

DICKENS AND THE UNIVERSAL RELEVANCE OF HIS VEILED MESSAGE IN A CHRISTMAS CAROL

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore the definite aim that Dickens had in mind while writing the book *A Christmas Carol*. The study focuses on the message that Dickens has to offer to humanity through the character Marley, who as a ghost, comes to advice and at the same time warn Scrooge that there remained one last chance for Scrooge to mend his ways for the better. This article aims to discuss *A Christmas Carol* as a book that is written to warn humanity of the dangers of neglecting virtues like charity, mercy and benevolence.

Key Words : Dickens, Christmas, Carol, Charity, Mercy, Marley, Ghost, Message, Transformation, Scrooge

Belle Moses, one of the biographers of Dickens declares in the opening lines of his preface to the biography of Dickens: "Those who know and love their Dickens, know also that though he was a man of high character, and deep and sincere purpose, he had all the pe-culiarities of a great genius." (Moses vii) To such a man of integrity and high character goes the credit of writing a Christmas book that has gained popularity not only among children but also among scholars who study Dickens.

A Christmas Carol is a book written by Dickens keeping special Christmas messages in mind. The book met with instant reception not only in England but the world over. This is what Carol Bernhardt has to say about the book in his introduction to the book: "Published in 1843, just a few days before Christmas, *A Christmas Carol* met with a rollicking reception." (Bernhardt 12)

Of course the lovers of Dickens are ever alert for the messages given out in his works. Dickens, being a man of values and integrity sought to offer subtle messages interspersed in his works. The present study will focus on the messages found in *A Christmas Carol*. These messages are spoken by Marley's ghost to Scrooge. Marley's ghost comes to give a warning to Scrooge to mend his ways before it is too late. "Dickens was a great preacher. How great, he himself never knew. From that time forward the Christmas story became a feature of his life, and the world always looked for some Christmas message in some little gem of thought and feeling." (Moses 212)

Dickens, the most prolific writer of the Victorian age, was also a hidden divine. All his works have the stamp of not only a great genius but also that of a secret evangelist. His preaching is never direct and is always garbed in some pretext. He is like the physician who proffers to his patient bitter pills laced with sweet ambrosia. Through the alluring ghost tale of Scrooge and Marley, Dickens takes the opportunity to offer to the discriminating reader such gems as are to be found only in the scriptures of various religions. Such teaching is never explicit and that is the hallmark of the genius that Dickens was.

Love has the power to transform. In case of Scrooge fear works better in shaking the hard hearted miser to the very marrow of his bones.

Jacob Marley was Scrooge's business partner. He was akin to Scrooge with relation to his dealings in business. Though not as flint hearted and close-fisted as Scrooge is described by Dickens; nonetheless he was what you would call a perfect businessman, concerned rather with making large profits than having got anything to do with sympathy, charity, concern and any other virtue that would have made him rise in esteem among the common people and would certainly have helped him to rise in the eyes of heaven.

Marley's ghost comes to Scrooge in the time of dusk when Scrooge is returning to his dark home. Scrooge has the first fright when the face of Marley appears as a bright light in the knocker of the door. Appalled at this more than earthly sight; Scrooge tiptoes to his room upstairs looking sideways, trying to see if Marley's ghost follows him. This is what Dickens beautifully says about his initial fears: "To say that he was not startled, or that his blood was not conscious of a terrible sensation to which it had been a stranger from infancy, would be untrue." (Chesterton 18)

Later when Scrooge is about to go to bed Marley's ghost comes up the stairs clanking the massive chains that bind him. Gradually the noise grows in proportions as the ghost is coming up closer to where Scrooge is seated. As the ghost comes nearer, the fear of Scrooge increases. This is what Dickens subtly suggests about the fear of Scrooge: "It's humbug still!" said Scrooge. "I won't believe it." His colour changed though, when, without a pause, it came on through the heavy door, and passed into the room before his eyes." (20)

Scrooge was in no way comfortable with the ghost of Marley squarely staring into his face. In fact, he was so shaken within that with his brief interjections from time to time he was trying to appear cool and act smart in order that he could keep his fear as low as possible. "Scrooge was not much in the habit of cracking jokes, nor did he feel in his heart by any means waggish then. The truth is that he tried to be smart, as a means of distracting his own attention, and keeping down his terror; for the spectre's voice disturbed the very marrow in his bones." (21)

