

The Haunted Universe of Dickens in *A Christmas Carol*

*There are many more things in heaven and earth Horatio, than are dreamt of
in your philosophy.*

Hamlet, Act I, Scene 5

I want to make your flesh creep—Fat Boy.

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Abstract

The paper deals with the way Dickens presents the concepts of social responsibility, self-transformation, western time, literary phantoms, civil society and unequal distribution of wealth in A Christmas Carol. Dickens uses the literary phantom both as narrative device and ventriloquizing moralism to campaign for the rights of the poor and bring about reformed thinking amongst the smug English well-to-do classes. Obviously Dickens speaks in the authorial voice and also through Marley and the three ghosts. By looping time Dickens presents two dimensions of dynamic present, a nostalgic past and a troubled future. He uses the literary ghost to sermonize about the ill effects of the capitalist economy, the self-made individual and the exemplary poor of Victorian society. The autodidactic nature of character transformation in the protagonist is less orthodox Christianity and more humanistic realism. It is not through belief in Christ but an understanding of past and future that Scrooge is able to change his destiny. However Dickens is

very much rooted in the nation and national identity privileging imperialist England over the colonial subject. The passionate sentimentality and spectral surprises allow the story to remain indubitably Dickensian in nature and leave a haunting residue even after 150 years of its writing.

In a world where images from the Internet, telecommunications, cinematography and the global media haunt us, where bigotry and condescension plague us and where economic and racial prejudice marginalize us, stories of a Victorian haunting by Dickens can be read and reinterpreted with renewed interest to apprehend the twenty-first century ethos or more correctly chaos. Indubitably Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* is by far his best work and underscores many of the Victorian concerns and our modern disarray. Though the narrative has nothing to do with the birth of Christ it is a story par excellence of human transformation and change. The ghosts ventriloquize through Scrooge a passionate message for the poor that the poor are also an integral part of the great human chain and that the rich cannot escape their responsibility to the poor in their smug discourses. Dickens fictionalizes the Victorian conceptions of time and the universe in the light of Christian notions of protestant work ethics, the nuclear family, the significant Other and individual transformation in his little ghost story. However his notions of both time and the universe are not strictly biblical, but contain his own interpretation of salvation colored by his prejudices and influenced by the beliefs of his age.

Dickens envisions the capitalist moment and graphs a strategy to redeem a self-centered greed through philanthropy and social commitment to the poor. The thawing of the human heart is not strictly in accordance with biblical tenets of a belief in Christ but a fear of economic and social retribution. The proponents of capitalist economy are most frightened of its collapse and destruction and this

fear mostly affects the rich who have much to lose. The dispossessed are always mired in poverty and have no time to feel their sense of loss. In Dickens the resignation of the poor pervades the universe. So apart from complacency occasionally inter-penetrated by a sense of fear there is also a general atmosphere of sadness and resignation that were dormant emotions of the Victorian poor in England. But the general tone of the novel is usurped by the Dickensian theme of self-awareness and redemption. Dickens is more interested in expanding the Victorian readings of time, society and the universe and bringing about reformed thinking. The attempt in this paper would be to show how Dickens uses the western conceptions of phantoms, time and universe and fine tunes both to deliver his social message of giving and forgiving thereby transforming the meaning of Christmas and its significance.

Literary Haunting and Social Change

The literary phantom emerges only in the act of writing about the day-to-day aspects of life and haunts us within familiar surroundings. The act of writing and the architecture of spectral presence are the very conditions of literary haunting (Wolfreys, 2010 5). The literary phantom in the novel is also rooted in the conception of an imperfect society where there is inequitable distribution of wealth and the society suffers from lack of educational opportunities. Before the Education Act of 1870 there was no compulsory education in England and only the rich could afford quality education for their children. Two thirds of the working poor were either autodidacts or learned their basics from Sunday schools. In 1851 the English population was roughly 20 million of which a quarter or 5 million lived in poverty. The issue of their empowerment became extremely important for Dickens who himself suffered from crushing poverty and lack of formal education. The idea of making the rich pay for the health and living of the poor was an important social program for Dickens as with other

reformers. Literary ghosts were therefore harnessed to jolt the smug bourgeoisie and the middle classes into a concerned and charitable awareness of the dispossessed.

