

## ENGLISH: *A CHRISTMAS CAROL*

**‘Dickens uses the setting of ‘A Christmas Carol’ to add complexity to the characters and evoke empathy and guilt.’ Discuss.**

---

When we are given an insight into other people’s situations that we are unfamiliar with, we can often have emotional responses that we do not anticipate. In his iconic novella, *A Christmas Carol*, Charles Dickens utilises setting and his various representations of his characters’ living and working conditions to add depth to his characters and evoke feelings of empathy and guilt in his readers. Through Dickens’ description of Scrooge’s cold, icy and wintry surroundings, we gain an insight into Scrooge’s personality and demeanour, however as the novella progresses and Dickens shows Scrooge in his vulnerable past and present situations, the readers are inclined to feel empathy towards Scrooge. Through his writing, Dickens criticises the greed and selfishness that he saw as one of the unfortunate characteristics of the Victorian society. Through his vivid description, Dickens captures the magic of the shops in which the virtuous poor can only admire rather than afford; through this he aims to evoke guilt from his affluent readers. In contrast, Dickens’ describes the decaying and revolting slum area of London, emphasising the enormous gap between the rich and the poor. Similarly Dickens creates Want and Ignorance to highlight the greed in the upper-class and elicit guilt for the society their selfish actions are generating. Because there is so little dialogue, Dickens’ description of setting is vital to the understanding of the characters and enkindling altruistic emotions.

Dickens’ representation of Scrooge in different settings adds to the complexity of our understanding of this character and gives the readers an in depth perspective into all facets of Scrooge’s personality and conduct. Scrooge is initially depicted in a “cold, bleak, biting weather” where he “he carried his own low temperature always about with him”. Dickens portrays Scrooge’s home as a “dreary” and “gloomy” environment; so isolated that it had “forgotten the way out again”. Through these ominous descriptions of Scrooge’s surroundings, the readers are inclined to view Scrooge as a niggardly curmudgeon who appears comfortable with his miserly existence. However, when Scrooge is taken on a journey back to his repressed past with the Ghost of Christmas Past, Dickens enhances the readers understanding and deepens the complexity of Scrooge as a character. Scrooge is taken to revisit the school he attended as a young boy. Dickens paints a picture of a house of “broken fortunes” with “windows broken” and “gates decayed”. It is presented as a “dreary” building with a “chilly bareness in the place” similar to that of Scrooge’s home in the present; this in turn develops the readers understanding of the reflection of Scrooge’s past into his present. Scrooge’s young self is depicted as “solitary child” in a “melancholy room...near a feeble fire”. Dickens’ use of setting in this scene evokes empathy in the readers due to the lack of emotional warmth Scrooge had received as a child. These descriptions add to the reader’s initial impression of Scrooge and develop their understanding of the complexities that lie behind Scrooge’s misanthropic demeanour.

Dickens’ novella criticises the Victorian Era and the conditions that the underclass faced. Through his use of setting, he portrays the underclass as virtuous and pleasant regardless of the fact that they cannot afford many of the luxuries that would add greatly to their Christmas celebrations. *A Christmas Carol* is brimming with descriptions of the “[radiance]” and “brightness of shops” blooming with benevolent shopkeepers. Those who are unable to purchase these goods are shown with their mouths ‘water[ing] gratis’ as they pass by. However, as the poor admiringly gaze at the shops knowing they cannot afford these goods, they still resist coveting them. This adds depths to the understanding of the underclass, highlighting their Christmas spirit regardless of the fact that they cannot indulge in the contents of these luxury goods. Characters such as the Cratchits and the environment in which they lived were used by Dickens to evoke empathy in the wealthy society of the Victorian era because they would not want to share the same fate as them. Scrooge is taken to the “four-roomed house” of the Cratchit’s by the Ghost of Christmas Present who sprinkles Christmas cheer on the family as “poor...need it most”. Dickens’ descriptions of the “tenderness”

and “universal admiration” of the food produced by the Cratchits adds to the readers understanding of the family because even though the Cratchits have a scarcity wealth, wear “thread-bare clothes” and have a “goose” instead of turkey for Christmas dinner, they are still appreciative and thankful that they were blessed with something to put on the table during this celebration. Dickens’ use of description on the surroundings of the poor evoke empathy within the readers because even though the poor are unable to purchase these goods in which they admire, they still remain virtuous and cheerful and therefore they deserve to indulge in the luxuries that others have the opportunity to own these products that many take for granted at seasonal celebrations such as Christmas.

Dickens’ descriptions of the horrific conditions that the severely impoverished face are a more subtle reminder to the reader of the hellish living conditions across London that create children like the predatory Want and Ignorance. When the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come appears, he takes Scrooge to a second hand dealer of goods. Dickens describes the London slums as having “old rags”, “bones” and “greasy offal”. He portrays the area as having secrets hidden under “mountains of unseemly rags, masses of corrupted fat and sepulchres of bones”. In contrast to the lavish and bright shops in the other parts of town, this shop is almost a decomposed pile with used objects that are gradually breaking down. The shop represents the utter desperation that drives it clients to buy and sell revolting contents such as “bed curtains” and “blankets” from the dead Scrooge in order to make money. Through this, Dickens’ evokes guilt within his readers because it shows the extent to which their carelessness and mistreatment of the poor has created a horrific emporium of desperation and “crime...filth, and misery”. The Ghost of Christmas Present shows two “monstrous” and “horrible” looking children named Want and Ignorance to Scrooge who are borne from the slums and also the neglect from the upper-class. Through this, Dickens warned his affluent readers that by ignoring the problem that is continuously faced by the underclass, they are feeding these two children and prolonging their pain and suffering. Dickens’ description of these “ragged, scowling, wolfish” beings aims to elicit guilt from the upper class readers because of the creatures they have created through ignoring the living conditions of the severely impoverished in London.

A Christmas Carol has become a literary classic that has endeavoured to educate those on important life lessons. Dickens uses his novella and the vivid descriptions that accompany it to remind his readers of the implications of selfish and careless actions that we may sometimes engage in. Dickens’ use of contrasting setting aims to criticise the Victorian period and subtly warn his readers of the hellish conditions that were experienced through neglect by the affluent portion of society. He teaches his readers that sometimes we may experience altruistic emotions when we are exposed to situations unfamiliar to us but we must act on these in order to prevent the serious ramifications that can be associated with abandoning these feelings.