

Perceiving the need  
for social change in  
"a christmas carol"



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Dickens's "A Christmas Carol" is set in Victorian London and tells the story of the transformation of a wicked, miserly Scrooge into a benevolent humanitarian via supernatural intervention. The invited reading persuades readers to accept that despite the gap between rich and poor, inspired individuals are capable of changing society, social change is desired by the powers of the supernatural realm, and small steps can be achieved by wealthy individuals who fulfill their duty of kindness to the less fortunate. The writer's purpose is stated in the words of Marley's ghost: "Mankind was my business" and implemented by allowing the reader to share the rigorous re-education of Scrooge. Dickens achieves his purpose of positioning readers to favour social change through the use of powerful stereotypical representations of real world and supernatural characters which compel readers to criticise and reflect on the wrongness of attitudes, values and beliefs of a selfish Victorian society. The reader initially rejects the main character, Ebenezer Scrooge, whose greed-driven values are contrasted with Bob Cratchit, a poor, underpaid, kindly clerk devoted to his family. Dickens emphasises that money lust has made Scrooge a miserable, toxic character who spreads misery. Yet his observations grow, and his viewpoint evolves as his relationship with the Cratchits grows: "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." The reader disapproves of his coldheartedness and sympathises with the people he mistreats: the Cratchits, his nephew, Fred, and Belle, his former fiancée who recognised Scrooge had made "a golden idol" (p65) of money. The reader's

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greatest sympathies are directed towards the Cratchit family, serving Dicken's purpose of promoting the welfare of the working class. Tiny Tim, condemned to poverty and physical misery as well, is an important device in Scrooge's transformation. That Scrooge has ignored this pitiful little boy is central to his failure as a human being. Befriending the child, signifies the awakening of his human spirit to the power of kindness. Dickens implies in Tiny Tim's words " God bless us, everyone!" that the purpose of life lies in feeling happy about helping the needy. Through his relationship with the Cratchit family, Scrooge learns about the joy of giving, the value of kindness and generosity, and the pleasures of living as a member of a loving family. The portrayal of Tiny Tim's death affects Scrooge deeply, positioning the reader to love children, and want to help an underprivileged handicapped child. Tim calls the reader to accept Christian teachings when he says, " I want people to see me because I am a cripple..." Through Dickens' detailed descriptions of supernatural characters, and his evocative emotional use of shocking imagery, the reader shares Scrooge's deeply emotional journey which teaches him compassion. Scrooge believes in ghosts, and the chained, doomed ghost of Marley introduces the reader to fear of the supernatural, of death and of the afterlife. Fear inspires the reader to share the Christian belief that the price of today's mistakes is eternal wandering in a void of misery after death. " You are fettered," said Scrooge, trembling. " Tell me why?" " I wear the chain I forged in life," replied the Ghost. " I made it link by link, and yard by yard; I girded it of my own free will, and of my own free will I wore it." Along with Scrooge, the reader accepts this as truth. With supernatural teachers, the Ghosts of Christmas, Scrooge's ignorance is destroyed through a painful moral education process which the reader

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shares. The shock of experiencing shame and guilt at his unkind treatment of others, followed by the fear of eternal damnation that Scrooge faces are life-changing. Scrooge faces the ugly eternal consequences of his wrongdoings. Through sharing Scrooge's experience, the reader also fears punishment in the afterlife, and like Scrooge, resolves to live a better life. Minor characters are contrasted against Scrooge, and also provides glimpses of the life and values of the poor class. Ragged, unhappy, hungry children are advertisements sending an anti poverty message to the reader. The inclusion of humble miner's hut and the lonely lighthouse expand the reader's awareness of the extent of both poverty and the kindly human spirit of the poor class. The benevolent employer, Fezziwig is contrasted with the mean spirited Scrooge, showing the reader that some people are already practising compassion . The parade of morally good characters impresses that society is struggling to help the poor, and this change needs to be boosted by more helping hands. Dickens' moral message is repeated for emphasis in each stage, by each spirit of Christmas, and through every character and situation in the novella. When Scrooge's nephew, Fred, comments that " offenses carry their own punishments" he is supporting Dickens's Christian moral viewpoint, further appealing to the reader to be reasonable and understand the importance of helping out the needy . He is repeating the message of Marley's ghost, who teaches that the faults of life will be paid for in death. The personal effort required to change is rewarded when Scrooge summons his courage to knock on Fred's door. Finally, Scrooge is deeply grateful for the help he received to change his ways, shown when he says " I shall love this doorknocker as long as I live". This positions the reader to share Scrooge's happiness and believe that change is

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achievable and desirable, and to make the effort. Finally, the reader walks the road of moral redemption with Scrooge, learning with him that “ the common welfare.. charity mercy, forbearance and benevolence” p49 are every man’s duty. The various range of character representations and their experiences support Scrooge’s transformation, persuading the reader to accept the need for social change, and to follow Scrooge’s example. His successful transformation offers the reader a role model which affirms the power of the individual to correct the social injustice caused by greed and uncontrolled capitalism.