By the time Dickens began writing in the late 1830s the literary ghost had acquired an indubitable identity. The average Victorian reader was immersed in contaminated genres of myths, fairy tales, folklore, the occult, bizarre and the uncanny. In the 1840s the Romanizing forays of The Oxford Movement made British Protestantism more amenable to mysteries and occult practices. The dehumanizing and constraining aspects of industrial society keenly felt by the English poor from the 1840s to the 1890s and sensitively documented by Dickens in *Hard Times*, generated a renewed interest in the power of the satanic amongst the educated classes.

Dickens uses the spectral presence both as a narrative device and moral consciousness to haunt the text thereby lifting it out of reality and returning it back to reality in altered forms. Reality always comes to us as Jacques Derrida points out in a fictionalized form (Derrida, 2002 3). Unlike the Gothic text in Dickens there is no shift from a “narrative device” to “literary trope” (Berthin, 2010 1). Dickens presents one apparition and three ghosts each with a specific purpose. The “dreadful apparition” of Jacob Marley appears dragging chains he “forged in life” (ACC, p. 22) to prepare Scrooge for the impending visit of the three ghosts. And before Marley leaves he has already preached the central message of the novel which is thus,

‘It is required of every man...that the spirit within him should walk abroad among his fellowmen, and travel far and wide; and if that spirit goes not forth in life, it is condemned to do so after death. It is doomed to wander through the

world—oh, woe is me!—and witness what it cannot share, but might have shared on earth, and turned to happiness.’ (ACC, p. 22)

Marley preaches compassion, fellow feeling and sharing as necessary conditions for a happy life both present life and after life, failing which a man’s life will be eternal suffering. Scrooge is jolted out of his smug complacency just as the rich class English reader would. Until we realize social responsibility there is “no rest, no peace” but “incessant torture of remorse” (ACC, p. 23). Marley brings with him a warning and a hope to Scrooge and help him escape a terrible fate of damnation. But this is not possible without the visitations of the three spirits.

Marley enters the “double locked door” of Scrooge’s heart and offers a window of hope by exiting through it. Scrooge looks out of the window and sees “phantoms, wandering hither and thither in restless haste, and moaning as they went.” The incident bothers him and exhausts him and he goes to sleep without “undressing” (ACC, 26-27; 30). Marley’s ghost expands the Victorian meaning of reason for Scrooge and he begins to believe that dreams are also deeper part of reason as Freud was trying to explain. Scrooge is perplexed as his “mature inquiry” dismisses the ghost as a “dream” but his consciousness is “bothered” by it (p. 30). Marley embodies the “paradoxical state of the spectre, which is neither being nor non-being” (Derrida, 1994).

The story begins with a haunting by three good spirits at his seven-year dead partner Jacob Marley’s “intervention” (ACC, p. 51). Each of three ghosts comes to teach the English businessman Ebenezer Scrooge a lesson in life and helps to erase a damning future born out of an egotistic life. In the end when they leave Scrooge has a change of heart and learns to be generous, forgiving and less self-centered. This socially-conscious behavior Dickens terms as “the Total

Abstinence Principle,” which apart from the obvious pun on giving up alcoholic spirits as against the ethereal spirits, is also Dickens’ belief in the “great human chain” and “sympathy” for all (Dickens, 1843 107). In a letter to Mrs. Cooper dated 20 December 1852 Dickens wrote:

I converted Mr. Scrooge by teaching him that a Christian heart cannot be shut up in itself, but must live in the Past, the Present, and the Future, and must be a link of this great human chain, and must have sympathy with everything. (Storey et al., 1988 828)

Dickens believed that the “Christian heart” must be able to feel a sense of connectedness with both the living and the dead and possess the ability to “sympathize with everything.” Dickens was campaigning for social responsibility, for the cause of the poor, for their uplift. The rich have much to learn from the exemplary suffering of the poor who support each other and make do with whatever little they have. Obviously this is a sentimental view of the poor which ignored their drunken and spendthrift attitude that often reduced them to penury.

Obviously Dickens’ view of the poor as the significant Other and the colonial subject as the dangerous Other becomes the framework of his treatment of the poor in *A Christmas Carol*. Dickens’ forays into London’s East End from the security of his bourgeoisie homes in Tavistock House or Gad’s Hill Place was yet another ploy to sympathize with the denizens of Marshalsea Prison and blacking factory without the fear of changing places with them (Moore, 2004 39). Undoubtedly London was the “capital of poverty” in Victorian times to use Gertrude Himmelfarb’s succinct phrase and Dickens endorsed this epithet in novels like *A Christmas Carol* and *Nicholas Nickleby*. In *The Uncommercial*

Traveller and Reprinted Pieces he confessed haunting the streets of London, “dragged by invisible forces” like Scrooge to reiterate his middle class perspective and sympathize with the English poor (Dickens, 1989 514-15). But Victorian England was a colonial power and Dickens was fully aware of the imperial role the English masters played in the colonies.

