

Analysing themes: perspectives on poverty

Assessment objectives

- AO2, AO3

How does Dickens present the poor in *A Christmas Carol*?

In *A Christmas Carol*, Dickens presents the poor in a variety of situations. It is important to consider how these situations vary, while at the same time developing a sense of how Dickens views the poor overall.

How Dickens presents the needs of the poor

Re-read the following sections of *A Christmas Carol*, which relate especially to general ideas about society and the poor. Make brief notes in response to the questions that follow.

- 1 Read Stave One, the visit of the charity collectors, from 'At this festive time of year...' to 'It's not my business'.
 - a What do the charity collectors say 'Many thousands' and 'hundreds of thousands' lack?
 - b What is Scrooge's response to the needs of the poor as explained by the charity collectors?
 - c What impression do we get from the charity collectors of the institutions Scrooge mentions?
 - d What is Scrooge's response to the idea that many of the poor 'would rather be die'?
- 2 Read Stave One, from 'Oh! captive bound...' to '...which its light would have conducted me!'.
 - a What does Marley say should have been his 'business'?
 - b What powerful metaphor does Marley use to compare the relative importance of his 'trade' with what should have been his real 'business'?

- 3 Read Stave Two, from 'Another idol has displaced me...' to 'such severity as the pursuit of wealth!'

In Stave Two, poverty – or fear of it – becomes a point of conflict between Scrooge and Belle.

- a In the Bible, idolatry was the worship of something other than God. What does Belle say Scrooge worships?
- b What does Scrooge give as his reason for worshipping this thing?

Interpreting Scrooge's motives

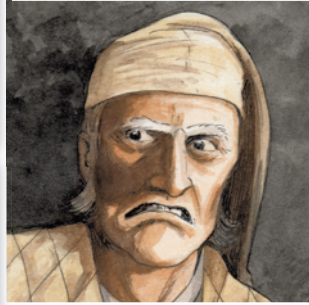
- 4 Overall, how would you sum up Scrooge's attitude by the end of his conversation with Belle (taking into account what he says and how he is presented in Stave One)?



Look at each of the interpretations below and decide which, if any, are closest to your reading of Scrooge's attitude.

Interpretation 1: Poverty brings hardship; Scrooge believes it is best to look after yourself by earning as much as you can, and keeping it.

Interpretation 2: Scrooge feels the state provides for the poor – so what has poverty got to do with him?



Interpretation 3: Scrooge would like to help, but poverty doesn't affect him, so why should he worry?

Interpretation 4: Scrooge despises the poor, or those who waste money unnecessarily. He thinks they are weak and deserve what they get.

For each interpretation you agree with, make sure you can back up your views with reference to what Scrooge says or does in the first two Staves.

Different perspectives on poverty

Scrooge's is not the only perspective on poverty. Dickens, as narrator, presents some alternatives.

	Descriptions of poverty
Stave Three	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The lengths the Cratchits go to make ends meet (consider the Christmas meal, their clothing, references to work) Tiny Tim's appearance and physical condition The faces of Ignorance and Want at the end of the Stave (consider the particular adjectives to describe them)
Stave Four	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Old Joe's place, his companions and the part of London where they live

- 5** For each of these descriptions of poverty in the table above:
- Find at least two quotations that show the *effect* of poverty on either appearance or behaviour.
 - Decide which perspective below is represented by each description.

Dickens's perspectives on poverty
Poverty as a corrupting, immoral influence
Poverty as degrading and shameful
Poverty as revealing people's decency and pride
Poverty as a direct result of poor education

Final task

- 6** Poverty is shown to have a range of effects in *A Christmas Carol*. Write 100 words explaining:
- what the worst effects of poverty are in the novel
 - what the 'good' effects of poverty are, if any.
- Make sure you select at least one relevant quotation for the worst effects, and one for the 'good' effects as well.