Life, Death, and Christmas in Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*

Karen Oshima

A Christmas Carol [1] remains one of Charles Dickens's most beloved works for it fosters an idyllic image of Christmas: a family gathered around the hearth, enjoying each other's company and a hearty meal. The tale is also one of hope where the protagonist, Scrooge, whose very name has become synonymous with miserliness and Christmas-bashing, learns the error of his ways and is transformed into the early Dickens's ideal— a rich man with a philanthropic heart, who, like the Cheerybles in *Nicholas Nickleby*, eagerly helps those in need. Dickens's earlier depictions of Christmas in *The Pickwick Papers* and *Sketches by Boz* also show it to be a time when the fellowship of man and the warmth of the family should be celebrated. However, *A Christmas Carol* is not merely a cozy, pleasant Christmas story—it is one deeply steeped in death and the supernatural where Dickens links the holiday with death and its aftermath. This paper shall examine how Dickens relates life and death to Christmas and how Scrooge comes to find new meaning in life through his journey in the spiritual world.

A Christmas Carol begins appropriately enough on the night before Christmas. Dickens starts his tale with the famous line, "Marley was dead: to begin with" (45). With these words, he brings death to the fore, an ironic beginning, considering that death marks the end of life and thus the end to one's story. In this manner, Dickens reverses the order of nature, beginning with a death and ending with the reformation or rebirth of Scrooge. This rebirth takes place on Christmas, which celebrates the birth of Christ, a time for exuberance and festivities that celebrate life. It is, as Philip Collins points out "an annual rebirth, both of high spirits and the spirit of charity and compassion" (166). However, the anniversary of the death of Marley, a man who was far from spirited and compassionate, is a grim reminder of human mortality.

Dickens's immediate association of Marley's death with Christmas is at first, however, a simple assertion of an indisputable fact. The narrator insists that Marley was "as dead as a doornail" (45) and points to Scrooge as one that can vouch for this since he was his partner's "sole" executor. Scrooge's entirely work-related involvement with Marley's death is tinged with caustic humor. While Dickens assigns Scrooge the role of Marley's "chief" or "sole" mourner, he negates this idea immediately by the offhand comment that Scrooge made a good business deal on the very day of the

funeral. Marley's death has had little or no emotional impact on Scrooge, even though he was the closest person to Marley. Marley could thus be just one of the nameless who die everyday, one of the "surplus population" (50). However, this death will bring about "something wonderful," actually something quite miraculous—for Marley's death makes Scrooge's salvation possible.

Thus far, nothing wonderful has come from Marley's death for Scrooge, as he has continued to lead the same kind of life as his partner with moneymaking as his whole reason for being. Scrooge does not even bother to paint out Marley's name from their sign and answers to both names. The two men are interchangeable since, by shunning human society and refusing to emotionally involve themselves with others, they shut out life. Although the narrator emphasizes several times the fact that Marley, unlike Scrooge, is dead, he describes the still-living Scrooge in terms similar to that of a corpse:

> The cold within him froze his old features, nipped his pointed nose, shriveled his cheek, stiffened his gait; made his eyes red, his thin lips blue; and spoke out shrewdly in his grating voice. A frosty rime was on his head, and on his eyebrows, and his wiry chin. He carried his own low temperature always about with him; he iced his office in the dog-days; and didn't thaw it one degree at Christmas (46).

The stiffness and low temperature of his body suggest that Scrooge is dead. He is so cold that he makes his office freeze all year round. Just as winter, the most severe season when many living things die or go into hibernation, Scrooge exists in a permanent state of winter where he eats enough and keeps warm enough only to preserve the life of the body.

In stark contrast, Fred, Scrooge's nephew, represents all the liveliness, generosity, and warm-hearted feelings appropriate to the Christmas season. Although poor, he takes pleasure in associating with others, and, unlike Scrooge, follows his heart to marry the dowerless woman he loves. He greets his uncle with a hearty "Merry Christmas!" and physically brings warmth into Scrooge's freezing office after having "heated himself with rapid walking." But, oddly enough, he also makes a connection between Christmas and death:

> I am sure I have always thought of Christmas time... as a good time: a kind, forgiving, charitable, pleasant time... and the only time I know 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 were really fellow passengers to the

grave and not another race of creatures bound on other journeys. (49)