The Victorians created two parallel societies one at home and another one abroad. Both the societies, one in the mother country and the other in the colonies had different set of rules often contradicting the enlightenment ideas at home with the repressive and hegemonic ideas abroad. Both colonial rule and the savage native continued to haunt Victorian society both as injustice and profit. Dickens was haunted by the ghosts of the English poor and the savage native. His notion of the unfortunate Other encompassed both the ‘neglected’ classes in Britain and ‘savage’ races in the colonies. But after the Indian Mutiny of 1857 Dickens saw both these groups as distinctly different.

In “The Perils of Certain English Prisoners” (1857) Dickens complained about the massacre of English women and children by the Indian mutineers in the Gangetic region and began to construct them as “vermin-haunted heaps of rags” with “brutal eyes” waiting to devour helpless Britons. In a letter to Burdett-Collins dated 4 October 1857 Dickens vowed to, “exterminate the Race...blot it out of mankind and raze it off the face of the Earth” (Dickens, 1995 459). The spread of egalitarian ideas through English education in the colonies, during the latter part of the nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth century, made colonial rule untenable leading to colonial revolt and subsequent independence. The fawning sympathy with the English working classes and the poor still persisted and found expression in his works.

The world of the 1840s spawned factories and slums in Britain forcing intellectuals like Matthew Arnold to warn England in “A Scholar Gypsy” published in 1853 a decade after *A Christmas Carol* that the “strange disease” of modern life with its “sick hurry” and “divided aims” was wreaking havoc on the social fabric of England (Arnold, 1891 273). The number of poor in Victorian England ran in thousands and people looked for any kind of job in a factory which provided secure employment and housing. But hard working conditions forced many to drink heavily and save nothing for a rainy day. Sudden destitution and poverty were rampant. Even children were forced to find employment in strange jobs such as chimney sweep, rat catcher, messenger, mudlark or pickpocket to earn some money. Arnold noticed the “o’ertax’d” heads and “palsied hearts” could not gauge the Christian significance of life.

Scrooge’s heart too has become palsied, paralyzed and frozen. The visitations of the phantoms are a necessary condition for Scrooge to change as he has become so hard of heart that he “cannot hope to shun the path” he is following (Dickens 1843 25). So both the spectre and the spirits are needed for Scrooge to change. Marley’s “spectre” or “apparition” enters through the locked door and exists through the window. The entry of a ghost through a locked door is a trespass of the “Invisible World” but the exit through a self-opening door is magical. A spectral ingress through a locked door shakes the rational world that Scrooge so heavily relies upon in order to justify his social values and self-centeredness.

The ghost of Bob Marley comes to prepare him for the visit of the three spirits and lament at his own predicament of having ignored the welfare of others. The dead Marley is not only Scrooge’s partner in life but also in death. He is both a warning and a hope. Just like Scrooge Marley had also concentrated on his work ignoring the welfare of the socially weak; those acts of “charity, mercy,

forbearance, and benevolence” that make life worth living (Dickens 1843 24). Slowly the munificence and compassion of both became frozen. They have gradually withdrawn into their cloistered selves and convinced themselves that communal conviviality can be conveniently ignored.

Scrooge needs to be shaken, to be frightened into a new awareness which both the spectre and the spirits do for him. As Scrooge looks out of the window of his “dusty chambers” he sees “phantoms, wandering hither and thither in restless haste and moaning” (Dickens, 1843 72, 26-27). The phantoms generate regret, surprise and fear at what he has missed, is missing and will miss after his death. The phantoms Scrooge sees outside his window are powerless creatures wanting to do good, “in human matters” but have “lost the power for ever” (Dickens 1843 27).

