A Christmas Carol

by Ian Brinton



English Association Dickens Bookmarks
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The aim of this first Dickens Bookmark is to give an account of the first and most popular of Dickens's five *Christmas Books*, its central themes of selfishness and greed which find one their most menacing representations in the figures of the two children, 'wretched, abject, frightful, hideous, miserable' who lurk beneath folds of the robes of Christmas Present. The Bookmark will also explore the way in which this short story reflects Dickens's growing concern for dwelling upon his own autobiography and, in this sense, examines his concern for the lost childhood.

A Christmas Carol in Prose; Being a Ghost Story for Christmas was published by Chapman and Hall on December 19th 1843 and it sold six thousand copies in five days. Dickens expected to make a considerable sum from the popularity of the tale (it had sold out in its seventh printing by May 1844) but the physical presentation of the slim book was always going to make that difficult to achieve. According to Michael Slater:

> He was determined that the lion's share of the anticipated profits should find its way into his own pockets rather than into those of any publisher. Therefore Chapman and Hall, who were still desperately hoping to remain his publishers, would publish the book on commission, all production expenses being met by Dickens. He was not sparing of these: wanting to make the book as physically attractive as possible, a Christmas present in itself, he had it bound in salmon-brown and gilt, commissioned Leech to supply eight illustrations, half to be printed as hand-coloured plates, while the title-page would be printed in two colours, first green and red then blue and red. At the same time he insisted that the selling price of the book should not exceed five shillings. This price, however, given the high production costs, proved in the event to leave a very narrow profit margin while it put the book beyond the reach of most of the nation's Cratchits, whose cause it championed.

The profit-margin was not helped by the plagiarized versions that appeared almost immediately, the first being in early January. This in turn prompted Dickens to take the rival publishers to court. He won the case but had to foot the bill of £700 when the other firm declared bankruptcy. The bitterness caused by the case was to cast its long shadow over the later webs and tangles of Law which ensnare so many of the characters in *Bleak House*.

Literary Background

The story of the miserly anti-social figure who is visited by an agent of the supernatural in order to effect a change in his behaviour has a precedent in Dickens's writing in the story of Gabriel Grubb, one of the digressive tales which appear in *The Posthumous Papers of The Pickwick Club*. In that early novel the four Pickwickians spend Christmas with the Wardles at Dingley Dell and the tone of the writing is already suggestive of what will dominate the later Christmas story and contribute to the notion that festive Christmas only really started with Dickens:

> Happy, happy Christmas, that can win us back to the delusions of our childish days; that can recall to the old man the pleasures of his youth; that can transport the sailor and the traveller, thousand of miles away, back to his own fire-side and his quiet home!

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Wardle is the narrator of the tale told round the fireside, 'The Story of the Goblins who stole a Sexton' and the first description of the miserly grave-digger is suggestive of the later Scrooge:

> Gabriel Grubb was an ill-conditioned, cross-grained, surly fellow—a morose and lonely man, who consorted with nobody but himself, and an old wicker bottle which fitted into his large deep waistcoat pocket—and who eyed each merry face, as it passed him by, with such a deep scowl of malice and ill-humour, as it was difficult to meet, without feeling something the worse for.

The malicious figure of Scrooge, the 'tight-fisted hand at the grindstone', is similarly shunned as he walks abroad:

> Nobody ever stopped him in the street to say, with gladsome looks, 'My dear Scrooge, how are you? When will you come to see me?' No beggars implored him to bestow a trifle, no children asked him what it was o'clock, no man or woman ever once in all his life inquired the way to such and such a place, of Scrooge. Even the blind men's dogs appeared to know him; and when they saw him coming on, would tug their owners into doorways and up courts; and then would wag their tails as though they said, 'No eye at all is better than an evil eye, dark master!'

The self-congratulatory isolation of the grave-digger as he goes to finish some work in the churchyard on Christmas Eve is highlighted by the contrast between the 'cheerful lights of the blazing fires' which 'gleam through the old casements' and by the satisfaction he takes in bullying a small boy who is singing to keep up his spirits. After he has hit the boy 'over the head with his lantern five or six times' he 'chuckled very heartily to himself, and entered the churchyard: locking the gate behind him'. It is during the visitation of the Ghost of Christmas Past in Stave II of the *Carol* that Scrooge's first awareness of a desire to remedy his brutal self-alienation from the world of childhood and happiness takes place. He has been shown the isolated boy, 'his younger self', whose world of imagination is vividly peopled with the characters from his reading and 'with a rapidity of transition very foreign to his usual character, he said, in pity for his former self, 'Poor boy!' When the Spirit asks him what the matter is he replies:

> 'There was a boy singing a Christmas Carol at my door last night. I should like to have given him something: that's all.'

