

## **ENGLISH B HL - EXTENDED ESSAY**

**Title:** 'Christmas Eve' as a symbol for exploring social responsibility and the value of life in  
A Christmas Carol and The Greatest Gift

**Research Question:** To what extent do Philip Van Doren Stern in The Greatest Gift and  
Charles Dickens in A Christmas Carol utilize the 'Christmas Eve' as a symbol reflecting  
distinct views on social responsibility and the value of life?

**Subject:** English B (Category 3- Literature)

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## A. Introduction

Christmas is well-known for its celebration of Jesus Christ's birth and salvation. Rather than just a celebration, it functions as a symbolic tool in literature. Writers usually use 'Christmas Eve' to demonstrate the moment of thematic crises. *A Christmas Carol* (1843) by Charles Dickens is one of the notable Christmas literature examples. This novella tells the story of Ebenezer Scrooge and his transformation at Christmas Eve, besides critiquing Victorian society about inequality, institutional indifference, and selfishness. Later a century, Philip Van Doren Stern published the short novella, *The Greatest Gift* (1943). It explains the miserable life of George Pratt and his salvation on Christmas Eve by a stranger. Also, Stern satirizes American society through concepts like materialism, individualistic ambition with the value of community and human life. Set during Christmas time, both texts underline historical context, promote social responsibility, and strengthen the value of life.

In *A Christmas Carol*, Dickens highlights the Victorian poverty and workhouse system in London. Charles Booth's survey corroborates that 31% of Londoners lived in poverty. Poverty intensified, resulting in the Victorian workhouse system (established by the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act), meaning that destitutes were provided food and shelter under prison-like conditions. So, Ebenezer Scrooge is used to portray a society that prioritizes wealth over compassion in an economically individualistic and Malthusian Victorian England. In *The Greatest Gift*, Stern showcases 1940s America as marked by psychological economic and status anxiety. After the Great Depression, 68% of Americans supported World War II mobilization, also verified by Gallup's polls. This created reduced unemployment rates and promoted the American Dream. The American Dream states that in a culture, success defines a person's value and failure reflects one's personal inadequacy. So, George

Pratt represents an overwhelmed individual due to post-Depression and the fear of economic insignificance.

The research question that will be analyzed is: **“To what extent do Philip Van Doren Stern in *The Greatest Gift* and Charles Dickens in *A Christmas Carol* utilize the ‘Christmas Eve’ as a symbol reflecting distinct views on social responsibility and the value of life?”**

In both novellas, authors utilize ‘Christmas Eve’ as a symbolic catalyst and liminal turning point for protagonists’ moral crisis and conflict before their redemption. While Dickens emphasizes social responsibility through the satire of Victorian wealth gap, Stern highlights it through the socioeconomic insecurity of 1940s America. Moreover, Dickens addresses the value of life by displaying that a meaningful existence comes from compassion, not wealth. Stern, however, expresses the worth of life by foregrounding the significance of human interdependence. Hence, due to novellas’ distinct historical settings, they show different creative thinking on the concepts of social responsibility and life's worth.

This essay provides a comparative literary analysis through a gathered up close reading of novellas with historical contextualization of Victorian England and 1940s America. Primarily, peer-reviewed journals (JSTOR) and academic presses were used for historical interpretations, which were cross-checked to maintain a precise investigation. Then, authoritative editions of primary passages were utilized for their thematic pertinence to ‘Christmas Eve’s’ liminal symbolic framework. In addition, secondary sources allowed critical and historical frameworks for interpreting each writer’s distinct thoughts on social responsibility and the value of life. At last, to pursue an accurate examination, the web sources were verified through institutional affiliations.

## **B. Analysis**

### **B.1. The Symbolic Function of ‘Christmas Eve’ in Awakening Social Responsibility**

In this section, close reading techniques will be applied to see how the symbol of ‘Christmas Eve’ functions in awakening social responsibility. Each protagonist faces distinct moments of crises on Christmas Eve. Firstly, the portrayal of George’s existential despair in *The Greatest Gift* will be discussed. Then, Scrooge’s self-made psychological and moral isolation in *A Christmas Carol* will be covered. Lastly, both texts will be compared to comprehend how each writer uses ‘Christmas Eve’ as a symbolic tool to emphasize social responsibility.

