**A Christmas Carol – Smug Points!**

**Past, Present and Future – The Threat of Time**

Three ghosts appear to Scrooge to show him how he is living sinfully and what the consequences will be if he doesn’t choose to live a better life. The three-part ghost story shows the reader a clear path – sins in Scrooge’s past leading to his present misery and the continuation of that sin leading in the future to death, symbolized by the hooded figure. Each ghost shows Scrooge a vision of life gone wrong, set in a chronological path to destruction. At the same time, the ghosts’ appearance threaten ultimately the absence of time, what will happen after Scrooge’s death if he continues down this path: the purgatory of endlessly wandering the earth that Marley’s ghost warned him was his fate.

Time in the story is distinguished by several motifs. First, bells tolling and chiming fit into the story’s song-like structure and also recur at key moments, reminding Scrooge of the time and of time passing. Second the chains that Marley shakes at Scrooge to scare him are a visual reminder of the endless prison sentence of purgatory awaiting Scrooge in the afterlife.

Time in the story is also threatening because of the changes its passing will enact in traditional society. Tradition is important for all of these characters – be it Scrooge with his obsessive money counting and nightly rituals or Cratchit with his love of Christmas – and the changing of the city during these industrial times threatens to break down all of these traditions through its transformation of economic conditions and the grinding poverty it inflicts.

**Family**

The entrance of Scrooge’s nephew Fred at the beginning of the story introduces another side to the miser. Scrooge is not unfortunate in the way of relatives – he has a family awaiting his presence, asking him to dinner, wanting to celebrate the season with him, yet he refuses. This is one of the important moral moments in the story that helps predict Scrooge’s coming downfall. It shows how Scrooge makes choices to prolong his own misery. He chooses to live alone and in darkness while even poor Cratchit is rich in family. Scrooge’s distaste for Fred’s happiness is not just annoyance at the sight of merriness and excess, it is also motivated by bitterness towards marriage based on Scrooge’s own lost love Belle, who left him long ago.

In the story, cold and loneliness are set up in opposition to the warmth of family. Symbols of coldness such as Scrooge’s empty hearth, refusal to provide heat for Cratchit, and keeping his own house dark to save money show Scrooge’s cruelty and lack of connection. But family provides the antidote to this coldness. When Fred enters, the counting house suddenly warms up. Further, Cratchit’s warmth, despite his lack of coal, and the togetherness and energy of his large family, show him to be one of the most fortunate men in the story.

Scrooge does have a kind of family in his partner Marley, who is described at the beginning of the novella as fulfilling many roles for Scrooge before his death. The inseparability of their names above the firm’s entrance shows how close they are—at least in business terms—and though they are bachelors they share their lives, and the suite of rooms is passed down like a family legacy from Marley to Scrooge. Ultimately, from Marley’s warning and the visions provided by the ghosts, Scrooge does learn to appreciate and connect with Fred and the rest of his family, and to even extend that family to include the Cratchits.

**Greed, Generosity and Forgiveness**

Scrooge is a caricature of a miser, greedy and mean in every way. He spends all day in his counting house looking after his money but is so cheap that he keeps his house in darkness, his fire small and allows no extravagance even on Christmas day. But we soon learn that he is the most impoverished character – he is lacking love, warmth and the spirit of Christmas, all of which make lives like Bob Cratchit’s so worth living despite their hardships.

The story’s structure and Scrooge’s character development are engineered so that as Scrooge becomes aware of his own poverty and learns to forgive and listen to his buried conscience, he is able to see virtue and goodness in the other characters and rediscovers his own generosity – he even becomes a symbol of Christmas in the final stave.

Scrooge is remedied in the novella by the Christmas-conscience characters that surround him, including his own nephew and Bob Cratchit and his family, who show Scrooge in the Ghost of Christmas Present’s tour the true meaning of goodness. All of the generous characters in the story are financially downtrodden but succeed in being good and happy despite their lot, whereas Scrooge needs to go through a traumatic awakening in order to find happiness. But the virtue that really ensures Scrooge’s transformation is forgiveness – it is this key of Christian morality that saves him when the characters that he has always put down—Fred, Bob Cratchit—welcome him into their homes when he undergoes his transformation, giving Dickens’ tale the shape of a true religious redemption.

**Christmas and Tradition**

A Christmas Carol was published as a Christmas story, and takes the form of a Christian morality tale containing a moral lesson that the highly religious and traditional English population of Dickens’ time would enjoy. Its structure, with five “staves” instead of chapters, is a metaphor for a simple song, with a beginning, middle and end. Dickens uses the idea of singing to connect the story to the joyful Christian traditions of the season, such as caroling, while at the same filling it with more serious, politically-minded themes.

