

The Power of Reformation

A Christmas Carol – who could ever forget the heartwarming tale of a miserly curmudgeon’s unlikely transformation into a munificent kindred spirit? While many could never forget Ebenezer Scrooge, Tiny Tim, or the infamous phrase, “Bah, humbug!,” few realize that this ostensibly simple novella transcends its surface label as a “mere” children’s classic. Not only is *A Christmas Carol* rife with social commentary regarding the stark disparity between the rich and the poor, but it is also chock-full of the valuable moral morsels and tidbits Dickens has thrown in for good measure. Furthermore, Dickens explores how imperative it is *not* to fall prey to the blinding, all-encompassing power of greed, a point that could not be more germane in today’s increasingly materialistic world. Beautiful in its simplicity, yet rich for all its moral insight, this deceptively thin volume, in fact, speaks volumes about the unrelenting power of the human conscience, man’s incredible capacity for reformation and the timeless value of hope – the hope that it is never too late to change.

Although the inevitable human tendency may be to lay the blame on anyone but ourselves, Dickens reiterates throughout *A Christmas Carol* that we must ““wear the chain [we] forged in life...made link by link, and yard by yard... girded on of [our] own free will”” (16). Granted, while placing the blame on another’s shoulders may temporarily lighten the load on our own backs, ultimately, no one can ever escape the haunting, harrowing power of one’s own conscience. While Scrooge may not feel the slightest tug at his heartstrings when he initially dismisses the poor as mere “surplus population,” even he, the most hard-hearted of humans, feels the rock of his heart moved and the core of his conscience tweaked when the Ghost of Christmas Present parrots back his heartless words as he takes in the pitiable sight of Tiny Tim (50). After

all, whether or not we like to admit it, the nagging, unforgiving power of the human conscience is a force to be reckoned with, to be ignored only at one's peril.

More importantly, however, Dickens emphasizes that even if we were somehow to evade the first line of defense by becoming immune to our conscience as did old Jacob Marley, there is no way around the foolproof second gate, which gives way to the swift and exacting hand of justice. Although, at first glance, it seems that Marley died without receiving his just deserts, Scrooge's parsimonious business partner eventually pays back the ultimate price, pound for pound, after death when he is forced to roam the face of the earth in the chains he forged. And, indeed, Dickens' message could not be more pertinent in today's crime-ridden society, where criminals often celebrate prematurely for having escaped through the myriad loopholes of our leaky legal system. Dickens reassures us, however, that although such criminals may have eluded the first hurdle of the justice system, they will never dodge the much harsher blow dealt by the invisible hand of justice after death.

Perhaps rather avant-garde for his time, Dickens was one of the few who dared to delve into one of society's most pesky, enduring problems – the passive-aggressive abuse of the poor and underprivileged. Exposing the hypocrisy of a Victorian era social system that supposedly “took care” of its needy by “kindly” relegating them to the prisons and workhouses, which those like Scrooge so eagerly noted were in good working order, Dickens points out with exasperation that such establishments not only failed to help the impoverished, but further exacerbated their already abysmal situations. Rather than dealing with the problem at hand, society, instead, averted its eyes, hoping that the problems would somehow take care of themselves if left alone long enough. In effect, Dickens is alerting us to the dangers of taking the passive route of inaction because we indeed act through our inaction. After all, through inaction, we *are* giving

our tacit consent to the unjust actions of the status quo. And in exploring this darker side of human nature, Dickens is underscoring the fact that the Scrooges of the world are simply allowing poverty to tighten its stranglehold on the poor, allowing society to trample ruthlessly on those already downtrodden. Regrettable as it is, under a government far too concerned with meddling in other countries' affairs to bother with its own, too few people today ever give pause to consider those in need, either. When we shuffle past the homeless apathetically, aren't we all giving way to the latent Scrooges within us? Quite simply, it is a shame that we have learned nothing from the mistakes of the past: we continue to believe today that the poor are nobody's problem when, in fact, they are everybody's problem.