#### **B.1.a. The Greatest Gift**

Stern initiates the novella with a vivid description of ‘Baileyville’ on Christmas Eve and dull George Pratt: “The little town... was bright with coloured Christmas lights. But George Pratt did not see them.” (Stern 1). The juxtaposition of the scene and protagonist creates a visual and psychological contrast between the cheerful town and concerned George. The words ‘bright’ and ‘light’ not only make reference to the ambiance of the town, but also refer to the Christmas spirit, happiness, and unity. The phrase ‘George Pratt did not see them’ illustrates that George was unable to capture the fullness of town. George’s inability to see the ‘Christmas lights’ demonstrates the personal crisis he experiences on Christmas Eve. George feeling like a social burden due to society’s prioritization of material success not only stays as a personal crisis, but gradually evolves into a social responsibility that George fails to fulfil. Here, George’s social responsibility is to contribute to the town’s well-being and accept the importance of one’s life to others. Therefore, Stern uses the symbol of ‘Christmas Eve’ to form contrast between what Christmas actually represents and how George mentally feels.

While 'Christmas Eve' traditionally stands for joy, warmth, and hope, George experiences exactly the opposite: despair, isolation, and disillusionment. This creates a dramatic symbolic contrast that strengthens George's misery to be more intense. Hence, Stern utilizes the symbol 'Christmas Eve' to display the metaphorical meaning of the night, besides showing the expected happiness in Christmas and the emotional darkness of George.

The following quote emphasizes George's lowest emotional point and how much he feels worthless. "I'm stuck here in this mudhole for life... I never did anything really useful or interesting... In fact, I wish I'd never been born!" (Stern 3). Stern uses the metaphor 'mudhole' to reinforce the stagnation in George's life on Christmas Eve. The word itself reflects how George feels trapped, stuck and unable to progress. He reckons he hasn't accomplished anything by saying 'I never did anything really useful or interesting'. In fact, he kept the bank functioning, helped maintain economic stability, saved his sibling's life and transformed Mary's life (Stern 5, 8–10, 11). So, this scene foregrounds another moment of crisis in George's life. It is a crisis of failing to recognize social responsibility. George's isolation and existential despair represents his interconnectedness within society. In consequence, Stern uses 'Christmas Eve' as a symbol to illustrate the moment of moral crisis, cognitive awareness, and realization of interconnectedness. George venting his despair on the bridge foreshadows the idea that later he will recognize his social responsibilities since 'Christmas Eve' forces George to confront them. The symbol functions as a bridge between cognitive awareness and social responsibility.

#### **B.1.b. A Christmas Carol**

Marley's declaration showcases Victorian society's conflict between social responsibility and economic self-interest: "Mankind was my business. The common welfare was my business; charity, mercy, forbearance, and benevolence were all my business" (Dickens 23). Jacob Marley, who is Scrooge's deceased business partner, comes back to warn Scrooge and initiate

his moral awakening (Dickens 22). Marley seeing 'mankind' and 'common welfare' as a task displays the metaphorical meaning behind 'business'. Even though business refers to a commercial activity, Dickens uses 'business' to reinforce the idea of serving humanity. It also shows the contradiction between Victorian capitalism and Christian charity. Despite Victorian capitalism supporting earning money, Christian charity means helping the poor, being compassionate, and sharing. Dickens highlights that even if people earn money, they should not forget their responsibility to others. However, on 'Christmas Eve', even when Christian charity is most expected, Scrooge personifies pure capitalism by rejecting beggars and counting money instead (Dickens 13). Hence, the crisis between capitalism and Christian charity reveals the Victorian moral crisis. This establishes 'Christmas Eve' as a judgement moment because it is the time when society's moral expectations conflict with Scrooge's behaviour. Therefore, 'Christmas Eve' is used to make him confront the loss of social responsibility. In addition, Dickens utilizes it to satire Victorian society's prioritization of economic business instead of moral business. According to Dickens, social responsibility requires valuing human welfare above financial gain. To display this, he leans on the historical context of Victorian England and the symbol of 'Christmas Eve.'

Through the end of Stave I, Scrooge uses a cold and dismissive tone to reflect institutional indifference toward the poor. His asking of "Are there no prisons?... And the Union workhouses?" (Dickens 50) shows 'Christmas Eve' exposing Victorian social attitudes toward poverty. His dismissive tone of rhetorical questions create the impression of unconcern and recklessness toward the poor. Both questions having an identical parallel structure demonstrates the cold and mechanical thinking in Scrooge's mind. Scrooge's primary rejection of making donations for the poor (Dickens 13) also supports the contradiction between his economic individualism and his social responsibility. This corresponds with the 1834 Poor Law Ideology, highlighting that poor people already have

‘enough help’. In addition, the institutional vocabulary such as ‘prisons’ and ‘workhouses’ symbolizes the Victorian welfare system and dehumanization. Furthermore, Scrooge’s words also align with Thomas Malthus. His theory states that too many poor people cause overpopulation, that helping them would make society even worse. Therefore, Dickens uses the symbol ‘Christmas Eve’ to show the moment to expose Scrooge’s moral failure since it clashes with expected Christian compassion.