The supernatural exerted a powerful influence on the Victorian mind. It shaped their world view and became a subject of literary inquiry. Though Freud’s work on psychoanalysis, paranormal and the uncanny created a “whole climate of opinion” to use W. H. Auden’s phrase, the world continued to be a mysterious place. Zizek believes that the “traumatic fantasies” of history are transmitted through a vibrant “symbolic tradition to “haunt the living” (Zizek, 2003 128). All major religious traditions have their ghosts and our self-discovery is always haunted by these ghosts whether they are suppressed or released. Luke Thurston suggests that the literary ghost carries with him “a spark of life” and attempts to find ways to write “life itself” (Thurston, 2012 6). However that may be too ambitious a task for the literary ghost to accomplish. In Dickens the ghosts jolt the protagonist and the reader into a new awareness of themselves. It is they who write on the tabula rasa, not the ghosts.

Victorian Social Responsibility

The Victorians were incorrigible idealists trying to configure the world according to their values and morality. The belief in hard work was doubly reinforced by colonial acquisitions abroad and rapid economic progress at home. However this progress left out a large section of the poor and the downtrodden. Dickens often reveals the sordid aspect in his writings. The Victorian morality had more to do with social respectability than moral uprightness. Acquisition of property, household comforts and visible acts of charity suited their moral temper. So Scrooge is forced to reflect upon his disrespect for social conventions and charity. The Victorian belief in a patriarchal family was also a part of a bourgeois ideal located in divine sanction. Family men like Cratchitt and Fezziwig are praised for their familial concerns while Scrooge is disliked for shunning such responsibility.

Though civil society and its institutions were based on egalitarian principles of universal education and freedom of thought the reality was far from it. Dickens picks out these anomalies in his fiction to show the dichotomies in British social life. Though Darwin's introduced a paradigm shift from God's creation to evolutionary theory, Carlyle's emphasized capitalist responsibility for the working classes and Stuart Mill's stressed working class rights, individual freedom and anti-utilitarianism, the Victorian society still battled with a God-centered universe, neglect of social responsibility and belief in a supernatural world. Dickens found it an ideal ground to preach his ideas through fiction.

Haunting in Dickens

Dickens expands the meaning of the haunting to include the smug reader—"I am standing in spirit at your elbow" (ACC, p. 31). The social critic that Dickens was could not rest without campaigning for the cause of the poor. And perhaps the

best way was to jolt the reader through this pleasant haunting that he mentions in the Preface:

I have endeavored in this Ghostly little book to raise the Ghost of an Idea, which shall not put my readers out of humour with themselves, with each other, with the season, or with me. May it haunt their houses pleasantly, and no one wish to lay it (ACC, p. 1).

The “Ghost of an Idea” has to do with fellow feeling, social responsibility and inclusion of the dispossessed in the project of nation building and civil society. The uncanny of Freud that had “undergone repression” returns to haunt Scrooge and the reader. Scrooge’s unfulfilled desires and the fear of their retribution is connected to Dickensian psychoanalysis.

Visiting the past is undoubtedly a strange experience and the Ghost of Christmas Past is indeed a “strange figure.” Its hair is white but its skin is wrinkle free. It is no general ghost of mankind’s amorphous past but a specific ghost of Scrooge’s past. It is on a special mission to remind Scrooge of the sights and the sounds and the smells of his long-forgotten past when he was happy and concerned about others. He remembers himself as poor lonely boy, his generous sister Fan with a “large heart,” the happy employer Mr. Fezziwig and the indictment of Belle—“You fear the world too much” (ACC, p. 45). These sights leave him in a state of “strangest agitation” (ACC, p. 43). Even though Scrooge realizes that these are but “shadows of things that have been” and people in it “have no consciousness of us” he is so moved by the haunting that he begs the Ghost to remove him from the past—“Haunt me no longer!” (ACC, p. 49).

The second Ghost is a “jolly Giant” with “a glowing torch” wearing a green robe

lined with fur with a holly wreath on his head. Scrooge has “never seen the like of [him] before” but is willing to learn a lesson—“teach me, let me profit by it” (ACC, p. 53-55). The prose that follows is at times evocative and poetic and at times dull and boring. But nevertheless Dickens has made a point—the genial Ghost has “sympathy with all poor men” (ACC, p. 59). Scrooge heart warms up to the Cratchits and his concern about Tiny Tim’s well being grows (ACC, pp. 55-64).

The third Ghost is totally concealed in black garment with one “out-stretched hand” (ACC, p. 79). Scrooge is terribly frightened of the “spectral hand” and symbolically of his hidden but dark future. The Ghost of Christmas Future takes him to the underbelly of the town:

The ways were foul and narrow; the shops and houses wretched; the people half-naked, drunken, slipshod, ugly. Alleys and archways, like so many cesspools, disgorged their offences of smell and dirt, and life, upon the strangling streets; and the whole quarter reeked with crime, with filth, and misery (ACC, p 84).