Fred sees Christmas as a time of openness and unity in man's common mortality and introduces the egalitarian aspect of the holiday. Christmas is, as Collins describes it "as demotic, unsophisticated, and classless an experience as can be: a festival celebrated much alike by duke, don, and dustman" (166). In addition, according to Malcolm Andrews, the traditional English Christmas can be traced back to the Roman Saturnalia, a winter festival that celebrates the coming of the new year, where observance of the social hierarchy was suspended (98).[2] Death, likewise, does not discriminate; regardless of social status or wealth, it is the great equalizer that comes to everyone. Scrooge can understand death as a fact of life where breathing ceases and the body rots; however, he does not believe that a man's spirit may exist after death. Scrooge is a Smilean man of industry, a hard, shrewd businessman with disdain for the imagination. He does not trust anything that is not tangible or countable — and thus has no conscious awareness or understanding of the life of the soul. Scrooge's senses allow him to acknowledge the existence of a human, material world — but, he does not recognize the possible existence of a spiritual world.

Scrooge is forced to encounter the spiritual world, however, when the ghost of Marley makes his appearance. Naturally, Scrooge cannot believe in his existence, preferring to consider Marley's ghost merely a bad reaction to food. When he asks Marley "Why do spirits walk the earth and why do they come to me?" Marley explains his mission:

> It is required of every man... that the spirit within him should walk abroad among his fellow men, and travel far and wide; and if that spirit goes not forth in life, it is condemned to do so after death. It is 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! (61)

Since Scrooge does not recognize that he has a spirit within him that should walk "among his fellow men," he is already, in that sense, dead, while Marley is terribly alive in his suffering. Scrooge's acceptance of the existence of Marley's ghost, shows an acknowledgement, albeit a reluctant one, that there may be more to life than what meets the eye.

In Stave 2, Scrooge lets go of the material world he knows and leaps into a supernatural, spiritual one. The Ghost of Christmas Past takes him back to when he was young to make him re-live a past that was as good as dead and buried to him. He sees his former self as a lonely but imaginative child and he weeps for the tender child

in him that had long been forgotten. The sense of sadness he feels for himself as a child enables him to feel sympathy and a pang of regret for his earlier dismissive treatment of a child singing a Christmas carol. Afterwards, he sees himself as an apprentice of his former employer, Fezziwig, whose child-like delight in Christmas festivities was infectious. Recollecting the kindness of the now-deceased Fezziwig, he warmly defends his employer in the present tense as if he were back in time:

> He has the power to render us happy or unhappy; to make our service light or burdensome; a pleasure or a toil. Say that his powers lies in words and looks; in things so slight and insignificant that it is impossible to add and count 'em up: what then? The happiness he gives, is quite as great as if it cost a fortune" (78).

This recollection suddenly makes Scrooge regretful of his harsh treatment of his own employee, Bob Cratchit, and makes him realize that Bob could never speak in such glowing terms of him. Scrooge comes to see the power he has over Bob's happiness and the responsibility he has as an employer.[3]

The Ghost of Christmas Past also reminds Scrooge about a crucial choice he had made in his youth. Scrooge sees the life he gave up when he decided not to marry Belle, the woman he loved, simply because she had no dowry. As Belle aptly comments, Scrooge "fears the world too much" and he seeks protection from poverty from what he trusts the most—money.[4] By choosing financial stability over love, he deprives himself of the warmth of family life and a future in the form of offspring. When he sees Belle's daughter, he realizes with sadness that " such another creature quite as graceful and full of promise, might have called him father and been a spring-time in the haggard winter of his life" (82). Regret for the choices he has made become unendurable as he is powerless to change them. By re-living some painful memories, Scrooge realizes that the past is far from dead for it has far-reaching consequences on the present.