### **B.1.c. Comparison**

Both authors use ‘Christmas Eve’ to reflect the meaning of the night and the moment of crisis. However, these crises rely on different historical and ideological contexts. In *The Greatest Gift*, George feels worthless like a burden on society. He sees life as meaningless until a stranger shows up. Their encounter happens on Christmas Eve. With their meeting, the stranger reveals George’s interconnectedness. Hence, George’s crisis comes from existential and psychological breakdown. On the other hand, in *A Christmas Carol*, Scrooge refuses social responsibility, sees the poor as a surplus population, and represents capitalist individualism all his life until Jacob Marley’s ghosts come. This is the moment of crisis on Christmas Eve, when the moral and social failures exposed are especially evident.

While Stern presents social responsibility as unrecognized, Dickens makes it neglected by rejecting duties toward society. This displays that Stern sees social responsibility as a natural reality one must come to realise. However, Dickens sees it as a duty one must choose to accept. Furthermore, Stern presents an individual crisis of self-worth in which social significance remains unrecognized. Dickens focuses on a critique of capitalist values that dehumanize social responsibility. This also relies on their distinct historical contexts. Stern’s novella describes 1940s America by showing the community values at that time. Such includes small-town solidarity, collective effort, and community support. So, Stern uses ‘Christmas Eve’ as a symbol to show people may feel worthless, but in reality they are

indispensable to society. In contrast, Dickens tells the Victorian era by delving into poor laws and workhouses. He states that society has forgotten humanity for the sake of money. Therefore, he uses 'Christmas Eve' to reflect a moment of crisis.

## **B.2. 'Christmas Eve' as a Liminal Turning Point in Redefining Life's Value**

In this section, 'Christmas Eve' is used as a liminal turning point where the protagonists' perception of life vitally changes. The metaphorical use of 'Christmas Eve' demonstrates the point of transition where the protagonists re-evaluate what makes life meaningful. In *The Greatest Gift*, George shifts from existential desperation to realizing that his life also touches others. Nonetheless, in *A Christmas Carol*, Scrooge shifts from valuing wealth and economic stability to valuing generosity and compassion. Moreover, both authors highlight the role of community and historical context in defining life's worth. At last, using comparative literary analysis, different interpretations of the redefinition of life will be examined.

### **B.2.a. The Greatest Gift**

At the end, George realizes the value of his life standing on the bridge on Christmas Eve. His continuous cry marks displays his eagerness for living: "I want to live again. I want to live again." (Stern 12). The repetition of 'I want to live again' shows the panicked voice of George. He wishes the opposite of what he had wished earlier, showing the metamorphosis in his character. Even though George had wished to be non-existent earlier (Stern 2), after seeing what the town would be like if he had never been born, he realizes the value of his life. This illustrates George's rethinking of living due to recognizing the value of life. Moreover, using simple and childlike wording such as 'I want' showcases that George is speaking from the heart rather than thinking rationally. Using a childlike language at the turning point of the

story proposes the preciousness of life that George yearns for. In addition, Stern using ‘want’ in present tense conveys an active and rapid desire for living. Therefore, Stern exemplifies that although George’s life seems ordinary in such a small town, it has invisible communities and relationships that keep him there. After seeing a version of the town in which he had never been born, where the Building and Loan collapses, his brother dies, and several townspeople suffer diminished lives (Stern 5,8), George recognizes the worth of living. He also realizes that living contributes to others’ well-being by strengthening compassion and assistance. Moreover, in 1940s America, a cultural belief that everyone matters for the stability of the town and family was popular. Due to America's historical context, George’s declaration, ‘I want to live again’ reflects how everyone is essential for other’s living. Ergo, George recognized the value of life on Christmas Eve courtesy of the stranger. Dickens uses the liminal turning point ‘Christmas Eve’ to reflect the transformation that George goes through. George’s focus shifts from his old life into a new understanding and perception of life. He now sees life as something that is irreplaceable and worthy to spend.

