

## What **atmosphere** does Dickens create in *A Christmas Carol*?

When Scrooge awoke, it was so dark, that looking out of bed, he could scarcely distinguish the transparent window from the opaque walls of his chamber. He was endeavouring to pierce the darkness with his ferret eyes, when the chimes of a neighbouring church struck the four quarters. So he listened for the hour.

To his great astonishment the heavy bell went on from six to seven, and from seven to eight, and regularly up to twelve; then stopped. Twelve. It was past two when he went to bed. The clock was wrong. An icicle must have got into the works. Twelve.

He touched the spring of his repeater, to correct this most preposterous clock. Its rapid little pulse beat twelve: and stopped.

"Why, it isn't possible," said Scrooge, "that I can have slept through a whole day and far into another night. It isn't possible that anything has happened to the sun, and this is twelve at noon."

The idea being an alarming one, he scrambled out of bed, and groped his way to the window. He was obliged to rub the frost off with the sleeve of his dressing-gown before he could see anything; and could see very little then. All he could make out was, that it was still very foggy and extremely cold, and that there was no noise of people running to and fro, and making a great stir, as there unquestionably would have been if night had beaten off bright day, and taken possession of the world. This was a great relief, because "three days after sight of this First of Exchange pay to Mr. Ebenezer Scrooge or his order," and so forth, would have become a mere United States' security if there were no days to count by.

As *A Christmas Carol* is irrevocably a text about change the **atmosphere** created by Dickens is mercurial and multifaceted, at times, tension is the predominant mood in the text but there are also fluctuations between **atmospheres** of bleakness and doom and glimmers of hope or emancipation.

This extract arguably epitomises the **atmosphere** of **tension** that Dickens weaves into the text, as Scrooge lies in bed waiting for the arrival of the first spirit the abject **apprehension** he feels becomes evident. Stave 2 begins in the midst of the night and the baleful nature of the darkness is exacerbated by Scrooge "endeavouring to pierce the darkness" as the verb "pierce" gives a material and tangible quality to the dark which creates a feeling of suffocation and entrapment. From the offset creates connotations of threat and evil to begin crafting an air of **apprehension**. Temporally, this entrapment is amplified by Dickens's reference to the church bells, the "chimes of a neighbouring church" are used to portray the passing and stalling of time. Although the bell rang "regularly up to twelve" it then stopped, and this temporal stasis is reiterated in the repeating short sentence "Twelve". Both the repetition and short, fragmented sentences create a sense of panic and elongate the **tension** that comes with waiting and anticipation. Moreover, the "church" bells could be symbolic of God watching over Scrooge, for a devout Victorian audience this would add to the feeling of a heavy **atmosphere** hanging over this paused moment in time as it amplifies the sense of pressure. It seems Scrooge also succumbs to this amalgamation of pressure and fear as he sporadically continues to repeat "twelve" indicating a loss of composure. Symbolically, it is the night that is elongated through this stalling of time Dickens may have intended to enclose the text within the ominous **atmosphere** of uncertainty that darkness brings. Therefore, he creates an all-encompassing **atmosphere** of fear, **tension** and anticipation that is imbued with the implied presence of God.

Moreover, the text is punctuated with a motif of **fog** that is used to echo the nature of Scrooge at different points in the text, it follows that the **atmosphere** created by Dickens works to encompass the character of **Scrooge**. Beginning in a setting of "**fog** and darkness thickened" the reader is introduced to the character of **Scrooge** as a protagonist so bleak his dismal nature pollutes his surroundings. The pertinent use of pathetic fallacy becomes crucial to the creation of the **atmosphere** in the text as the "**fog**" frequently referenced has thematic significance that extends beyond the text; it could be a symbol of institutionalised oppression. As the text (and **Scrooge**) progresses, so does the presentation of **fog**, in Stave 5 as **Scrooge** abandons his misanthropic ways there is now "no **fog**, no mist; clear, bright, jovial". This creates an antithetical **atmosphere** of hope, clarity and joy which implies the innumerable positive repercussions that are borne out of Scrooge's moral redemption. The **fog** in London from 1873-1879 was responsible for hundreds of fatalities so this pathetic fallacy may be a reminder that both the weather and the rich have the capacity to kill. Consequently, this could be a criticism of the parsimonious upper classes of Dicken's contemporary readership and the detrimental effects their behaviour has on other members of society. In sum, Dickens creates a shift in **atmosphere** to articulate how if the upper-class individuals **Scrooge** serves to represent changed akin to **Scrooge**, then institutionalised oppression could be eradicated and a "jovial" society would be feasible.

The Ghost of Christmas yet to come crafts an archetypal ghost-like **atmosphere** of mystery and dread in order to make a powerful reference to **death**. This ghost, "shrouded in a deep black garment" is reminiscent of the grim reaper and thus serves to be a symbol of impending **death**. In this sense, the Ghost of Christmas yet to come could be said to personify the concept of memento mori, the notion that eventually, **death** will come to all. As this figure approached "slowly, gravely, silently" this could again be a metaphorical reminder of the inevitability of **death**. This personification gives an eerie sense of agency and power to **death**, it creates a "solemn dread" within Scrooge as he is reminded that he will with time succumb to a gloomy **death**. It could be said that the ghost is a microcosm for the bleak future of Victorian society if they do not change and make efforts to escape this bleakness. Thus, Dickens may have intended to elicit, through the desolate **atmosphere** that the notion of **death** creates, self-reflection in his readership. Consequently, Dickens uses an ominous and pallid **atmosphere** to highlight instead that compassion, empathy and agape should be fostered and prioritised by society in order to postpone the arrival of the eventual misery of **death**.

In conclusion, the prominent **atmosphere** created by Dickens is one of tension, darkness and gloom however it is subject to change throughout the text. Notably, the bleakness communicated through the motif of fog is eventually lifted, however this is dependent on Scrooge's transformation in the text. Moreover, there are nuances to the role an **atmosphere** of darkness created in the text, at the start it crafted a sense of tension and uncertainty whereas later in the text it was used to vocalise the inevitable notion of death.