In A Christmas Carol, an allegory of spiritual values versus material ones, Charles Dickens shows Scrooge having to learn the lesson of the spirit of Christmas, facing the reality of his own callous attitude to others, and reforming himself as a compassionate human being. The reader is shown his harshness in the office, where he will not allow Bob Cratchit enough coal to warm his work cubicle and begrudges his employee a day off for Christmas, even claiming that his clerk is exploiting him. In the scene from the past at Fezziwig’s warehouse, Scrooge becomes aware of the actions of a conscientious, caring employer and feels his first twinge of conscience. The author suggests an origin for Scrooge’s indifference to others as Scrooge is portrayed as a neglected child, the victim of a harsh father intent on denying him a trip home for the holidays and only reluctantly relenting.

The ghost of Marley teaches his former partner the lesson of materialism, as Marley is condemned to drag an enormous chain attached to cash boxes: “I wear the chain I forged in life,” the ghost explains. “I made it link by link.” Marley warns Scrooge that he is crafting a similar fate for himself and that the three spirits are coming to give him a chance to change. Marley is filled with regret for good deeds not done. This theme is repeated when the first spirit exposes Scrooge to phantoms wailing in agony, many of whom Scrooge recognizes. The phantoms suffer because they now see humans who need their help, but they are unable to do anything: It is too late; they have missed their opportunity.

The novel contains important social commentary. As the two gentlemen are collecting for the poor on Christmas Eve, Scrooge contemptuously asks, “Are there no prisons?” One of the gentlemen says that many of the poor, rather than go to the detested workhouses, cruel and inadequate residences for the destitute, would prefer to die. Scrooge replies that “they had better do it, and decrease the surplus population,” a reference to Thomas Robert Malthus’ An Essay on the Principle of Population (1798), a treatise predicting that population would soon outstrip food production and result in a “surplus population” for which society could not provide. Later, in response to Scrooge’s plea to allow Tiny Tim to live, the Ghost of Christmas Present throws Scrooge’s words back at him: “What then? If he be like to die, he had better do it, and decrease the surplus population.”

Observing two ragged children clinging to the skirts of the Ghost of Christmas Present, Scrooge asks about them and is told, “They are Man’s. . . . This boy is Ignorance. This girl is Want.” The spirit has a warning: “Beware them both, and all 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.” This warning suggests that those who do not share in the prosperity may in time prove dangerous to society. The revolution in France half a century earlier may have been on Dickens’ mind. An important idea that the author stresses is that humans are responsible for their own destiny, both as individuals and as a group. He is writing in the tradition of a religion that teaches that people will one day have to answer for their failure to fulfill their responsibility.

This story opens on Christmas Eve in the office of Scrooge, a miserly Victorian businessman. Opposed to Christmas as pointless frivolity, Scrooge refuses to make a contribution to Christmas charities, begrudges his employee Bob Cratchit a holiday on Christmas day, and rejects his nephew’s Christmas greeting with the now-famous phrase “Bah! Humbug!”

Returning to his lonely and desolate dwelling, Scrooge is confronted by the ghost of Jacob Marley, his former partner, who promises that he will be visited by three spirits. The first of these, the Ghost of Christmas Past, shows Scrooge scenes from his lonely boyhood at boarding school; from the lively and festive Christmas celebration of Mr. Fezziwig, the man to whom Scrooge had been apprenticed; and of his final encounter with his fiancee, who releases him from their engagement because she realizes that he already loves money more than he loves her.

The next spirit, the Ghost of Christmas Present, shows him a number of celebrations of Christmas, most memorably that of the Cratchit family, who are jovial and happy in spite of their meager income and the threat that their youngest child, Tiny Tim, will die of a disease that has already crippled him. Finally, the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come shows Scrooge scenes of his own death, lamented by no one--his servants have even stolen his bedclothes before his burial--and of the Cratchit family mourning the death of Tiny Tim. Moved by these visions, Scrooge awakens on Christmas morning a new person and engages in a whirlwind of generosity and good fellowship.

A Christmas Carol is the most notable example of the Victorian “Christmas book,” a type of short, attractively printed book designed to be given as a Christmas gift and usually embodying the themes of generosity and joy associated with the season. The degree to which this story and its characters have remained popular indicates how well Dickens succeeded in this genre.