

The Chimes: A Story of Hope

“I can’t make out whether we have any business on the face of the earth, or not,” wonders Toby Veck doubtfully on New Year’s Eve (97). Of all Charles Dickens’s memorable working-class protagonists, from David Copperfield to Tiny Tim, Toby is perhaps the most pitiful: he portrays, in Dickens’s novella *The Chimes*, the victim convinced by his oppressors that he is worthless. Through the lesson that Toby learns from the spirits of the Chimes, Dickens argues that the poor man’s spirit can only be destroyed by submitting to the idea that he does not deserve to exist—a betrayal of God’s purpose for mankind. When, on the other hand, he embraces the joyful and love-filled life for which he was created, he instead finds hope.

As the novella begins, Toby is struggling with two warring sides: the despairing part of him that lives apologetically, that doubts himself whenever he is demeaned and blamed for his poverty; and the other side that cannot help but live his life with gusto and love. The former is fed by the opinions of the world: the newspapers that complain about the nuisance and danger poverty creates, the Alderman who stuffily proclaims his irritation with the problems of the poor, and the would-be “Friend and Father” of the poor who names enjoyment of any kind a sin (115). An impressionable person, Toby often allows such criticisms to cripple his self-worth, asking himself if the lowest class truly has a right to enjoy any aspect of living, from the meat in his lunch to the beauty of his daughter. The latter side, characterized by his inherently optimistic and joyful nature, is fueled simply by his enthusiasm for life. Dickens reveals this enthusiasm in every facet of Toby’s life, from his attitude towards his harsh and difficult job—“he loved to earn his money” (94)—to the way he eats his food—“with an unctuous and unflagging relish” (101)—to his generosity to a stranger—“Come home with me! I’m a poor man, living in a poor

place, but I can give you lodging for one night and never miss it.” (122)—and especially in his great love for his daughter Meg. However, this side of him exists because of the unconscious vitality he has possessed since birth, not because he feels it is justified—in fact, he feels constantly guilty for these virtues that others have called sins. In essence, the unnaturally shame-filled side of him causes him to betray, through denial, the righteousness of his inherent life-loving nature.

Dickens uses the time of the New Year’s Eve to signify Toby’s transformation and rebirth, through a lesson orchestrated by the magical Chimes. Similar to the magical beings in the other Dickens Christmas novels, the spirits that reside in the bells are manifestations of a didactic Creator through whom Dickens expresses his moral argument. In *The Chimes*, these spirits wish to teach Toby that his lack of self-worth is in reality a betrayal of self and purpose. Toby himself has always subconsciously recognized that the Chimes speak the voice of God—he often hears them calling “Toby Veck, Toby Veck, keep a good heart, Toby!” or even saying grace for his meal (100)—so when he starts hearing the Alderman’s echo, “Put ‘em down, Put ‘em down!” (110) it is because he has begun to imagine that God, as the ultimate arbiter of truth, agrees with those who believe that the poor “have no earthly right or business to be born” or to enjoy life grudgingly given (108). The Chimes lead Toby on a *Christmas Carol*-like journey through the hypothetical future, helping him realize that his idea of God’s intentions could not be farther from the truth.

Toby is convinced that the poor have no right to be happy or to love one another, so the Chimes choose to show Toby the future of his beloved daughter Meg stripped of hope. Meg is the manifestation of Toby’s hope and love for life—Dickens describes her eyes, seen by Toby, as “beaming . . . with Hope so buoyant, vigorous, and bright, . . . claiming kindred with that light

which Heaven called into being”—so when he sees her working alone, her engagement to her love broken off and the light in her eyes dimmed, he is seeing the harsh consequence of what he believes (98). He witnesses the results of hopelessness in all of his acquaintances who are happy, strong people despite their poverty: drunkenness for Meg’s would-be husband, prostitution for Meg’s protégé Lillian, and homelessness for Meg herself. All of them, he realizes, are driven to desperation because of their lack of hope and happiness. “Learn from [your daughter’s] life, a living truth . . . See every bud and leaf plucked one by one from off the fairest stem, and know how bare and wretched it may be,” the Chimes tell him, for he is condemning in himself those qualities that he loves about his daughter (134). Her sweetness, her patience, her love for a father, a husband, a child—all of these are the metaphorical buds and leaves that are born from hope and self-worth. In Toby’s hypothetical future where the poor deserve none of these, Meg loses all her virtues one by one until she loses the last: the love for her life.

Suicide is a prominent theme in *The Chimes*—effectively, for it is the logical end for one who feels their life is not deserved. The Alderman states emphatically that, above all else, suicide is the one vice of the poor that he most wants to eliminate. An acquaintance of the “Friend and Father” commits suicide. And in a future where there is no hope—for hope is humanity’s attachment to life in times of difficulty—Toby must watch, distraught, as Meg contemplates and finally goes to throw herself off of a bridge. Meg’s suicide, since Meg, as his child, has always represented his hope, is symbolic of the death of Toby’s own hope. Her death is a challenge from the Chimes to make a choice. Toby now sees that he has been denying his greatest love—“learn it from the creature dearest to your heart” is their refrain—and the meaning of his life (157). With the realization, he shouts out the lesson the Chimes want to impart to him, and Dickens to the reader: “I know that we must trust and hope, and neither doubt ourselves, nor doubt the good

in one another” (161). He returns to reality, where, hope returned to the world, Meg is alive and happy, and about to get married. As she kisses her husband-to-be, the Chimes mark New Year’s Day—symbolizing a new life in which Toby celebrates his joy and hope.

The Chimes is not strictly a condemnation of the oppressed who have given in to despair. It is, rather, an expression of pity for those who have and for those who have not—an encouragement to continue to hope. As in all of his novels dealing with social injustice, Dickens heavily criticizes a society in which a man can be made to feel so unwanted that he thinks God did not intend his creation; so unwanted that, in the words of a convict imprisoned so many times that jail is seen as his rightful place: “. . . even his Bible changes in his altered mind, and the words seem to him to read . . . ‘Whither thou goest, I can Not go; whether thou lodgest, I do Not lodge; thy people are Not my people; Nor thy God my God!’” (142) However, Dickens argues that the power of human nature and the power of hope are, together, stronger than the influences of society. As say the Chimes, “Who seeks to turn [he who loves life] back, or stay him on his course, arrests a mighty engine which will strike the meddler dead; and be the fiercer and the wilder, ever, for its momentary check!” Dickens ends the novella with a tone of hope: hope for the integrity of human nature, hope for the strength of life. Hope, for men to know the happiness that “our Great Creator formed them to enjoy” (164).

Works Cited

Dickens, Charles. *Five Christmas Novels*. New York. The Heritage Press. 1939.