The world of childhood is central to the *Carol* and its infectious sense of 'blessing' is highly contagious. As Scrooge shuts up his business premises after bullying his poorly-paid clerk and advising him to turn up early for work on St. Stephen's Day (December 26th) Bob Cratchit makes his journey home on this Christmas Eve bound up with the carefree sense of childhood's pleasure. He 'went down a slide on Cornhill, at the end of a lane of boys, twenty times, in honour of its being Christmas Eve, and then ran home to Camden Town as hard as he could pelt, to play at blindman's-buff.' By way of contrast Scrooge took his 'melancholy dinner in his usual melancholy tavern' before proceeding home to a place that is itself representative of the lost world of childhood:

> He lived in chambers which had once belonged to his deceased partner. They were a gloomy suite of rooms, in a lowering pile of building up a yard, where it had so little business to be, that one could scarcely help fancying it must have run there when it was a young house, playing at hide-and-seek with other houses, and forgotten the way out again.

Interestingly one might compare this picture of urban confusion and loss with the description of Todgers's guesthouse in chapter nine of *Martin Chuzzlewit*, the novel in monthly parts that Dickens was writing at this same time in 1843:

> You couldn't walk about in Todgers's neighbourhood, as you could in any other neighbourhood. You groped your way for an hour through lanes and bye-ways, and court-yards, and passages; and you never emerged upon anything that might be reasonably called a street. A kind of resigned distraction came over

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> the stranger as he trod those devious mazes, and, giving himself up for lost, went in and out and round about and quietly turned back again when he came to a dead wall or was stopped by an iron railing, and felt that the means of escape might possibly present themselves in their own good time, but that to anticipate them was hopeless.

Similar to Grubb in his churchyard, when Scrooge arrives home he 'locked himself in'. In fact he even double-locks the door as if he has already a premonition of there being something that he is desperate to keep out: a vision of Hell. The association between the home of the Goblins in the Pickwick story and Hell was emphasised not only by Grub's 'descent' into a large cavern but by the liquid fire which was forced down his throat as a prelude to his being shown a series of visions. Grubb was presented with a picture of domestic simplicity, an early version of Bob Cratchit's home, as a clear indication of what is missing in the life of the solitary misanthrope:

> A crowd of little children were gathered round a bright fire, clinging to their mother's gown, and gambolling around her chair.

A 'frugal meal' is prepared, a chair is placed beside the fire for the father to take up as he returns from work and when he enters 'wet and weary' and shaking the snow from his clothes, the children climb onto his knees and 'all seemed happiness and comfort'. This scene of domestic harmony is swiftly followed by one of loss as the 'fairest and youngest child' lies dying and this anticipates the 'vacant seat…in the poor chimney-corner', symbolic of the death of Tiny Tim. The third scene presented by the Goblin reveals a rural idyll in which 'The ant crept forth to her daily toil, the butterfly fluttered and basked in the warm rays of the sun' and 'Man walked forth, elated with the scene; and all was brightness and splendour' only to be swiftly followed by a fairly pedestrian moral conclusion as Gabriel Grubb becomes 'an altered man' who reappears within the community some ten years later as 'a ragged, contented, rheumatic old man.'

The Three Visions

The three visions granted to Scrooge of Christmas Past, Present and Future are preceded by the disturbing reappearance of his former business partner, the dead Jacob Marley, who rises from the cellarage as if from the personal buried past. The figure has a quality of one of Dante's spectres in *Inferno* '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.' The similarity to a vision from Dante is made even more direct as Marley's ghost exits and Scrooge 'became sensible of confused noises in the air; incoherent sounds of lamentation and regret; wailings inexpressibly sorrowful and self-accusatory.' These phantoms were given a further Dantesque association in the engraving John Leech did for the first edition of the tale where they seem to appear from the air and fog passing by an all-too substantial figure of misery, a woman sitting weeping by the prison-like bars of sharpened iron railings.

When Dickens was nine years old the financial difficulties of his father which were to plague his life (aggravated by his own profligacy) prompted a change of house in the North Kent shipping town of Chatham in 1821. One year later the family moved to more narrow accommodation in Camden Town. The schooling which Dickens had begun, the imaginative reading which was to inform so much of his later life, was discontinued and in a letter to John Forster he made clear the significance of that loss: 'As I thought in the little back garret in Bayham Street, of all I had lost in losing Chatham, what would I have given, if I had had anything to give, to be sent back to any other school, to have been taught anything anywhere!' A further move in 1823 to Gower Street was swiftly followed by Dickens being sent to work in Warren's blacking warehouse at Hungerford Stairs in order to ease the financial burdens of the household, and the lasting stain of this experience was registered in his manuscript fragments of autobiography, which he sent to Forster in 1847. The world of the lost childhood, the lost home, haunted Dickens and was to reappear in a multitude of guises. In the *Carol* the Ghost of Christmas Past shows Scrooge a picture first of his younger

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self preoccupied with the imaginative world of Ali Baba, Valentine and Orson, the Sultan's Groom and Robinson Crusoe before guiding him to a room 'a little darker and more dirty':

> The panels shrunk, the windows cracked; fragments of plaster fell out of the ceiling, and the naked laths were shown instead…there he was, alone again, when all the other boys had gone home for the jolly holidays.

