

Ghost of an idea



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Much of Charles Dickens' representation of morality in his most famous of Christmas stories, *A Christmas Carol*, is derived from "the wisdom of our ancestors." (1) From the beginning of his narrative Dickens explains his usage of the phrase "dead as a doornail," in relation to Marley, as trusting in the "wisdom of our ancestors," even if it were not the simile he himself would have invented. He continues to carefully craft his story in attribute to traditional culture. Christmastime, as a setting, stands for the temporary breakdown of restraints felt within a normal life in a Dickens society.

Scrooge's nephew describes Christmastime as: "...the only time I know of, in the long calendar of the year, when men and women seem by one consent to open their shut-up hearts freely, and to think of people below them as if they really were fellow-passengers to the grave, and not another race of creatures bound on other journeys.... though it has never put a scrap of gold or silver in my pocket, I believe that it has done me good, and will do me good; and I say, God bless it! (6-7) Indeed the fragmentation and restoration of a set of values is the theme of *A Christmas Carol*- a story set not in chapters, but sung in staves. The characterization of a story told in song is in itself a return to ancestral and traditional values. One remembers the well-known opening "I sing of warfare and a man at war," (In. 1) from Virgil's *Aeneid*. The poems by Ancient Roman writers, such as Virgil and Ovid, speak to a culture's history but perhaps most importantly to teach a lesson in morals. By adopting this medium Dickens pays homage to his ancient predecessors, and also to the art of Christmas carols in themselves (as the title suggests). Before the twentieth century one of the only means of widespread education was through the Christian Church. And through Dickens' characterizations of church officials as often being corrupt, it can be

assumed that Dickens probably did not like the tainted information churchgoers were receiving. However Christmas carols maintain their integrity no matter who sings them. Their message is clear and their words unaltered, save for children's common mistakes (going 'waffling' as opposed to 'wassailing'). Principally what Dickens' novel does is take the eroding moralistic traditions of the past and deliver them intact to the common man. His many characters allegorize the traditional values Dickens is concerned with in the past, present and future. Ebenezer Scrooge is perhaps the most allegorical among them. Albeit in crisscross order, we see Scrooge's progression and depression throughout his time as a schoolboy into his elderly, miserly years. His first vision is of himself is as a terribly lonely child at Christmas, trying to keep himself company with the characters from books. The first spirit, that of Christmas Past, is himself a young child and an old man all at once; and the luminous glowing of his head speaks for the importance of the human mind. This first ghost represents memory and its ability to tie all of one's life together. Indeed the fluid movement of time throughout the story suggests that in terms of humanity it is not the "when" that is important; it is only the "what" that one should concern himself with. The second spirit, that of Christmas Present, exemplifies the concerns one should ideally have in association with Christmas: goodwill, generosity, love and celebration, to start. The food "heaped on the floor to form a kind of throne," (57) aids the spirit in evoking thoughts of prosperity and merriment. Similarly the moral theme of A Christmas Carol has little to do with the solemnity of a religious occasion (although the sway of organized Christianity is present, in the tolling of the church bells to mark the hours, for instance), but mostly in praising the abundance of joy, which have the capability of

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sharing with one another. In essence Dickens' Christmas is not about self-restraint and religious piety. It is a time for sharing one's riches, be they on a scale of poverty or one of wealth- be they monetary or spiritual. Here Scrooge begins to realize what is perhaps already apparent to the reader: to celebrate by feasting is an extremely enjoyable experience, but only if one shares that feast with others. The Cratchit family is able to demonstrate the ability to derive great joy from having little by sharing it with loved ones, in opposition to the very little joy Scrooge derives from plenty because of his solitude. This visit from the Ghost of Christmas Present also highlights the importance of teaching that joy to the next generations to come. In literature the presence of children embodies the natural human response to innocence within a loving environment, or one lacking in love. The children in the story at hand are no different as they serve to greatly focus the course of the book. Chiefly this focus is achieved through the pathetic character of Tiny Tim. His endearing faith and spirit in the face of deathly illness is one of the reasons A Christmas Carol has maintained its extreme popularity through the centuries. Tiny Tim correctly highlights the connection between himself and Jesus Christ when he tells his father: "...he hoped the people saw him in the church, because he was a cripple, and it might be pleasant to them to remember upon Christmas Day who made lame beggars walk and blind men see.(67) Growing up in an environment of monetary comfort but little love, Scrooge ages into a cold-hearted miser. Yet growing up in a world of much love and little money, the youngest Cratchit possesses the kindest soul in the story. In contrast to the spiritual light radiating from Tiny Tim's character are the "devilish"-looking creatures: the boy called Ignorance and the girl called Want. "They are Man's" (86) children, as they are a product of the

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neglect of social responsibility. Ignorance and Want are explained by the second spirit to be humanity's "doom" if ignored. The third spirit, the Ghost of Christmas yet to come, carries with him a grim tint to the story. He represents the fate of Scrooge (i. e. greater humanity) if poverty goes on unaltered by those who have the power to change the conditions. As Scrooge begins to understand that a desolate and perverted future is to be his own fate, the fear of death and imminent reckoning causes him to connect his new lessons and memories into an emotional landscape where not only can he relate with the common man's suffering, but he also cares outright as a humanitarian. As it is earlier noted, Scrooge is able to see other people as if "...they really were fellow-passengers to the grave, and not another race of creatures bound on other journeys." (6) Dickens comments on 19th Century Britain's economic corruption by picturing the world of the counting house. Yet he goes on to visualize a restructuring of selfish society, by embracing the most basic human morals of love. The society Dickens suggests is one of a kind of voluntary socialism. As Scrooge learns that all men are men regardless of their station, the reader is lead to envision each of themselves as responsible for the happiness or suffering of others. What we have here is the suggestion that all men have the same capability for joy or sadness no matter what their natural abilities or resources are. This message is carried to the reader through a collection of ghosts, yet they are not at all tied to the definition of 'supernatural'. Each ghost standing for past, present, future, memory, generosity or responsibility, carries a piece of the whole moral that Dickens lays out. What Dickens creates in A Christmas Carol is a representation of the most poignant wealth humans possess: first the ability

to change, and second the capacity for brotherhood and communion. In essence what Dickens creates is an allegory of love.