letters from Bob Cratchit or Scrooge's nephew to friends, explaining how they have spent this Christmas (telling of Scrooge's changed behaviour)
- a series of letters, some years after the events of the novella, between Tiny Tim and his 'second father'.

These are only suggestions: you may be able to think of many more letters to write. You may wish to try a handwriting style that looks authentic for the Victorian period, and to use old-fashioned language (but this is not essential). Or you could read the letters aloud, and make a recording of them.