Year 9 Victorian Literature: A Christmas Carol by Charles Dickens (1843)

Context

The Industrial Revolution and Wealth

The Victorian era saw a boom in manufacturing largely due to the invention of steam power, which powered huge factories. England became a world leader in trade and industry, which made lots of business owners very wealthy (like Scrooge who hoards his wealth). As the rich became richer, the poor became poorer and were often exploited by selfish and irresponsible employers (and Dickens uses Scrooge to symbolise the cruel, unscrupulous employer).

Poverty and Charity

Poverty remained a huge issue in England throughout Dickens' lifetime. Some thinkers viewed the poor as lazy and corrupt and The Poor Law of 1834 had done enough for them by creating workhouses- but these were feared for their brutal conditions. Some people believed that over-population caused poverty. However, Dickens believed there was plenty to go around, which should be shared (a message shown through the characters Ignorance and Want, particularly if those like Scrooge are willing to learn, to change and treat those less fortunate with compassion, charity and equity).

Family and Social Isolation

Dickens had a troubled childhood and a difficult relationship with his father, who was even sent to debtor's prison (reflected in Scrooge's abandonment as a child, resulting in his fear of poverty and so isolates himself, rejecting family and marriage which were important institutions in the Victorian era, yet opposingly, Belle, Fezziwig, the Cratchits and Fred show the importance of marriage and/or family

Plot

Stave 1: Miserly Scrooge is 'solitary as an oyster' and his dead business partner, Jacob Marley, with his 'chains', warns Scrooge that he will be visited by three spirits.

Stave 2: With its 'bright jet of light', The Ghost of Christmas Past exposes Scrooge to his own past and memories.

Stave 3: The Ghost of Christmas Present, a jolly giant' with its 'glowing torch' shows Scrooge Christmas as it happens that year.

Stave 4: A 'dark, hooded figure', The Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come, takes Scrooge through a sequence of scenes linked to an unnamed man's death.

Stave 5: Scrooge is now 'light as a feather' and rushes out to the street to share is newfound Christmas spirit. 'like a second father' to tiny Tim

Christmas

The True Spirit of Christmas

Victorian society was very religious and as a Christian country expected to live by strict moral code. However, Dickens opposed this somewhat and believed that it wasn't enough to just show charity at Christmas time and, to be a good Christian, people should keep the true spirit of Christmas all year round and be charitable, giving, kind, forgiving and generous at every opportunity.

Characters

Ebenezer Scrooge
Fred
Jacob Marley
Bob Cratchit
Tiny Tim
Mrs Cratchit
Ghost of Christmas Past
Ghost of Christmas Present
Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come
Fezziwig
Belle
Fan
Ignorance and Want

Terminology

Antagonist – a character that creates obstacle or challenges

Antithesis – two things that are the direct opposites of one another.

Contrast – being strikingly different from something else

Circular (or cyclical) narrative – the story ends where it began

Fireside ghost story – Victorians would gather around the fire to tell ghost soties on Christmas Eve

Foreshadowing – a clue in the text that hints at something that will happen later

Listing – syndetic (using conjunctions, e.g. and, to list and asyndetic (using commas to list)

Metaphor – a direct comparison between two things

Motif – a recurring theme or idea

Pathetic fallacy – the weather is personified to reflect the character's mood

Protagonist – the main character in a story

Simile – a comparison between two thigns using like or as

Stave – the term Dickens uses instead of chapter (reflects Christmas, music, a carol)

Symbolism

Social commentary – a text that comments on what society is like, to promote change