Here Scrooge recoils but continues to watch with dawning comprehension that they are exchanging stolen goods of “a wretched old screw” who has recently died is no other than him (ACC, pp. 86-96). Scrooge is now ready to change and he inquires eagerly from the third Ghost: ““Are these the shadows of the things that Will be, or are they shadows of things that May be, only?” (ACC, p. 96). And once he gets the assurance from the spirit that these events are forebodings of “May be” he decides to change:

‘I will honour Christmas in my heart, and try to keep it all the year. I will live

in the Past, the Present, and the Future. The Spirits of all Three shall strive within me. I will not shut out the lessons that they teach. Oh, tell me I may sponge away the writing on this stone!’ (ACC, p. 97).

As soon he transforms the Ghost of the Future collapses into a bedpost. He then he gets into the act of dispelling the “shadows of the things that would have been” with renewed gusto (ACC, p. 100). And he looks at the knocker that starts his journey of spiritual awakening and exclaims: “‘I shall love it, as long as I live!’”

The Victorian Conception of Time

In a period of transition from pre-industrial to industrial society the Victorians felt the relentless passage of time in machines and factories. They were more urgently concerned with the fast changing present life and the place of secular present in it. In other words they were increasingly concerned with temporalizing and temporality as modern and postmodern western philosophy is. *A Christmas Carol* is an excellent place to interrogate the concept of time as understood in western philosophy. Heidegger and Levinas have talked about the linear flow of time from the past to the present and the future. Heidegger also talks about absolute time from which clock time emerges. Levinas argues that the recognition of the other help us to escape the temporality of the present. But Dickens concept of time in the story is somewhat different.

Dickens takes us from the present into the past, then back the present. Once again we are transported to a ghostly present and made to return to the living present and finally from the present into the future and back to the present. Dickens conceives of two presents—the present that Scrooge inhabits and the present that the spirit of the present inhabits. The flow of time is both ways—

from the present to the past and also from the present to the future. This to and fro movement of time allows Dickens not only to interrogate the concept of time but to use it as a literary device to jolt the reader into a new awareness of himself and the movement of the world around him.

A Decentered Universe

Dickens conceives of the universe as a multi-layered presence where absolute time is frozen in the past as unalterable consciousness. The centrality of man in the universe was gradually eroded by Copernicus when he declared that earth was not the center of the universe. Both Darwin and Freud gave a new structure of evolution and the mind further eroding the significance of the all-important thinking subject. The world was seen as a mysterious place inhabited by free-thinking kindly spirits, specters and diehard individualists. Abroad Great Britain was seen as a great colonial power but at home the social ills of industrialization, capitalism and urbanization were starkly visible straining the resources of the welfare state. Though there was spread of wealth it was so disproportionate that it left a large section of the population poor and dispossessed. The rise of slums and crime strengthened the belief in a Benthamite utilitarianism leading to a Victorian compromise. Carlyle's idea of a soulless universe pushed man to relentless self-determination and rational thinking but lurking doubts remained often leading to confusion.

Conclusion

Dickens decenters the individual in a vast and a hostile world, a world that is soulless but nevertheless conforms to the laws of causality. Dickens could not do anything better. The Victorian society was in a state of radical transformation where revolutionary ideas from science, astronomy and psychoanalysis were clashing with old certitudes and uneven economic growth. The story begins with

the suffocating present but expands to include the past and the future. It begins with the selfish and self-centered individualism and inflates to encompass the universe. Scrooge's transformation from a believer in the anxious present to an advocate of a causal interconnectedness of past, present and the future is nothing short of a miracle. In a typically Kafkesque manner Dickens takes Scrooge through different aspects of time and expands his understanding of each of its three components—past, present and future. Dickens narrative allows the ghosts to return to the reader and haunt him, though he would like us to believe that the ghosts will continue to haunt the Victorian reader “pleasantly” always ventriloquizing a message through the text. Dickens would like us to acknowledge that the presence of people are permeated by all sorts of phantom figures—figures that we have read about in books like Marx, Freud or Kafka, figures we encounter like our family and friends, and figures we will encounter in the future. In this sense Dickens is a typical Victorian writer seeped in the values of colonial England, heir to imperialist attitudes of the late nineteenth century and fired by a reformist Christian zeal to realize a more egalitarian society.

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