

Sample Answer

Read the following extract from 'A Christmas Carol' (Stave One, pages 15-16)

In this extract, the Ghost of Jacob Marley has just appeared to Scrooge.

Scrooge was not much in the habit of cracking jokes, nor did he feel, in his heart, by any means waggish then. The truth is, that he tried to be smart, as a means of distracting his own attention, and keeping down his terror; for the spectre's voice disturbed the very marrow in his bones.

To sit, staring at those fixed glazed eyes, in silence for a moment, would play, Scrooge felt, the very deuce with him. There was something very awful, too, in the spectre's being provided with an internal atmosphere of its own. Scrooge could not feel it himself, but this was clearly the case; for though the Ghost sat perfectly motionless, its hair, and skirts, and tassels, were still agitated as by the hot vapour from an oven.

'You see this toothpick?' said Scrooge, returning quickly to the charge, for the reason just assigned; and wishing, though it were only for a second, to divert the vision's stony gaze from himself.

'I do,' replied the Ghost.

'You are not looking at it,' said Scrooge.

'But I see it,' said the Ghost 'notwithstanding.'

'Well!' returned Scrooge, 'I have but to swallow this, and be for the rest of my days persecuted by a legion of goblins, all of my creation. Humbug, I tell you – humbug!'

At this the spirit raised a frightful cry, and shook its chain with such a dismal and appalling noise. That Scrooge held on tight to his chair, to save himself from falling in a swoon. But how much greater was his horror, when the phantom taking off the bandage round its head, as if it were too warm to wear in-doors, its lower jaw dropped down upon its breast!

Scrooge fell upon his knees, and clasped his hands before his face.

Starting with this extract, explore how does Dickens creates a frightening atmosphere.

Write about:

- How Dickens creates a frightening atmosphere in this extract
- How Dickens creates a frightening atmosphere in the novel as a whole
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[30 marks]

AO4 [4 marks]

Sample Answer

AO3: Relevant reference to literary context

Dickens uses a range of techniques to create a frightening atmosphere in this scene and at other key points in the novel. He describes 'A Christmas Carol' as a 'Ghostly little book' in the Preface, and he uses some of the techniques of the Gothic genre which was popular in the Victorian period to contribute to this aspect of the novel.

AO2: Relevant terminology

AO2: Effective explanation of effect of technique

As established from the start of the novel, Dickens employs the intrusive narrator in the extract to explain and comment on Scrooge's behaviour. In this scene, and leading up to this extract, the main purpose of this is to contextualise his reactions as unusual, in order to highlight just how strange and frightening the situation is. The reader is shown Scrooge 'cracking jokes ... as a means of distracting his own attention', from which we are to infer that Scrooge is avoiding the situation because it is too terrible to face directly.

Dickens also uses physical description to show what Scrooge does rather than describing his emotions, in order to enable the reader to perceive the atmosphere through Scrooge. For example: 'Scrooge fell upon his knees, and clasped his hands before his face.' This straightforward description shows Scrooge's behaviour, but because the narrator has already made very clear what kind of man Scrooge is, the reader understands how unlikely such behaviour is for him. If Scrooge is frightened enough to act so humbly before the spirit, then the reader, too, experiences the fearful effects of the event.

AO1: Explanation of effect here builds neatly on the last paragraph

AO2: Effective use of subject terminology

A further way in which Dickens creates an atmosphere which would be particularly frightening for his contemporary audience is by using a semantic field referring to Hell and demons, e.g. 'deuce' and 'infernal'. Such words might frighten a Victorian audience who would be likely to fear the supernatural and the idea of punishment for sins in the afterlife. He employs a similar technique to describe the appearance of Ignorance and Want: 'where angels might have sat enthroned, devils lurked'. This again invokes the supernatural based on a Christian system of belief, combined with a Gothic style of writing which may well have disturbed the sensibilities of his audience.

AO3: Excellent references to cultural and literary context

Structurally, in this extract, Dickens makes use of sentence length to vary the pace and also to delay the more frightening parts of the narrative for maximum impact. For example, from 'You see this toothpick?' to 'Humbug!' there are several short sentences interspersed with much longer multi-clause sentences. This whole section is a relatively humorous exchange which serves as light relief to lessen the tension before the more serious conversation that follows.

AO2: Strong analysis of language and structure

In this more serious exchange, Dickens uses sensory imagery when the spectre 'raised a frightful cry and shook its chain with such a dismal and appalling noise'. The verbs 'raised' and 'shook' focus our attention on the specific actions taken by the ghost to produce the sounds and create a sense of action as well as using the sensory imagery of the sounds to impact visually and aurally on the reader. Sound is also a fundamental feature of the suspense created by Dickens when Scrooge hears Marley's chains before he sees them.

AO1: Strongly linked paragraphs

The use of sound (or its absence) to create a fearful atmosphere also features in Stave Four, but with a twist, as one of the ghosts of Christmas Yet to Come's most haunting trait is its silence, which introduces the core idea that it is unable to offer Scrooge direct answers, and that any such solutions must come from within. This is disturbing in a new way for Scrooge, once he reaches this point in the plot, and is perhaps symbolic of an indeterminate or unclear future – not yet determined for either us or Scrooge himself. The future is shown to be an empty void that can yet be filled.

AO2: Precise language analysis and subject terminology

AO1: Original interpretation

Dickens's creation of a frightening atmosphere is achieved in various ways throughout the novel, as it needs to be utilised in different ways at different points. While Scrooge needs a good scare at the beginning to make sure he takes the ghosts seriously, there are fewer truly frightening moments in the middle two staves as these are more moral lessons than cautionary ones. However, the horror of the last Ghost's appearance acts as the catalyst for Scrooge to change, and so it's vital for the narrative as a whole.

AO1: Original interpretation

Comment: Very High Level

An extremely insightful answer showing a clear grasp of the novel's intention and place in the genre. The references to context are concise and perceptive and quotations are well-used and analysed. Links are made between the extract and elsewhere in the novel to show a cogent understanding of the whole text and the author's intentions for it.