In an interesting twist, Dickens draws yet another astute observation when he points out that the depth of one's pocket is a poor judge of the depth of one's character. Oftentimes, Dickens notes, it is the less wealthy who realize that there is merit in kindness, as Scrooge's nephew declares, "There are many things from which I might have derived good, by which I have not profited, I dare say... and therefore... though it has never put a scrap of gold or silver in my pocket, I believe [doing good] *has* done me good, and *will* do me good, and I say, God bless it!" (5). Indeed, more often than not, it is the poor who see that, "while there is infection in disease and sorrow, there is nothing in the world so irresistibly contagious as laughter and good-humour" (55). Sadly, the money-rich, on the other hand, who have all the wealth in the world, are oftentimes the spiritually bankrupt ones, mere hollow, empty souls too "busy" to worry about such trivial matters as happiness. Such people are so consumed with filling their pockets that they all but neglect the growing cavity in their souls, allowing their moral debt to society and their own consciences to mount while their wallets bulge. And isn't it true that for all the money in the world, the wealthy can still never buy true happiness, which is "quite as great as if it cost

a fortune” (33)? Likewise, there are all too many celebrities today who are literally rolling in riches, yet are still unhappy with the state of moral decrepitude they find themselves steeped in. The Ghost of Christmas Present basically says it all when he remarks, ““It may be that in the sight of heaven, you, [Scrooge], are more worthless and less fit to live than millions like this poor man’s child”” (50).

Rather than shying away from the issues that have long festered beneath the raw, open wounds of society’s problems, Dickens endeavors to cleanse and dress these sores, boldly soldiering on to fight the pervasive pandemic we know as greed. Although most would recoil from such unpleasant sights, Dickens casts a direct, critical eye toward the “wretched, abject... wolfish” allegorical twins of “Want” and “Ignorance,” who are slowly leading society to its downfall (61). As man was the one who created these atrocious monsters in the first place, man must also be the one to destroy them before *they* destroy *him*, as the Ghost of Christmas Present forewarns, “Beware them both, and all of their degree, but most of all beware this boy [Ignorance], for on his brow I see that written which is Doom, unless the writing be erased” (61). Ultimately, “Want” and “Ignorance,” both close relatives of the equally vile monster “Greed,” are deathless evils permeating society, bringing man closer to his own demise with each passing day. Although, as humans, we were never placed on earth to lead the extravagant lives of hedonists, or to hoard our money to the grave like penny-pinchers, somehow, little about the exaggerated significance attached to money has changed over time. If anything, the obsession with green has only intensified in this day and age, where there is constant competition to drive the fanciest car or keep up with the latest technological gadgets. Suffice it to say, we will eventually pay for our nonchalance; we will pay when we see that the heinous twin ogres we so carelessly allowed to run rampant have toppled every last pillar of society.

More than anything, however, Dickens' timeless tale continues to be pertinent to society today because it speaks of human sentiments that speak straight to our hearts. Because regret is an emotion that no human has ever successfully evaded, we empathize when a much reformed Scrooge exclaims, "...no space of regret can make amends of one life's opportunity misused!" (7). And, ultimately, we delight in Scrooge's miraculous transformation because his reformation leaves us with incredible hope – the hope that the desire to change can never come too late. After all, there is a reason why "hope" was the only element that failed to escape from Pandora's Box, for man would be nothing without it. More importantly, however, the visits from the three spirits on that one fateful night bring Scrooge's life into perspective, as he experiences a life-altering epiphany that renders him a changed and better man. For the first time, Scrooge sees that "men's courses will foreshadow certain ends, to which, if persevered in, they must lead, but if the courses be departed from, the ends will change" (77). After all, *we* are the ones who wield the pens that dictate the courses of our lives. Granted, these instruments come with no convenient erasers to wipe away our mistakes, but with them come the great power and responsibility to learn from past errors so that we can all seek to write happy endings in the final chapters of our lives.