### **B.2.b. A Christmas Carol**

By the end of the novella and Scrooge’s vision, he remembers that he can still change himself. The following quote showcases the turning point where he kneels before his own gravestone and pleads: “I am not the man I was. I will not be the man I must have been but for this intercourse” (Dickens 84). Here, Dickens creates a contrast between past, present, and future. Him using ‘I was’ and ‘I must have been’ reflects the past and shows Scrooge’s old self. ‘I am’ is the present tense and displays Scrooge’s current identity that has initiated a shift. It also reflects Scrooge’s craving for an instant inner transformation. Lastly, ‘I will not be’ uses future tense and describes his newly-formed being. This is due to Scrooge’s metamorphosis that happens especially on ‘Christmas Eve’. Additionally, ‘this intercourse’

refers to his interaction with the Spirit. The use of clinical language shows that the interaction was formal. This makes the emotional confession more striking and underlines how powerful Scrooge's vision has been. Furthermore, Scrooge's confession implies that even a strict Victorian traditionalist can be sorry when confronting the end of his life. Dickens conveys that in a Victorian era, people can change if they transform their lives from taking benefits to being responsible for others. Dickens describing the transformation of Scrooge does not happen due to fortune. Dickens makes reference to 'Christmas Eve's metaphorical meaning of symbolizing the start and end of something. As a result, Dickens implies that 'Christmas Eve' works as the liminal moment between Scrooge's death and rebirth. Scrooge realizing the value of life reflects his rebirth.

### **B.2.c. Comparison**

Stern and Dickens utilize 'Christmas Eve' as a liminal turning point, relating to the transformation of protagonists. Even though initially both characters measure worth through material or external success, 'Christmas Eve' forces them to confront a world where their existence is meaningless. Their confrontation leads to the derealization and redefinition of life's value. This happens through social impact and relationships. In *The Greatest Gift*, George redefines life's value from personal achievements instead of human connections. Here, 'Christmas Eve' exhibits how his absence would erase the positive spillover effects in other people's lives. The focus is not moral failure but lack of self-recognition. Hence, George's transformation comes through realizing the interconnectedness of human lives. Stern describes the idea that life gains utility through relational significance and unseen impact. By contrast, In *A Christmas Carol*, Scrooge redefines life's value from economic productivity which is also a social responsibility. His visions display that wealth without human connections culminates in social emptiness, besides inner desolation. Dickens uses

‘Christmas Eve’ to highlight moral accountability to society, especially the poor. Scrooge’s metamorphosis is driven by fear of a socially meaningless death. Dickens underlines the key idea of life gaining worth through community, generosity, and compassion. Therefore, the liminal turning point ‘Christmas Eve’ serves as an existential realization in *The Greatest Gift* and as a moral awakening in *A Christmas Carol*.

### **B.3. The Extent to Which ‘Christmas Eve’ Enables Transformation in Each Text**

‘Christmas Eve’ functions as a narrative device through which both authors explore social responsibility and the value of life. However, the significance of ‘Christmas Eve’ differs in each text since it enables transition of protagonists to distinct extents. This section moves beyond symbolism (B1) and turning point (B2) to assess the casual impact of transition from old understanding to new perception of life. So, the degree of dependency each protagonist has on ‘Christmas Eve’ will be investigated to see how powerful ‘Christmas Eve’ clearly causes change. In *The Greatest Gift*, Stern uses ‘Christmas Eve’ to allow self-realization about life’s value. Nevertheless, In *A Christmas Carol*, ‘Christmas Eve’ directly forces moral transformation. Out of extent, both authors ultimately show that life gains meaning through social responsibility and relationships.

#### **B.3.a. The Greatest Gift**

The following quote displays the stranger’s declaration when he speaks to George at his moment of realization: “You had the greatest gift of all conferred upon you — the gift of life, of being a part of this world and taking a part in it.” (Stern 11). Stern alludes to the novella’s title with the symbol of ‘the greatest gift’. The allusion represents the existence itself, the

opportunity to participate in the world, and the chance to form relationships by influencing others. Here, Stern reframes 'life' as presence and connection, instead of reevaluating it as achievement. The title allusion also emphasizes that George's transformation arises from changing his perception and not his attitude. The word 'gift' Stern uses, means a thing given willingly to each other without payment. So, the stranger makes George recognize that his life is a 'gift' which is something that is not related with financial matters. George realizes that his value comes from simple existing rather than having an impact on others. Moreover, the didactic tone that Stern utilizes states the clear tone of the moral of the message. 'You had the greatest gift of all conferred upon you', this phrase sounds like a direct lesson being taught. The stranger explicitly tells George what he should comprehend. Hence, it presents a moral truth rather than a sole description. As a result, 'Christmas Eve' works as a facilitator awareness. George's comprehension of social responsibility and redefinition of life depends on realization. Here, 'Christmas Eve' enables transformation to a moderate but significant extent. It exhibits inherent value instead of creating it.

