**‘A Christmas Carol’ AO3 – All You Need to Know**

**Biographical Details About Dickens’ Life**

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| 1. When Dickens was 12 years old, his father was put into prison for owing debts. The rest of the family joined his father in prison but Dickens had to go to work in Warren’s shoe blacking factory where he endured appalling conditions. He was haunted by the experience for the rest of his life. |  |
| 1. As a child, Dickens’ nanny, “Miss Mercy”, told him terrifying bedtime tales. One of her favourite (and most gruesome) was “Captain Murderer,” which she fiendishly accompanied “by clawing the air with both hands, and uttering a long low hollow groan.” As a teenager, Dickens read The Terrific Register, a "penny dreadful" weekly magazine, and was enthralled with and terrified by stories about murder, ghosts and cannibalism. |  |
| 1. By 1832 he had become a very successful shorthand reporter of Parliamentary debates in the House of Commons and began work as a reporter for a newspaper. He became sickened by the attitudes wealthy MPs displayed towards their fellow human beings. | **Which attitudes towards his fellow human beings that sickened Dickens does Scrooge hold at the start of the novel, do you think?** |
| 1. Dickens married Catherine Hogarth in 1836. His son, Charles, the first of ten children, was born in 1837. Dickens really valued family and promotes the idea that a joyful Christmas does not require money or wealth, but heart, love, and family. | **Look at p. 51-53 (Belle) and p. 67-75 (the Cratchits). Find quotations to portray how Dickens portrays the warmth and love of big families.** |
| 1. Dickens lived in London and describes areas he knows. He regularly walked the streets and got to know the poor – he was regarded as a champion of “the poor” by some of the poor themselves. One of the street sellers Henry Mayhew interviewed in 1851 said Dickens was a great favourite of the “patterers” who sold ballads and other materials on the street. So, he was not ignorant to their hardships. | **Look at p. 61-65. How does Dickens convey London on Christmas morning? Then examine the description of the area where Old Joe is located in Stave 4 (p. 98). What kind of area is this?** |
| 1. Dickens wrote ‘A Christmas Carol’ in just six weeks. He began it in October 1843 and it was published in December. He was desperate for money as his career had slumped and he had a growing family to support. He hoped to make around £1000 but spent too much on the illustrations and cover. However, it was an immediate success and the first print run sold out in a week. |  |

