Starting with this extract, explore how Dickens presents the suffering of the poor in A Christmas Carol.

Write about:

• how Dickens presents the suffering of the poor in this extract

• how Dickens presents the suffering of the poor in the novel as a whole.

Throughout ‘A Christmas Carol’, Dickens delves into the suffering of the poor, and what part the more privileged members of society have to play in causing this. Dickens uses the characters of Scrooge and the Ghost of Christmas Present, to explore how much responsibility the rich feel for causing this suffering, shown by Scrooge, and how much blame should actually be placed on them, argued by the Ghost of Christmas Present. By doing this, Dickens uses the Ghost of Christmas Present as a mouthpiece for social reform, using A Christmas Carol as a didactic tale to the upper classes, instructing them to care for the less fortunate members of society.

Dickens presents the suffering of the poor as a result of a neglect of the lower classes from the more fortunate members of society. When interacting with Scrooge, the Ghost of Christmas Present produces 2 children, calling them “Man’s”, labelling the children “Ignorance” and “Want”. The names are symbolic, as “Ignorance” and “Want” are used to describe the current attitudes of the upper classes. “Ignorance” refers to a lack of care towards the lower classes, seeing their plight as not their problem. “Want” suggests the other desires that the rich strive to achieve – in Scrooge’s case, it would represent his want for money. The Ghost of Christmas Past uses these children as metaphors to represent the desires of the upper classes being focused on other things. These children are presented as “ragged” and “scowling”, and through Dickens’ representation of these children this way, Dickens presents the neglect of the poor as evil, causing them to suffer due to the upper classes not helping. Dickens was a social reformer, who strived to make sure all members of society were represented and cared for. As a social reformer, Dickens would have shared similar viewpoints to the Ghost of Christmas Present, feeling that the rich were not doing enough to support the less fortunate members of society. Dickens uses A Christmas Carol to present this viewpoint, urging the rich to do more to reduce the class gap, and make society more equal.

Dickens explores the suffering of the poor as a result of the upper classes seeing the poorer classes as pawns, with only monetary value, instead of recognising them as real people. At the start of the novella, in his interaction with the charity men, Scrooge describes how he “can’t afford to make idle people happy”. Scrooge here suggests that he sees everything as an investment, including the poorer members of society, who he describes as “idle”. By using the verb “afford”, Scrooge feels that the poorer classes offer nothing to society, and therefore he cannot give his money to people who do not do anything. Through his investment viewpoint, since the poor in his opinion offer nothing to society, he feels that his money would be wasted on supporting these people. At the time of writing, Scrooge would have written to an upper class audience, who may have agreed with scrooge. However, through Scrooge’s progression in the story, and his eventual willingness to raise Bob Cratchit’s salary, and become a better person, Dickens shows that the rich should be giving to the poor – and that the lower classes are just as important as the richer members of society.

Dickens also shows the poor as suffering due to the expectations placed on them by the upper classes. When being informed of the plight that the poorer members of society face, Scrooge questions “are there no prisons”, and asks whether the “union workhouses are… still in operation”. Scrooge here expects the lower classes to be in prison (for being unable to pay debts), or in workhouses (because they have nowhere else to go). Scrooge fails to recognise the part he has to play in supporting the less fortunate members of society, and does not realise that another support system for the poor is for the richer members of society to help, and support those less fortunate. By doing this, Dickens aims to show the upper class contemporary audience their failures in not supporting those less fortunate in society, and makes them to realise that they should offer help for the poor. Dickens sees the suffering of the poor as a result of the rich not expecting that they have an involvement in empowering the lower classes. As a social reformer, Dickens would have been a strong advocate for this, and would’ve wanted his didactic tale to teach the upper classes to support the lower classes, just as Scrooge “endeavour[s] to support [Bob Crachit’s] strugging family”.