

**A CHRISTMAS CAROL by CHARLES DICKENS
THE THREE GHOSTS**

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UNDERSTANDING THE THREE GHOSTS

Key to understanding these Ghosts is considering the way they are described and the scenes that they show Scrooge.

THE THREE GHOSTS AND CHOICES

The most obvious thing that the ghosts all represent is choices

- Throughout his travels in the spirit world, Scrooge is confronted with choices he has made and the consequences of those choices
 - Some choices, such as the ones in the past, Scrooge has tried to forget
 - Choices in the present and future are just as important, but Scrooge has given little thought to them.
 - each ghost operates to taunt Scrooge with the kind of man that he is now and with regret and remorse over his past, present and future actions
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DESCRIPTION OF THE GHOST OF CHRISTMAS PAST

The Ghost of Christmas Past is described as being:

- ‘...like a child: yet not so like a child as like an old man, viewed through some supernatural medium, which gave him the appearance of having receded from the view, and being diminished to a child's proportions.’
 - It is perhaps fitting then that the ghost that examines the past and the actions and choices that have led Scrooge to become the man that he is today appears in such a way that its very appearance depicts looking back on our past lives and decisions.
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THE GHOST OF CHRISTMAS PAST AND SCROOGE'S LIFE

the Ghost of Christmas Past represents events that shaped Scrooge's life

- He shows Scrooge past versions of himself
 - as a boy
 - as an apprentice
 - and as a young man
 - The person he has become is shaped through this progression of sad, happy, and sad again
 - Scrooge comes to realize that his choices in the past made him who he is.
 - “Spirit!” said Scrooge, “show me no more! Conduct me home. Why do you delight to torture me?” (Stave 2, p. 26)
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SCROOGE'S PAST

Thus, Scrooge goes from being just a mean old miser to a man who is tortured by his past

- and perhaps does not even realize it
 - Scrooge has shut himself up away from everything, even his emotions
 - When Scrooge says, “I don't wish to see it,” he is vocalizing how he does not want to face his past.

DESCRIPTION OF THE GHOST OF CHRISTMAS PRESENT

The Ghost of Christmas Present is described in such a fashion as to emphasize the season of plenty and the festival that he represents:

- ‘...there sat a jolly Giant, glorious to see; who bore a glowing torch, in shape not unlike Plenty's horn, and held it up, high up, to shed its light on Scrooge, as he came peeping round the door.’
 - Perhaps this description is fitting for the Ghost that shows so many people enjoying the season and all of the luxuries and warmth and festivities that come along with it.

THE GHOST OF CHRISTMAS PRESENT AND ENJOYMENT

In the present, Scrooge is shown people enjoying themselves

- Scrooge never enjoys himself
 - he realizes that Christmas Present symbolizes happiness and joy found in togetherness
 - All of the people are poor, yet “content to be so” and happy to have each other
 - Scrooge is stunned to see that his clerk has a crippled son.
 - “Spirit,” said Scrooge, with an interest he had never felt before, “tell me if Tiny Tim will live.” (Stave 3, p. 34)

HOW TINY TIM INFLUENCES SCROOGE

Scrooge has never felt affection or interest in anyone

- but Tiny Tim's gentle, pious manner has influenced him
 - The spirit reminds him that Tiny Tim is a member of the “surplus population” and Scrooge regrets not having taken interest in the poor before.

SCROOGE AND THE PRESENT

The Present also represents what Scrooge can have

- He cannot change the past, but he can become a part of the present
 - The Present is basically the future, because it is about to happen but has not happened yet
 - Scrooge can relive the positive events, such as Fred's party, with instant gratification the very next day. He is thrilled when he learns this.
 - The true future is very bleak for Scrooge, as the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come shows him that he will die alone and his deathbed will be looted by less than savory characters
 - Scrooge is in complete denial until he realizes that the dead man whose life he is seeing is himself.

“Men's courses will foreshadow certain ends, to which, if persevered in, they must lead,” said Scrooge. “But if the courses be departed from, the ends will change...” (Stave 4, p. 50)

Scrooge has clearly decided to reform. He wants to live the life he saw in Christmas Present. This is what Dickens means when he says:

“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.” (Stave 4, p. 51)

Scrooge does better than his word, and becomes a second father to Tiny Tim and a good friend to the Cratchits

- He also becomes a good Uncle
 - Scrooge realizes, seeing the present as he did, that he has a ready-made family
 - All he has to do is open his heart to them.

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 GHOST OF CHRISTMAS YET TO COME

Lastly, the Ghost of Christmas Yet To Come is described in such a way as to emphasize its darkness and associations with death:

- ‘It was shrouded in a deep black garment, which concealed its head, its face, its form, and left nothing of it visible save one outstretched hand. But for this it would have been difficult to detach its figure from the night, and separate it from the darkness by which it was surrounded.’
 - Again, the point of this Ghost is to show how Scrooge is remembered after his death,

- and to shock him with how little respect and regard he had even from those he considered his "friends" and "business associates."
 - Thus the darkness and the "solemn dread" that this Ghost inspires in Scrooge is perhaps fitting.

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.