**Dickens – Other Aims, Values and Beliefs**

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| **Christianity**   1. As a “Christian of the broadest kind”, Dickens stresses is Christ as model, teacher, and healer—the comforter of the distressed rather than the saviour of mankind through the crucifixion and atonement. He passionately believed that the task of the Church as a body, and its members, was to live out the example of Christ. This was especially the case with regard to social justice and the plight of the poor. 2. So, Christianity was not about ritual or formal religious observance for Dickens, but a matter of individual conscience and attitude of heart, which should be shown **in actions rather than words and general benevolence (kindness).**   Further reading:  <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2017/22-december/features/features/the-simple-faith-of-charles-dickens> | **There are brief references to the church. Make notes on these references: p.11, p.64.**  **Focus on Tiny Tim and how Dickens uses him to convey his Christian message, especially p.69-70.**  **Through Scrooge and his redemption, how is the Christian message conveyed? Think specifically about his ACTIONS at the end of the book.** |
| **Christmas**   1. Dickens didn’t invent Christmas but he revived the celebration of it. 2. He put family, fun and charity at the heart of its celebration. | **Look at p.78-88. Firstly, how does Dickens show the importance of Christmas through the three scenes showing the working class?**  **Then, at Fred’s house, how is the value of celebrating Christmas conveyed?** |
| **Writing a ghost story**   1. The genre of the Gothic, and ghost stories in particular, developed a great deal through the nineteenth century. Victorians were itching to be spooked Dickens was quick to oblige them. He wrote more than two dozen ghost stories in his lifetime. 2. Friend and biographer John Forster described Dickens as having "a hankering after ghosts". The original title of the book was Christmas Carol. In Prose. Being a Ghost Story of Christmas 3. Dickens is often credited with starting the tradition of the ‘ghost story at Christmas’, with families and friends trying to scare each other with spooky tales, often made up and spoken rather than read. The Victorian passion for ghost stories also led to them being printed in the many Christmas annuals of the day. This is continued today through the BBC which has produced television and radio dramas every Christmas for many decades.   **Further reading:**  <https://www.historic-uk.com/CultureUK/A-Dickens-of-Good-Ghost-Story/> | **The two most Gothic ghosts are Marley and the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come.**  **Look at p. 18-28. How does Dickens include features of the Gothic genre? Consider tension, how Marley’s ghost is supernatural, its message from beyond the grave…**  **Look at p. 91, 93 and 94. How is the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come described? What is Dickens trying to achieve with this description?** |
| **Better conditions for children, including education**   1. Before writing the book, Dickens had read a government report on child labour which included interviews with children. Dickens read the testimony of girls who sewed dresses for the expanding market of middle class consumers; they regularly worked 16 hours a day, six days a week, living above the factory floor. He read of 8 year-old children who dragged coal carts through tiny underground passages over a standard 11 hour workday. The descriptions left him “stricken”. 2. In writing ‘A Christmas Carol’, Dickens said he wanted **“to strike the heaviest blow in my power on behalf of these victims.”** 3. For Dickens, education had the potential to rescue working-class children from the ravages of industrialization and from the dangers that lurked in the sprawling city. 4. Dickens often visited working-class neighbourhoods and explored the schools for the local poor. 5. Dickens uses Ignorance and Want at the end of Stave 3 to show his middle class readers the Doom which will befall society if they do not take care of the poor, and especially children. The original drawing shows the factory looming behind the children, suggesting industrialization is to blame. 6. The idea of society facing Doom **may** also link to the European revolutions. It's a frightening idea for his middle-class readers that if they ignore the plight of the working class, they might rise up in violence, as was seen in France, for example. | **The Cratchit children are the best examples of Dickens’ concern for children in the book.**  **Think about Martha Cratchit. She arrives on p. 68. Where has she been?**  **Peter Cratchit is described on p. 67 and p.75. He is probably a young teenager. How does Dickens use language to show what life has in store for him?**  **On p. 89-91, how does Dickens use Ignorance and Want? Find details about their description and what they represent.** |
| **The poor**   1. The 1834 New Poor Law went far toward criminalizing poverty. Dickens was furious about the grim fate of the working class, and he used this novella to write about it. 2. Dickens first conceived of the book as a pamphlet (like a leaflet – gives information), which he planned on calling, “An Appeal to the People of England on behalf of the Poor Man’s Child.” But in less than a week of thinking about it, he decided instead to embody his arguments in a story. 3. Dickens believed that employers are responsible for the well-being of their employees. Their workers are not of value only to the extent to which they contribute to a product for the cheapest possible labour cost. They are of value as “fellow-passengers to the grave.” 4. Dickens was sympathetic to the working poor—what he would have considered to be the good or "deserving" poor. He showed them bravely struggling against the forces arrayed against them. 5. However, he was worried, even afraid of the potential for crime and violence in poverty. He recognised the danger of poverty both to the individual and to wider society.   **Further reading:**  http://www.historyisnowmagazine.com/blog/2014/4/13/charles-dickens-poverty-and-what-he-might-think-of-britain-today#.YFymWq\_7S1s= | **Look at the Fezziwig section – p. 42-47. He is the kind of employer that Dickens promotes. What does he do for his employees and what is the lesson about being an employer that Scrooge learns on p.47?**  **Now contrast Fezziwig to Scrooge with Bob Cratchit in Stave 1 – p. 4-5, 7 and 13. In what ways does he treat his employee harshly?**  **Now compare this to Stave 5 – p. 124-6. How is he now fulfilling the role of a good employer?**  **The scene with Old Joe, Mrs Dilber, the laundress and the undertaker’s man shows crime in poverty on p. 98-104. How is this scene and its characters so unnerving for a middle class audience?** |
| **Lack of welfare state or medical support**   1. In the 1840s there was no welfare state so people did not have a free medical service like the NHS. 2. The Cratchits cannot access medical support for Tiny Tim because they just don’t have the money to pay for a doctor. Dickens never specifies what’s the matter with him but suggestions include tuberculosis (TB), rickets, malnutrition, a disease of the spine and cerebral palsy. Because Scrooge doesn’t pay Bob enough money, the Cratchits can’t afford to feed their children well (their Christmas meal is a one-off and by no means do they eat like this all of the time). 3. The blackened skies from burning coal, the crowding of people in tenements, the limited diet of the underclass, and the filth of London resulted in a haven for infectious diseases and rickets in children. Sixty percent of children in London had rickets, and nearly 50% had signs of TB. Dickens was familiar with both rickets and TB and wrote about cod liver oil as a possible cure for rickets and scrofula. | **How does Dickens establish that Tiny Tim is ill when he introduces him on p.69? Look at p. 70, 73, 74 and 76. How does Dickens encourage Scrooge and the reader to consider the value of the lives of children like Tiny Tim?**  **Importantly, Scrooge’s care for Tiny Tim proves to be an important part of his transformation. Look at p. 126. How does Scrooge enable Tiny Tim to live and what message is Dickens sending to his middle class readers?** |

