

A CHRISTMAS CAROL by CHARLES DICKENS THEMES

OVERVIEW

Scrooge's initial penny-pinching reflects the values taking hold during the Industrial Revolution.

- Dickens illustrates what happens when individuals view relationships and other people through the prism of money.

Dickens proposes that connecting individuals to one another is what ultimately corrects the social injustice created by capitalism.

Marley's ghost serves as a reminder of Scrooge's guilt in casting away his family and friends

- Many of the people Scrooge mistreats are innocent, less fortunate, and/ or loving.

Scrooge's dysfunctional relationship with his father left him with a fear of connecting to others.

CHRISTIAN MORALITY

"A Christmas Carol" is deeply rooted in the important nineteenth century question of how Christian morality would survive in the face of an increasingly utilitarian and capitalistic world brought on by the Industrial Revolution

- The financial success that Scrooge enjoyed is precisely the goal of capitalism
 - but a fixation on the accumulation of wealth seduced Scrooge into seeing every aspect of life in such terms
 - Not only Christmas, but his fiancé, his dying friend and business partner, his reputation, his office staff, and his only living family member are all weighed against their financial cost and found unworthy
 - The costs of such selfishness and bitterness are not borne by Scrooge alone, however.
 - Dickens's portrayal of the social costs—prisons, workhouses, increased mortality, the creation of ghettos and slums, the miserable state of both wealthy and poor alike—clearly makes a case for morality and social justice on a larger scale.

INDIVIDUAL REDEMPTION

On the other hand, the solution to social injustice in "A Christmas Carol" is not a social movement but individual redemption

- The world becomes a better place almost immediately following Scrooge's conversion
 - In fact, the story implies that a renewed connection to humanity is, in fact, the very essence of redemption
 - Though the Christmas setting invites a traditional Christian interpretation of Scrooge's redemption, his change is rooted not in a commitment to deeper spirituality or orthodoxy but in an authentic connection to and investment in the lives of other human beings

- This “conversion” is not introspective and personal; it is outward-looking and social
 - While the results seem to change nothing about the social structure itself, the compassion shown by individual people changes the social relationships they share.

GUILT AND INNOCENCE

Often in ghost stories, the ghostly apparitions function to remind the main character of something evil he or she has done in the past

- In other words, ghosts act as the character's conscience
 - Scrooge certainly has enough to feel guilty about:
 - he is mean and tight-fisted with his assistant, Bob Cratchit;
 - dismissive of his nephew, Fred;
 - miserly and cold with the men from the local charity association;
 - and nasty to the little caroler that he chases away from his keyhole with a ruler
 - Each of these people are associated with some form of innocence, a reminder of the less fortunate or the love of family and friends.

Marley's ghost raises the question of guilt directly, explaining that he himself is forced to walk the earth as a ghost because he was a heartless, self-involved man

- The ghosts of Christmas Past, Present and Future make no accusations toward Scrooge about his behavior—but with the warning that Marley has given him, Scrooge interprets the visits to mean that unless he changes his life and learns to value the people around him, he will end up like Marley
 - Moreover, by revisiting events and people from his past, he realizes just how much he has missed by shutting himself off from family, friends, and coworkers
 - With the help of the ghosts, he resolves to change his life.

FEAR

"You fear the world too much," Belle tells Scrooge as she is breaking off their engagement

- It is implied by his sister's visit to his school that the roots of these fears can be found in a problematic and dysfunctional relationship with his father
 - Although we don't know the details, it was an obviously unhappy relationship that impacted Scrooge's relationships with others the rest of his life
 - It figures that his withdrawal from Belle, his growing interest in financial dealings, his lack of companions, and his unhappiness is a result of this early trauma

The ghostly intervention makes him see that the loneliness and neglect he has brought upon himself is even worse than the general fear of the world that he developed from the neglect suffered during his childhood

- Beside the fear of his own death, Scrooge is very affected by the realization of Tiny Tim's death, which he inquires about with "an interest he had never felt before."
 - When he finds out that the boy's fate could be avoided, he finds an opportunity to reach out and help someone other than himself
 - His emotional and financial support saves Tiny Tim's life and provides the true emotional connection that Scrooge desired all along.

WEALTH AND POVERTY

A recurring theme in the work of Dickens is the tremendous gap between the rich and poor

- In fact, he portrayed the gritty world of the working class and lower class of London at a time when most novelists—most of them educated and from the upper class—had no sense of what poverty or its victims were like

In this story, Bob Cratchit's meager earnings can barely feed his family

- In spite of this, the members of the Cratchit household are a cheerful and happy bunch
 - When Scrooge looks in on them with the Ghost of Christmas Present, he hears about the tiring jobs that the children work or will work, and he notes the little they have to eat, with the meager plum pudding being a great treat
 - As Scrooge observes, "They were not a handsome family; they were not well dressed; their shoes were far from being waterproof; their clothes were scanty; and Peter might have known, and very likely did, the inside of pawnbroker's. But they were happy, grateful, pleased with one another's company, and contented with the time."

By contrast, the wealthy Scrooge lives in miserable circumstances in a cold, abandoned building that is dark because he does not want to spend money on candles ("darkness was cheap, and Scrooge liked it")

- His wealth is not bringing him any more happiness—it only perpetuates the fear that one day he will lose it

A Christmas Carol does not equate poverty with cheer and wealth with misery, however.

- The party at Fred's house shows people who are wealthy having a good time, while two children revealed to him by the Ghost of Christmas Present—Ignorance and Want—make it clear that even though people like the Cratchits can laugh in their poverty, it is still a serious and life-threatening matter.