

Exam Task 2

Read the following extract from the fourth chapter of *A Christmas Carol* and then answer the question that follows.

In this extract, the third spirit shows Scrooge the two children, Ignorance and Want.

From the foldings of its robe, it brought two children; wretched, abject, frightful, hideous, miserable. They knelt down at its feet, and clung upon the outside of its garment.

"Oh, Man, look here! Look, look, down here!" exclaimed the Ghost.

They were a boy and a girl. Yellow, meagre, ragged, scowling, wolfish; but prostrate, too, in their humility. Where graceful youth should have filled their features out, and touched them with its freshest tints, a stale and shrivelled hand, like that of age, had pinched, and twisted them, and pulled them into shreds. Where angels might have sat enthroned, devils lurked, and glared out menacing. No change, no degradation, no perversion of humanity, in any grade, through all the mysteries of wonderful creation, has monsters half so horrible and dread.

Scrooge started back, appalled. Having them shown to him in this way, he tried to say they were fine children, but the words choked themselves, rather than be parties to a lie of such enormous magnitude.

"Spirit, are they yours?" Scrooge could say no more.

"They are Man's," said the Spirit, looking down upon them. "And they cling to me, appealing from their fathers. This boy is Ignorance. This girl is Want. Beware them both, and all of their degree, but most of all beware this boy, for on his brow I see that written which is Doom, unless the writing be erased.

Starting with this extract, explore how Dickens presents poor characters in the novel.

Write about:

- * How Dickens presents poor characters in this extract.
- * How Dickens presents poor characters in the novel as a whole.

[30 marks]

Sample Answer

Dickens presents poor characters in a variety of ways. He does show the impact of poverty upon members of society in order to show his readership how and why society must change if it is to avoid suffering and disaster. He makes this moral point through his horrific depictions of the children shown in the extract, but he also shows how families such as the Cratchits are able to circumvent their poverty, albeit superficially, in order to celebrate the true meaning of Christmas and the wider value of family and community.

In the extract we see how Dickens uses negative adjectives to describe the hands of the children Ignorance and Want. The word “shrivelled” is used here, which compares these children, who are also victims of the struggles of poverty, to Tiny Tim. It creates a similar image of premature decay to highlight the neglect of lower classes in society. The boy in this scene represents Ignorance, and the Ghost of Christmas Present tells Scrooge to “most of all beware the boy”. This strongly conveys Dickens’ message about poverty and the poor, as he is trying to tell society that ignoring the struggles and problems of the poor will be their downfall. The representation of these two characters is one of horror, with a string of dismal words used to describe their appearance and manner. Dickens contrasts heavenly images with satanic ones to reveal just how far from grace these two are. When the spirit reveals that they are an emblem of humanity’s attitudes, even Scrooge is appalled. This encounter is one more stage in his transformation.

Poor characters are often used by Dickens in sentimental ways. This is demonstrated in Stave 4 when Tiny Tim ‘dies’, and the Cratchits say that when Bob had Tiny Tim on his shoulders he walked “very fast indeed”. When we have a weight on our shoulders, the phrase normally implies a burden or worry, however here I think that Tiny Tim represents the burden that the rich think the poor impose upon society. Here Dickens could be saying that if we only realised the potential of the poor, they may actually prove helpful and contribute to society, however they are seen only as dead weight on the shoulders of society due to the ignorance of the rich.

Although the Cratchit family are poor, they are shown as happy despite their situation. When the novella was published in 1843, so many people were moving into cities, leading them to become overcrowded and therefore poverty-stricken. This poverty is evident in the quote “the family display of glass,” which we then learn consists of “two tumblers” and a “custard cup without a handle”. The word “display” shows just how little they own, as they seem proud to showcase these small dilapidated objects off, as this is all they have. However, they seem content as such trivial matters don’t change how they feel towards each other. Dickens compares the cups to “golden goblets”, which to me suggests that the Cratchits feel enriched simply by each other’s company, which is worth more to them than anything materialistic.

Earlier in the same scene, we learn first how vibrant the scene is among this family when Dickens personifies even the potatoes, saying they were “knocking” to get out of their pan, as if the joyous atmosphere was so desirable to be amongst that even inanimate objects wanted to be part of the festivities. In the extract we are told that the chestnuts cracked

“nosily”, which conveys the same idea, building a feeling of community despite the poverty in the scene.

The Ghost of Christmas Present first takes Scrooge to see the Cratchit’s Christmas, which makes him realise the importance of family at this time, then continues this theme of company by showing him other scenes brought to life by Christmas spirit. For example, when the ghost takes him to a lighthouse, the poor workers there are described as having “horny hands”. This suggests that they have struggled through great hardships and have suffered more in their lives than Scrooge ever would, and yet their show of unison when they all sing together at Christmas let them disregard their struggles for a time. By comparing the Cratchits and these workers, Dickens shows how the poor could overcome their lack of materialistic value and settle for things of emotional value.

One member of the Cratchit family who strongly highlights the struggles of the poor is Tiny Tim, whose hand is described as a “withered little hand,” suggesting it has prematurely withered like a flower with no light. As the word “withered” has connotations of a flower, to me, this could perhaps be seen as a metaphor for how something beautiful had been hindered and killed by the tight-fistedness of the of the rich in society, which is something that Dickens was strongly trying to convey in this novella. Light is often a symbol of hope, so this flower could be shrivelled due to a lack of light, which is the lack of generosity from the upper classes. Dickens may have intended “withered little” as a juxtaposition, as we would normally associate “withered” with old age and “little” with childhood. This contrast highlights how wrong it is that an innocent child should be so shunned by society due to his wealth and status, and this demonstrates Dicken’s frustration over the inequality.

Sample Answer Commentary

This is a very confident answer which shows a great knowledge of the text. References are judiciously chosen and used to exemplify some very thoughtful points. The response begins by focusing on some of the stylistic choices made by the writer in order to convey the manner of Ignorance and Want. Very quickly, the student gets to a salient point about how Dickens uses these characters to make a moral point.

As the essay moves on to the rest of the novel, some very precise moments are selected to show the depiction of the Cratchits. In each case, the student links these examples to the wider issues at stake in the text, and in doing so, shows a perceptive grasp of Dickens’ messages. This is a very strong essay which easily warrants a mark in Level 6.

Below is a student-friendly mark scheme.

- Level 1 (0-5 marks) – SIMPLE ANSWERS
These are brief answers which don’t really answer the question in any depth. They might be re-tellings of the stories. Often poorly phrased.

- Level 2 (6-10 marks) – RELEVANT ANSWERS
These are answers which do answer the question in a basic way. They are often 'PE' answers – ie, there are several POINTS made, followed by EXAMPLES, but not much in the way of discussion or detail.
- Level 3 (11-15 marks) – EXPLAINED ANSWERS
These are straightforward answers which make sense and have some detail. They are often a collection of PEE paragraphs (POINT-EVIDENCE-EXPLANATION).
- Level 4 (16-20 marks) – CLEAR ANSWERS
These are essays which have some detail where several sensible points are being made. There is a bit more depth in the explanation of points. The phrasing makes clear sense.
- Level 5 (21-25 marks) – THOUGHTFUL ANSWERS
These types of answer show the examiner that once or twice there are moments of genuine thought, where a really good point is being made. Phrasing is clear.
- Level 6 (26-30 marks) – DETAILED/PERCEPTIVE ANSWERS
These answers have one or two moments of impressive points. They are conceptual – they link to the wider ideas of the text and argue points convincingly. Phrasing is fluent.