**Wider Social and Historical Context**

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| **Malthus**   1. Malthus’ ideas were still current in British intellectual life at the time A Christmas Carol was written. 2. An amateur economist of the 18th century, he created a theoretical model which allegedly proved that mass starvation was an inevitable result of population growth as the planet would not be able to produce enough food to feed everyone. 3. He believed that natural disasters like famine contributed to population control and shouldn’t be interfered with by mankind 4. The surplus population, for Malthus, consisted of the poor and the hungry who were not contributing usefully to society and therefore were surplus to requirements – it didn’t matter if they died. | **Scrooge’s attitude towards the charity collectors in Stave 1 provides evidence of his Malthusian views at the start of the novel before his transformation. What is his quote from p. 10? Dickens did not agree with these views.** | |
| **Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834**   1. Before 1834, the cost of looking after the poor was growing more expensive every year. This cost was paid for by the middle and upper classes in each town or parish through their local taxes. There was a real suspicion amongst the middle and upper classes that they were paying the poor to be lazy and avoid work. If you were unable to work then you were given some money to help you survive. By 1830 it cost about **£7 million** and criticism of the law was mounting. 2. Critics also suggested that allowance systems made the situation worse because **they encouraged poor people to have children** that they could not afford to look after. 3. The new Poor Law was meant to reduce the cost of looking after the poor and impose a system which would be the same all over the country. Under the new Poor Law, parishes were grouped into unions and each union had to build a workhouse if they did not already have one. Except in special circumstances, poor people could now only get help if they were prepared to leave their homes and go into a workhouse. 4. Conditions inside the workhouse were deliberately harsh, so that only those who desperately needed help would ask for it. Families were split up and housed in different parts of the workhouse. The poor were made to wear a uniform and the diet was monotonous. There were also strict rules and regulations to follow. Inmates, male and female, young and old were made to work hard, often doing unpleasant jobs such as picking oakum or breaking stones. Children could also find themselves hired out to work in factories or mines. | | **In Stave 1, Scrooge refuses to give to charity at Christmas. Refer to p. 9, 10 and 11 to explore how his ideas support the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834.**  **Then explore why Scrooge’s words are repeated back to him on p. 74 and p.90-91.** | |

**Big Ideas**

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| **Misanthropy and Philanthropy**  The novel tracks Scrooge’s journey from a misanthropist to a philanthropist.  A misanthropist means that he dislikes humankind and avoids human society.  Dickens promotes a message of philanthropy. This is love or goodwill for humankind, and more particularly it refers to gifts given or actions performed for the benefit of humanity. | **Find 10 quotes from Stave 1 to show Scrooge’s misanthropic nature where he shows dislike for humankind and avoids human society.**  **Find 10 quotes from Stave 5 where Dickens highlights his transformation. Many details are mirrored in Stave 5 from Stave 1, for instance the way he treats the boy…** |
| **Compassionate Capitalism**  Dickens’ message is not socialist and he does not argue against capitalism. He is saying that those who have personal wealth should use it to support those who don’t, adopting a philanthropic approach rather than a misanthropic one. The middle and upper classes should not be ignorant of the lives led by the poor and needed to understand their struggles and help them as workers were becoming like commodities and not individual humans. | **You have already considered Fezziwig here as well as Scrooge’s treatment of Bob Cratchit. Through these minor characters, Dickens promotes compassionate capitalism.**  **Look at the men at the Exchange in Stave 4 – p.95-97. These are men who Scrooge has known well. He respects them and, importantly, they are just like him. How does Dickens use their conversation after his death to show that they are NOT compassionate capitalists?** |
| **The Possibility of Redemption and Change**  Dickens portrays Scrooge in hyperbolic terms in Stave 1. He exaggerates just how much of a misanthropist Scrooge is at the start to show that ANYONE can seek redemption and change their ways, even if they are old and appear beyond the ability to be saved. | **Look at some of the hyperbolic language in Stave 1 and how it is matched in Stave 5. Similes in both are a good place to start!** |