### **B.3.b. A Christmas Carol**

Marley's Ghost sayings to Scrooge on Christmas Eve highlights the use of that night while mentioning to Scrooge's transformation: "I am here to-night to warn you, that you have yet a chance and hope of escaping my fate." (Dickens 24). The direct reference to 'to-night' underlines the importance of that night which is 'Christmas Eve'. Scrooge's transformation initiates thanks to this warning. It proves that Dickens uses 'Christmas Eve' as a direct trigger of change. In addition, Christmas Eve does not work as a coercive catalyst. The transformation of Scrooge is not automatic but creates the conditions for it to happen. The words 'a chance and hope' explicitly proves this by representing redemption opportunities. Furthermore, Dickens uses a didactic tone to reinforce the significance of Scrooge's change.

Since this scene serves as a turning point for Scrooge, Dickens supported it with a clear and general tone rather than using grandiose expressions. Using the words ‘to warn you’ which displays strong evidence can be given as concrete evidence to Dicken’s imperative and instructive language. So, this argument leaves no room for debate and ambiguity since the lesson is clearly stated. Therefore, ‘Christmas Eve’ allows for a great extension of transformation because it functions as the crucial catalyst that makes Scrooge’s change possible. Even though ‘Christmas Eve’ creates the opportunity for metamorphosis, Scrooge’s transformation mainly depends on his own decision to accept and act upon this moral inspiration.

### **B.3.c. Comparison**

‘Christmas Eve’ is used in each story to give a common moral message. However, the process of explaining the extent of ‘Christmas Eve’ differs in each text. In *The Greatest Gift*, ‘Christmas Eve’ enables a reflective setting for realization rather than compelling moral transformation. George sees the world where he has never been born. This showcases the negative consequences of his absence. With this, George eventually realizes the value of life and social impact. Thus, Stern displays George’s transformation as something internal and perceptual. The extent in which Stern conveys the symbol ‘Christmas Eve’ is therefore moderate. Because ‘Christmas Eve’ reveals the value of life rather than creating change. In contrast, in *A Christmas Carol*, Dickens uses ‘Christmas Eve’ as a direct catalyst for metamorphosis. Due to supernatural visitations such as Ghost Marley and the three spirits, Scrooge is forced to confront his past, present, and future. The night certainly enables a shift from a selfish man to a generous man. So, his transformation is sudden and externally triggered. The extent in which Dickens conveys the symbol ‘Christmas Eve’ is therefore direct and very strong.

## C. Conclusion

Both *The Greatest Gift* and *A Christmas Carol* utilize 'Christmas Eve' as a central literary device to explore social responsibility and the value of life. The section B1, focuses on what 'Christmas Eve' represents symbolically. 'Christmas Eve' symbolizes a moment where the protagonists confront the social consequences of their lives. These social consequences arise from each texts' distinct historical context. While Stern's novella describes post-Depression, Dickens's novella deals with Victorian England. Despite the differences in historical setting, both stories reflect a shared message. In B1, the message that was discussed is relationships and responsibility towards others. Furthermore, in section B2, 'Christmas Eve' acts as a threshold moment where the protagonists reassess their understanding of life's worth. It primarily describes how 'Christmas Eve' becomes the moment where understanding changes. Since the actual meaning of 'Christmas Eve' is rebirth and salvation, both authors use it exactly as it is to show protagonists old versus new perception of life. So, rather than conveying the symbolism of 'Christmas Eve', Stern and Dickens highlight its function to reinforce the message of redefinition of life. In both texts, it is utilized as a bridge between stagnation and rebirth. Whereas George recognizes the importance of his existence within the community, Scrooge realizes the emptiness of wealth without compassion. Lastly, in section B3, the extent of transformation of protagonists that 'Christmas Eve' provides is analyzed. Since 'Christmas Eve' represents rebirth, Stern and Dickens use it to solidify the psychological and behavioural transformation that the protagonists undergo. In *The Greatest Gift*, 'Christmas Eve' allows for a realization spontaneously. Stern fictionalizes the stranger merely to help George comprehend his significant societal responsibilities and the value of life. Thus, George's transformation happens naturally for him to perceive the already existing matters. By contrast, in *A Christmas Carol*, 'Christmas Eve' is utilized to trigger

transformation through supernatural intervention and moral dilemma. Dickens presents Marley's Ghost and the three spirits to impose a behavioural change in Scrooge.

In general, Stern and Dickens use the symbol 'Christmas Eve' to underscore social interdependence, social obligations, and the inherent value of life. Still, 'Christmas Eve' serves meaning to different extents. Whereas Stern utilizes it as a moderate symbol of a reflective moment of self-realization, Dickens uses it as a strong catalyst for ethical awakening.

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