This theme has two aspects: Firstly, the festive, jolly Christmas atmosphere flourishes in the streets surrounding Scrooge’s company office, and the ethos of the nativity story is embodied in characters like Tiny Tim, Bob Cratchit, and Scrooge’s nephew – these characters are examples of goodness and charity, and show Scrooge the way to kindness. The love and strength of the Cratchit family despite their poverty shows the reader that the spirit of Christmas can defeat Scrooge’s spirit of misery. At the same time, Dickens uses the seasonal period around Christmas to highlight the sort of unfair and crushing poverty that the Cratchit’s face. The cold, bleak winter weather exacerbates the terrible privations poor families of the era had to face, and in presenting the poor in such extremes A Christmas Carol profoundly criticizes the laws, policies, and economic system that promote such poverty. In this way, by allowing Dickens to use the harshness of winter to portray the terrible difficulty of the life of the poor, Christmas served Dickens as a vehicle not just for showing Scrooge’s transformation but to appeal to readers’ Christianity as well in an effort to change a society that was organized in some ways that Dickens saw as being profoundly un-Christian.

**Social Dissatisfaction and the Poor Laws**

A Christmas Carol has attracted generations of readers with its clear parable-like structure and compelling ghost story. It’s a moral tale that has proven timeless, but Dickens also wrote the story with a very present problem in mind, and his structure was designed to make the real issues of Victorian London stand out and provide greater awareness in the reading masses. For instance, the two gentlemen that ask for Scrooge’s charity are kindly but unable to inspire Scrooge’s sympathies. In Scrooge’s easy assurance that the poor not only belong in but actually deserve to live in the poor house, the story conveys a message about the visibility and effectiveness of charity being swamped by common misconceptions that the poor house is a functional institution keeping poor people usefully employed. In fact, the poor house was an institution that did nothing to help the poor. Rather, it was a terrible place that served primarily to keep the poor out of view of those who were better off. Scrooge’s repetition of his dismissive phrase “Humbug!” is a symbol of the insensitivity and ignorance of the middle class looking down on and dismissing the poor.

The Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come shows us not only Scrooge’s miserable future but also the future of his contemporaries, the traders and bankers that are discussing his funeral lunch and not caring at all that he has died. Dickens shows us that meanness is often connected to the pursuit of wealth. Further, he shows how such meanness is a cycle, almost catching. Scrooge, then, transforms a larger fate than his own when he discovers charity.

In fact, A Christmas Carol has had a tangible effect on poverty, at least on a small, individual scale – stories abound of factory owners and merchants being so affected by readings of A Christmas Carol that they sent their workers gifts and changed harsh conditions.

**Music**

A Christmas Carol was written as a metaphor for a traditional Christmas hymn. The title conjures the familiar Christmas tradition of singing round the fireplace or through the streets from door to door, a seasonal activity that joins rich and poor together and echoes the political theme of the story. Many features of the story also reinforce its musical quality. The virtuous characters, Fred Scrooge and his family, the Fezziwigs, and many other unnamed townspeople that Scrooge initially despises, all bring music into Scrooge’s life, be it through laughter, dancing or the joyful chanting of “Merry Christmas!”.

**Images of Age and Youth**

Dickens was especially aware of the plight of poor children in the 19th century, and children appear in the story as symbols of the ruined youth of Industrial Capitalism. The youths of Ignorance and Want are especially clear representations of these problems, and Tiny Tim is a lasting symbol of the power of goodness and generosity to overcome adversity. Putting these large themes in the figures of children emphasizes the tragedy of the premature suffering of the Victorian youth, affected by the grinding poverty created by the Industrial Revolution and England's poverty laws which made being in debt a crime punishable by forcing debtors into working houses. The story is also populated with images of age, which taunt Scrooge with the idea of the past and of his approaching death. The Ghost of Christmas Past is a strange mixture of the two, both elderly and childlike.

**A Tragedy in reverse?**

Traditional Shakespearian tragedies have 5 ‘Acts’, at the end of which the main character dies as a result of their own flaws and failings. ACC is essentially a tragedy in reverse – the main character starts as a hated and feared persona who, after 5 ‘Acts’ (Staves), learns the errors of his ways and avoids his fate. He sheds his ‘hubris’, whereas other great tragic characters fall victim to theirs.

**Use of opposites and contrasts**

Every character in the text is carefully constructed to represent an exact opposite to one or more of Scrooge’s defining features, thereby emphasizing them further. The juxtapositions are revealed as the Staves progress and therefore his outside status is developed as well

**Pathetic Fallacy**

Simple but very effective. In the opening Stave, when Scrooge is a blinkered, selfish man the weather is foggy, dark and oppressive. When Scrooge wakes up with social clarity, vision and an open mind on Christmas Day, the weather is bright and clear.