

A CHRISTMAS CAROL by CHARLES DICKENS IGNORANCE AND WANT

notes taken from ENOTES.COM

MAIN QUOTE

They were a boy and girl. Yellow, meagre, ragged, scowling, wolfish; but prostrate, too, in their humility. . . No change, no degradation, no perversion of humanity, in any grade, through all the mysteries of wonderful creation, has monsters half so horrible and dread.

“Spirit! are they yours?” Scrooge could say no more.

“They are Man's,” said the Spirit, looking down upon them. “And they cling to me, appealing from their fathers. This boy is Ignorance. This girl is Want. Beware them both, and all of their degree; but most of all beware this boy, for on his brow I see that written which is Doom, unless the writing be erased.”

THE HAVES AND THE HAVE-NOTS

A recurring theme in the work of Dickens is the tremendous gap between the rich and poor

- In fact, he portrayed the gritty world of the working class and lower class of London at a time when most novelists—most of them educated and from the upper class—had no sense of what poverty or its victims were like

Ignorance and Want, the children of humankind, cling to the Ghost of Christmas Present because, in Scrooge's (and Dickens's present), they are children, young

- a new kind of social problem
 - To be sure, **ignorance and want** have always existed
 - but they exist in a new way during the Victorian era
 - a time characterized by an extreme disparity between the haves and the have nots
 - People who were poor were excruciatingly so, and many of the people with money -- people like Scrooge -- choose to remain ignorant of the problems caused by this extreme want
 - Thus, ignorance and want were the two social evils that Dickens believed posed the biggest threat to society.

In this era, then, a particular kind of ignorance and a particular kind of want were in their infancy, and they would only grow to become more pernicious if not dealt with early on

- Therefore, they are children who cling to the Ghost of Christmas Present because they are relatively small problems in the present; however
 - they are problems that will grow more significant that longer they are ignored.
-

WHEN SCROOGE IS VISITED BY TWO MEN ASKING FOR MONEY FOR CHARITY

When Scrooge is visited by two men asking for money for charity, he scoffs at the idea

- He suggests that he already takes care of the poor by paying taxes that fund prisons and workhouses

- He sends the men off without giving them anything.

By contrast, the wealthy Scrooge lives in miserable circumstances in a cold, abandoned building that is dark because he does not even want to spend money on candles ("darkness was cheap, and Scrooge liked it")

- His wealth is not bringing him any more happiness—it only perpetuates the fear that one day he will lose it

WHEN SCROOGE MEETS IGNORANCE AND WANT

Dickens was particularly concerned with the health, treatment and well-being of children

- always among the most vulnerable members of any society
 - By the mid-nineteenth century, it is believed that well over 100,000 children in London had never attended a school of any kind

In Stave Three, Scrooge encounters two children hiding beneath the skirt of the Ghost of Christmas Present

- These children are symbolic of the poor in Victorian society
 - specifically the industrial poor who toil away in England's workshops and factories, struggling to make ends meet
 - and, so very often, the victims of extreme deprivation.

The children are called Ignorance and Want, whose appearance shocks Scrooge:

- ‘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.’
 - With the revelation of these ragged, pitiful children, the Spirit is cautioning not only Scrooge, but all of mankind
 - He proclaims that they represent Man's worst enemies -- the state of Want (for food, shelter, etc.) that many suffer and live through every day, but most especially, the self-imposed Ignorance of this state of affairs, the Ignorance in which Man chooses to live his life
 - Man, according to the Spirit (and Dickens), must wake up and see what is needed by others and the part each individual can play to ease the pain and suffering of his fellows
 - The Spirit cautions that, unless Man wakes from his self-imposed Ignorance, he will create his own downfall, his own "Doom."