The Spirit of Christmas Present in Stave 3 shows him the merriment of others at Christmas and the tendency toward recollection at this time of the year. Cazamian observes that in the Victorian Age "Christmas was already the major family and Church festival; on Christmas Day men were open-hearted; old, dead affections were revived and general sympathy prevailed. Families which had become separated were reunited under the paternal roof" (134).[5] Scrooge sees people gather around a fire with family or friends in their best Christmas humor. He notices that on a ship,

> every man among them hummed a Christmas tune, or had a Christmas

> thought, or spoke below his breath to his companion of some bygone Christmas Day, with homeward hopes belonging to it. And every man on board, waking or sleeping, good or bad, had had a kinder word for another on that day than on any day in the year; and had shared to some extent in its festivities; and had remembered those he cared for at a distance, and had known that they had delighted to remember him. (101)

Christmas is thus a time when people think about those they hold dear. Cazamian also points out that Dickens felt that this good will toward those closest to one should "shine out beyond the domestic hearth, and take in the humble, poor, and destitute" (134).

Scrooge gets more of an understanding of the Christmas spirit when he spends time observing celebrations at his nephew's and employee's houses. At the Cratchit home, he sees the hectic bustle and enjoyment of a simple Christmas dinner shared by a loving family. He also comes to form an attachment toward the ailing Tiny Tim and comes to regret his earlier thoughtless comment about decreasing the surplus population. At Fred's house, Scrooge finds his nephew and his guests playing games in such a lively manner that he longs to join them himself. Scrooge finally sees Fred and the Cratchits as real human beings, not merely part of the masses for whom he can easily feel aloof and detached. When the spirit shows him the children called Ignorance and Want and tells him that they mean the end for mankind, Scrooge comes to recognize his own responsibility for these children as a member of the human race. Dickens implies that people like Scrooge must not leave the disadvantaged to the mercy of state institutions like the infamous workhouses and must extend the generous spirit of Christmas to them.[6]

Scrooge fears the Spirit of Christmas Yet to Come in Stave 4 and understandably so — the spirit in black robes is like Death incarnate. This silent spirit simply shows Scrooge an unidentified dead man whose death inspires no natural feelings of grief from anyone — instead people profit from it or feel relief from it. Death indeed seems like a fearful, vengeful God in relation to the dead man. As Scrooge views the covered corpse, he hears the following invocation:

> Oh cold, cold, rigid, dreadful Death, set up thine altar here, and dress it with such terrors as thou hast at thy command: for this is thy dominion! But of the loved, revered, and honoured dead, thou canst not turn one hair to thy dread purposes, or make one feature odious. It is not that the hand is heavy and will fall down when released; it is not that the heart and pulse

> are still; but that the hand WAS open, generous, and true; the heart brave, warm, and tender; and the pulse a man's. Strike, Shadow, strike! And see his good deeds springing from the wound, to sow the world with life immortal! (118)

The dead man is, of course, Scrooge, who realizes that if he continues his misanthropic ways, he will suffer the same hell as Marley— an eternity of remorse. Death, however, cannot harm those who have been kind and good for they will achieve a kind of immortality.

This immortality is that of being remembered by others. Scrooge sees that his corpse lay " with not a man, woman, or a child, to say that he was kind of me in this or that, and for the memory of one kind word I will be kind to him" (118). He realizes that having shunned humanity and considered it "not his business," he will be forgotten and his grave neglected. Thus, Dickens shows that another definition of "death" is to be forgotten. When he asks the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come to show him some tenderness concerning a death, he finds a very different kind of scene. Scrooge hears Bob Cratchit remind his children about their deceased brother, Tiny Tim:

> But however and whenever we part from one another, I am sure we shall none of us forget Tiny Tim—shall we—or this first parting that there was among us?... I know, my dears, when we recollect how patient and how mild he was; although he was a little, little child; we shall not quarrel easily among ourselves, and forget Tiny Tim in doing it. (123)

Cratchit's children cry out that they will never forget their poor brother. Christmas is a time of recollection and Tiny Tim, in being remembered by his family, will live on in spirit.[7] Scrooge sees the contrast between his fate and that of Tiny Tim's.

With the combined insight he has gained from the spirits and an understanding of his failure to nurture his own spirit through relations with others, Scrooge can be reborn. The old Scrooge dies on Christmas Eve, the anniversary of Marley's death, and the new one is born on Christmas Day. In becoming a kinder, gentler person, Scrooge himself almost becomes a Christ figure, capering about jubilantly as a child as he resolves to help those he can. He can become both a "joyous child and a benevolent adult" (Andrews 111). He contributes to charities, raises Bob's salary, and helps the Cratchit family financially so that Tiny Tim can recover. Through such good deeds, he is able to rejoin society and finds happiness in sharing his life with others. His good deeds will insure that he will not face the eternity of remorse that Marley

suffers and that he will be remembered and, in this way, "live on" even after death.