With no great leap of the imagination one can recognise in this description a memory of the blacking warehouse as Dickens described it to Forster with 'Its wainscoted rooms and its rotten floors and staircase' as 'the dirt and decay of the place rise up visibly before me as if I were there again.' In the vision which the Spirit shows Scrooge the young man is rescued from his isolation and taken home by his sister, a relationship which Dickens was to develop in *Dombey and Son*:

> 'I have come to bring you home, dear brother!' said the child, clapping her tiny hands, and bending down to laugh. 'To bring you home, home, home!'

The danger to society of poisoning the world of childhood is made absolutely clear by the Ghost of Christmas Present who hides in the folds of his robe two children, 'wretched, abject, frightful, hideous, miserable':

> They were a boy and girl. Yellow, meagre, ragged, scowling, wolfish; but prostrate, too, in their humility. Where graceful youth should have filled their features out, and touched them with its freshest tints, a stale and shrivelled hand, like that of age, had pinched, and twisted them, and pulled them into shreds. Where angels might have sat enthroned, devils lurked, and glared out menacing. No change, no degradation, no perversion of humanity, in any grade, through all the mysteries of wonderful creation, has monsters so horrible and dread.

The figures of Ignorance and Want are a warning sign to be placed in contrast to the sentimental picture of Tiny Tim and they relate more to the poisonous disease which is spread by Jo the crossing-sweeper in *Bleak House* than they do to the tears shed for the loss of a little boy within the warmth of a loving home. They act as a timely reminder of the serious undercurrent which works its way through the *Carol*, the tone of which is reminiscent of the ideas on population proposed by Thomas Malthus in his *Essay on the Principle of Population*:

> Must it not then be acknowledged by an attentive examiner of the histories of mankind, that in every age and in every State in which man has existed, or does now exist that the increase of population is necessarily limited by the means of subsistence, that population does invariably increase when the means of subsistence increase, and, that the superior power of population is repressed, and the actual population kept equal to the means of subsistence, by misery and vice.

Scrooge's response to the gentleman who is collecting money for the poor is brutally to the point as he dismisses the idea of those in need by suggesting that they might as well die 'and decrease the surplus population'. As Scrooge hopes that Tiny Tim will live the Ghost warns him of the folly of doing nothing to alleviate distress:

> If he be like to die, he had better do it, and decrease the surplus population.

The echo of the miser's own words is followed by a warning to man not to play the role of the Omnipotent:

> 'Man,' said the Ghost, 'if man you be in heart, not adamant, forbear that wicked cant until you have discovered What the surplus is, and Where it is. Will you decide what men shall live, what men shall die? It may be, that in the sight of Heaven, you are more worthless and less fit to live than millions like this poor man's child. Oh God! to hear the Insect on the leaf pronouncing on the too much life among his hungry brothers in the dust!'

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As if to emphasise the connecting links between the responsibility of wealth and the abject poverty which it fails to address the Ghost of Christmas Yet To Come guides Scrooge beyond his own death:

> They left the busy scene, and went into an obscure part of the town, where Scrooge had never penetrated before, although he recognised its situation, and its bad repute. 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 straggling streets; and the whole quarter reeked with crime, with filth, and misery.

The supernatural world of this den is woven into a reconstruction of *Macbeth* as three people collect together to divide the spoils of the dead Scrooge:

> 'Let the charwoman alone to be the first!' cried she who had entered first. 'Let the laundress alone to be the second; and let the undertaker's man alone to be the third. Look here, old Joe, here's a chance! If we haven't all three met here without meaning it!'

With the power and condensation of this short masterpiece so evident that it has remained a Dickens favourite for over a hundred and fifty years it comes as no surprise to read about the author's own sense of excitement at its conception. Dickens told his friend Cornelius Felton that he had 'wept, and laughed, and wept again, and excited himself in a most extraordinary manner, in the composition' and had spent his time walking about 'the black streets of London, fifteen and twenty miles, many a night when all the sober folks had gone to bed.'

Further Reading

Charles Dickens by Michael Slater, Yale University Press, 2009.

'Dickens: The Two Scrooges' by Edmund Wilson in *The Wound and the Bow*, W.H. Allen, 1952.

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