SCROOGE BECOMES REFLECTIVE

Scrooge attends many events from his past, and begins to become more reflective

- By the time he has finished viewing what is going on around him in the present and how he influences people's lives, he is starting to regret his negligence in doing his duty to help the poor
 - The ghost finally confronts him with two skeletally thin children
 - He asks who they belong to, and the Ghost of Christmas Present tells him that they belong to mankind.
 - “And they cling to me, appealing from their fathers. This boy is Ignorance. This girl is Want. Beware them both, and all of their degree; but most of all beware this boy, for on his brow I see that written which is Doom, unless the writing be erased. ...” (Stave 2)

- Scrooge's reaction to the two children is completely different than how he reacted to the poor in the first chapter
 - He is no longer thinking of himself, and the thought of the children going to a workhouse is now repellent to him.

THE GHOST OF CHRISTMAS PRESENT AND SCROOGE'S WORDS

When Scrooge asks about the children, the ghost throws his words back at him with vehemence.

- "Have they no refuge or resource?" cried Scrooge.
 - "Are there no prisons?" said the Spirit, turning on him for the last time with his own words. "Are there no workhouses?" (Stave 2)
 - The Ghost reminds Scrooge of his unfeeling words after warning him of the consequences to all of Scrooge's society if the children, and the life conditions that they came from, continued to be unaddressed.

Scrooge is a different person now than when he said those words

- He cares about Tiny Tim, and he cares about these children too
 - The ghostly intervention makes him see that the loneliness and neglect he has brought upon himself is even worse than the general fear of the world that he developed from the neglect suffered during his childhood
 - Beside the fear of his own death, Scrooge is very affected by the realization of Tiny Tim's death, which he inquires about with "an interest he had never felt before."
 - When he finds out that the boy's fate could be avoided, he finds an opportunity to reach out and help someone other than himself
 - His emotional and financial support saves Tiny Tim's life and provides the true emotional connection that Scrooge desired all along.
- He is already transforming into the Scrooge who cares about other people
 - One of the first things he does when he wakes up in his own present again is find the men he denied gifts too and promise them an enormous sum for their fund.

THE GHOST OF CHRISTMAS PRESENT, THE POOR AND THE MIDDLE CLASS

Moreover, the placement of these children under the ghost's skirt is symbolic of how the poor have been largely forgotten by the Victorian middle classes

- They are, quite literally, hidden from public view, forgotten and neglected by the wider society.
 - By presenting the poor as two half-starved children, Dickens forces his readers to sit up and take note of the realities of industrial life
 - particularly those who become its victims.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF ABANDONING THE POOR

Above all else, A Christmas Carol is allegorical

- The children represent those who were living in poverty, with no hope of improving their lot due to lack of education and lack of opportunity.

- Dickens was a strong proponent of taking care of society's poor and downtrodden (see Dickens' purpose notes)
 - this is why he chose to represent them in children
 - Most people will have more sympathy for children than adults
 - Dickens wanted to make the case that the adults we see as criminals started out as poor and abused children.

A BLEAK FUTURE FOR POOR VICTORIAN CHILDREN

“This boy is Ignorance. This girl is Want. Beware them both, and all of their degree; but most of all beware this boy, for on his brow I see that written which is Doom, unless the writing be erased.” (Stave 3)

- Ultimately, the little boys will turn into pickpockets and thieves (like Oliver Twist)
- and the girls will turn into prostitutes (like Nancy)

Unlike most high and mighty Christians of the Victorian era, Dickens did not look down on the poor

- He even started a charity house for prostitutes
 - because he recognized that these were the people that society threw away.

THE ROOT OF THE PROBLEM

Dickens tells us to beware ignorance more than want

- This is telling, because it demonstrates the root of the problem
 - If our poor are not educated, they have no chance to escape the cycle of poverty
 - Want, or hunger and need, is important
 - It comes from ignorance though
 - We need to educate and take care of our young people so that they don't have children that are just as badly off as they are.

DICKENS' PURPOSE

Dickens wrote this book in order to remind people not to just walk past the needy on the street

- It worked
 - When people saw beggars in the street, they thought about Tiny Tim
 - Eventually, laws were passed providing funds for public education and ending the workhouse system

Scrooge showed people that they are responsible for the children of their society.