In *A Christmas Carol*, Dickens tells a story where life, death, and Christmas are inextricably linked. He shows two planes of existence, the human world and the spiritual world where "life" and "death" are defined in different ways. In the human world, there is a natural order from the beginning of life, birth, to the end of life, death. This order, however, does not necessarily apply to the spiritual world. The old Scrooge must "die," experience a kind of conversion, before the new one can be born and truly live. Through his time travel with the spirits, he can widen his view of life to include the spiritual world and recover his own forgotten humanity. Death may always be looming but it challenges people to make something of their lives. Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* suggests that it is never too late for reform — both personal and social — and that if each individual makes a similar kind of leap of faith as Scrooge, there is hope in life and hope of a better world.

Notes

1 Charles Dickens, *The Christmas Books: Volume 1, A Christmas Carol/The Chimes* (London: Penguin, 1985). Subsequent references to this edition will be made throughout the text.

2 For more information about the history of Christmas and the Victorian middle class Christmas, see Catherine Waters, "Dickens, Christmas, and the Family," *Dickens and the Politics of Family* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997), 58-88.

3 See John Butt, "Dickens's Christmas Books," *Pope, Dickens, and Others* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1969) 127-148. Butt observes that one of Dickens's favorite themes concerns the mutual sense of duty and responsibility between an employer and employee, which can also be seen in *Nicholas Nickleby* and *The Pickwick Papers*.

4 Peter Ackroyd, in his biography, *Dickens* (Toronto: Stewart House, 1991), points out that Dickens could relate to Scrooge's fear of poverty and his need to "earn money as a defence against the world." Dickens "created Scrooge exactly at the time when he was desperate for money and when he was trying to fend off the demands of his own relatives." Ackroyd also asserts that a central theme of the story was to show "how the experiences of childhood can lead ineluctably to miserliness itself" (433).

5 See Charles Dickens, "A Christmas Dinner, "*Sketches by Boz: Illustrative of Every-Day Life and Every-Day People, 1833-1836* (London: Oxford UP, 1957). Dickens describes the "magical" quality of Christmas to draw a family together as follows:

> Who can be insensible to the outpourings of good feeling and the honest interchange of affectionate attachment, which abound at this season of the year? A Christmas family-party! We know nothing in nature more delightful! There seems a magic in the very name of Christmas. Petty jealousies and discords are forgotten; social feelings are awakened, in bosoms to which they have long been strangers; father and son, or brother and sister, who have met and passed with averted gaze, or a look of cold recognition, for months before, proffer and return the cordial embrace, and bury

> animosities in their present happiness. Kindly hearts that have yearned towards each other, but have been withheld by false notions of pride and self-dignity, are again reunited, and all is kindness and benevolence! Would that Christmas lasted the whole year through (as it ought), and that the prejudices and passions which deform our better nature, were never called into action among those to whom they should ever be strangers! (220-221)

6 See J. Hillis Miller, "The Genres of A Christmas Carol," *Dickensian* 89 (1993): 193-206. As many critics recognize, Dickens did not advocate radical change in the social system to help the poor and he distrusted state institutions. Instead, as Miller observes, Dickens seemed to believe that everything would "be all right if we all live in charity with our neighbours" and that "a rich man (may) enter the kingdom of heaven if he is generous enough and loving enough" (204-205). Dickens, through his writing, thus was making a call to individuals to open their hearts and wallets to help those in need.

7 Dickens also addresses this issue of remembering the dead at Christmas in "What Christmas Is As We Grow Older," *Christmas Stories* (London: Dent, 1910), where the narrator speaks lovingly of a deceased friend:

> Shall he be shut out of our Christmas remembrance? Would his love have so excluded us? Lost friend, lost child, lost parent, sister, brother, husband, wife, we will not so discard you! You shall hold your cherished places in our Christmas hearts, and by our Christmas fires; and in the season of immortal hope, and on the birthday of immortal mercy, we will shut out Nothing! (24-25)

As in *A Christmas Carol*, Dickens stresses the inclusiveness of Christmas, that no one, not even the dead, is "shut out" and his use of the word "immortal" implies that the dead can live on, at least, in memory.

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