Another matter that puzzled the understanding of Scrooge was that Marley's ghost which wore a ponderous chain of metal had attached ledgers, cashboxes and purses that he had been using while he was alive. Scrooge, in fact, failed to realize that they were the appendages of all the objects that Marley had been attached to and had been closely dealing with while doing his partnership business with Scrooge. All this was being shown to Scrooge to open his eyes to the fact that all worldly attachments if given undue importance while one lives are carried to one's after life as great burdens that have to be carried as punishment. Dickens offers a wonderful description as the ghost floats about in front of Scrooge offering

him advice and warning from time to time: "The chain he drew was clasped about his middle. It was long, and wound about him like a tail; and it was made (for Scrooge observed it closely) of cash-boxes, keys, padlocks, ledgers, deeds, and heavy purses wrought in steel." (20)

Marley's ghost had come to Scrooge to open his eyes to the fact that he had been doing wrong in being miserly and unfriendly. The ghost, on account of the terrible suffering he was undergoing even after his earthly sojourn, had come there to offer warning to Scrooge who had now become so hard hearted that he never wished the good of anyone. Whenever someone genuine asked for charity he would blankly refuse him any aid observing that he had better ask for charity elsewhere. This attitude of Scrooge had made him most unlovable among human beings who interacted with him or came across him during his stern walk from the counting house to his dark and dingy home or whenever he had the occasion to interact with his office assistant whom he frequently upbraided for no reasons. He was such a miser that even during severe winter he would keep a watchful eye on the assistant and scold him if he used more than a single piece of coal to warm his cold hands during office work.

The morals that the ghost has come to preach are multiple and the ghost does this preaching in such a dramatic way that Scrooge is forced to listen and pay attention to what the ghost has to observe. The ghost offers his personal example to prove to Scrooge the necessity of immediate transformation in the way Scrooge thinks or acts and before it is too late.

The ghost does a good job explaining the connotations of the word business to Scrooge. Scrooge who is ever obsessed with earning profits and not sharing any part of it with his fellow beings either in the form of bonus wages or in the form of charity is reminded by the ghost that business does not just mean earning a lot of money. Business means something even beyond the obsession with money. To quote the words of the ghost as in the text: "Mankind was my business. The common welfare was my business; charity, mercy, forbearance, and benevolence were, all, my business. The dealings of my trade were but a drop of water in the comprehensive ocean of my business!"(23)

The foregoing passage holds the central crux of the novel; a veiled message to Scrooge and moreover the greatest message to mankind that neglects the general welfare of people at large. This message to Scrooge has the impact on Scrooge only towards the end of the narrative after the three spirits have taught him the lessons of life by taking him into the past and the future. The travel into the future shows the death of Scrooge in a neglected and ignominious condition. This creates an acute foreboding in Scrooge of the things to come. At the same time the spirit offers solace in the form of a condition. The promise is that things would certainly turn out to be different and pleasant if Scrooge softened his heart to the suffering of people and became amiable than being hostile towards people at large.

Marley's ghost then points out to Scrooge the importance of giving charity to people who deserve it. Marley's ghost regrets his total neglect of derelicts who walked the streets expecting some monetary aid from people like Marley who had the means to serve them in small ways. Marley clearly states how he would put his head down and go his way in order to keep vagrants at bay so that he would not have to part with any of his money. The very fact

that Marley neglected offering help to the needy becomes agonising to him in the garb of the ghost that he has become. This is what he painfully expresses to the now attentive Scrooge:

“At this time of the rolling year," the spectre said, "I suffer most. Why did I walk through crowds of fellow-beings with my eyes turned down, and never raise them to that blessed Star which led the Wise Men to a poor abode? Were there no poor homes to which its light would have conducted me?"(23)

Scrooge listens to all this and the veiled message does have a positive impact but only towards the end where Scrooge badly wants to make amends before it is too late.

Les Standiford, in his memorable and fresh book - *The Man who invented Christmas* , wonderfully recounts how Dickens, to provide calm to his otherwise restless and wandering mind , begins to write *A Christmas Carol* that is a positive wish to bring respite to the world and converge it into a harmonious existence. Writing of *A Christmas Carol* was thus a holiday break for Dickens who wanted to keep to earth his wild imagination and let good things take place on Christmas. The writing of this book is like asking Santa to give the gift of harmony and happiness to the world at large and families in particular. This is what Le Santiford observes: “Indeed, the ability to immerse himself in the writing of *A Christmas Carol* had provided a much-needed respite for Dicken’s psyche. It was as if, in writing the book , he could will into existence a world of universal charity , empathy , and family harmony that he had not experienced in his life”(Standiford 124)

Dickens clearly states that the purpose of writing this work is to reveal to people at large what transgressions were happening the world over, particularly in the England of his times, and how man could find real happiness and salvation. His method is to combine a familiar down to earth story with geographical facts of the England of his times. The purpose and aim in the writing of this beautiful tale of Christmas has been aptly put down in the preface to *A Christmas Carol* where Dickens observes: “ I have endeavoured 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 house pleasantly, and no one wish to lay it. Their faithful Friend and Servant, C. D. December, 1843.”(Chesterton preface)

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