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# The Importance of the Five Senses in A Christmas Carol

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## ANNOUNCEMENT

- The 2017 International Conference on Quality of Life was held in Penang Malaysia on August 20<sup>th</sup> - 21<sup>st</sup>.
- Proceedings as well as photos and other information from past conferences can be found on our website.

More information at <http://as4qol.org/icqol/2017/>

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## The Importance of the Five Senses in A Christmas Carol

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*A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens, a Christmas novel strongly extolling philanthropy, tends to be considered a light, heart-warming fantasy. Limited to Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, the novel tells the story of an avaricious old man, detested by those around him, undergoing an overnight change of heart into a compassionate, charitable person. At first glance, *A Christmas Carol* seems overly idealistic; however, by perceiving Ebenezer Scrooge as a captive in a prison of his own making and his reputation as a cold-hearted miser as *not* his true nature but akin to walls protecting his heart from the outside world, can this work actually be considered a serious novel in which typically Dickensian themes play a pivotal part? One after the other, the four ghosts appear and appeal to Scrooge's obstinate heart. With their unique methods and Scrooge's gradual freeing, the shift from death to rebirth—existing in the background of the Christmas season—is realized through the novel's protagonist. This short novel is thus, indeed, serious.

### I

Similar to many Dickensian characters, Scrooge, an unlikely protagonist in *A Christmas Carol*, is a self-made prisoner; this is an important point in the process of his change of heart. Needless to say, physically, he has always been free. His confinement is unrelated to actual jails or detention centres; at the most, it is metaphorical. However, although his walls are psychological, they are extremely solid and have been constructed so strongly by Scrooge's internal necessity that he frees himself with great difficulty. From his mannerisms described in the novel's beginning, readers see that Scrooge caught himself in the cage of his own resolute will and has continued day by day to reinforce his imprisonment.

In the first chapter, a characteristic evidencing Scrooge's self-imprisonment is his complete exclusion of the outside world and other people; the happy, cheer-inducing December scenery, his nephew Fred's passionate speech on the Christmas spirit, and the charity workers' appeals as they raise donations for the poor cannot reach Scrooge's heart. During long, cold hours in his office on Christmas Eve, he mutters cold, brusque statements such as 'Humbug!'; 'I wish to be left alone'; a dismissive 'Good Afternoon!'; 'It's not my business....It's enough for a man to understand his own business, and not to interfere with other people's.' All these are not satis-

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factory forms of communication but rejections of others, charged with hostility. Scrooge's miserliness and beliefs in non-indulgence extend to his words and actions themselves, not just to his finances. The stiff, elderly Scrooge is a mere figure of a man existing in self-imposed isolation, not turning his eyes to his actual surroundings and not directly bending an ear to listen. He has abandoned his feelings and emotions; this is the prison he has created for himself.

Scrooge! A squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous, old sinner! Hard and sharp as flint, from which no steel had ever struck out generous fire; secret, and self-contained, and solitary as an oyster. The cold within him froze his old features, nipped his pointed nose, shriveled his cheek, stiffens his gait; mad his eye red, his thin lips blue; and spoke out shrewdly in his grating voice. External heat and cold had little influence on Scrooge. No warmth could warm, no wintry weather chill him. (8)

Brought into sharp relief in these sentences is poor Scrooge, cold and hardhearted, resembling ice, rock, or metal. Despite expressing his heartlessness and inhumanity, these statements can also be read as demonstrating the thickness and toughness of walls that repel absolutely everything.

Dickens seems eager to plant Scrooge's negative impression since the book's very beginning, with his merciless line, 'If they would rather die, they had better do it, and decrease the surplus population'(12) seems reminiscent of Malthus's 'An Essay on the Principle of Population.' Dickens emphasizes Scrooge's heartless attitude towards his upright, hard-working, honest clerk Bob Cratchit. At the same time, the name Ebenezer, his fireplace tiles illustrated with stories from the Old Testament, and his occupation as a banker suggest that Scrooge is of Jewish birth, as does the stereotype of Jews as greedy moneylenders, widespread at the time. In fact, Dickens so succeeded in affixing Scrooge's image that *Scrooge* has entered the language as a term for greed, selfishness, heartlessness, and cold-blooded people.

But was Scrooge naturally so villainous?

Scrooge is not really inhumane in the beginning any more than he is at the end. There is a heartiness in his inhospitable sentiments that is akin to humour and therefore to humanity; he is only a crusty old bachelor, and had (I strongly suspect) given away turkeys secretly all his life.(1)

Past interpretations regarding Scrooge's true nature have been divided. Can it not be said that G.K. Chesterton's view, quoted here and appearing somewhat extreme, shows great insight? Certainly, even in the first parts of the book, occasional instances suggest a vague semblance of humor beneath Scrooge's rejections. Such instances do not suit a person full of unequalled cruelty. Besides the reader glimpsing a fragment of Scrooge's humanity, the author would surely not have scribed Scrooge the potential to be freed from wandering purgatory, like Marley, if he were truly the person he appears to be.

Can it not be that the heartless outward appearance of an elderly miser is a mask of his own design, fashioned to conceal himself? We must not be deceived by this mask. Instead, we need to grasp what lurks in the depths of Scrooge's soul and experience. Therefore, let us focus on the following passage.

They[chambers] were a gloomy suite of rooms, in a lowering pile of building up a yard, where it had so little business to be, that one could scarcely help fancying it must have run there when it was a young house, playing at hide-and-seek with other houses, and forgotten the way out again. (14)

A common Dickensian narrative strategy is for the outside world's scenery to become a metonymy of characters; thus, clearly, Scrooge's truth is included here. In other words, Scrooge's London residence definitely overlaps Ebenezer's childhood image—the Ghost of Christmas Past shows us a lonely child left behind by his friends, on his own in the desolate schoolyard despite it being Christmas. His residence also functions as the lonely, isolated, sorrowful landscape of Scrooge's present inner state of being.

Clearly, Scrooge's present inner state emerges from a past that was not at all happy. From fragmentary scenes recreated by the Ghost of Christmas Past, we can see that little Ebenezer was not blessed with his parents' love and protection, suffered from extreme poverty, and experienced society's cruelty more than enough times. Kathleen Tillotson and others have observed that the writer's own childhood deeply influenced Scrooge's creation. As is known, Dickens's past included his father's imprisonment for debt, an ensuing life of poverty, humiliation at the shoe polish factory, and distrust in others. All this traumatized Dickens and became a source of anguish. He sealed his pain away, deep in his heart, keeping it long to himself. Thus, it is certainly not completely off the mark to imagine that such misfortunes also beset Scrooge, causing him to fear the outside world. Could it not be that Scrooge, who guards himself against harsh reality, earnestly shut himself away, deeper and deeper within, confronting society only from within thick armor, burying inconvenient memories, and sealing away the movements of his heart? In other words, Scrooge's apparent lack of humanity can be interpreted as a method of self-defense, over which he has little or no control.

Thus, Scrooge constructed his internal prison. Developing a miser's outward appearance, abhorred by those around him, and sealing off his whole being was surely not his original intent. Before long, however, this state must have become comfortable in its own way. A closed-off space often includes not just the discomfort and pain accompanying an assumed need for isolation but a paradoxical guarantee of security. Certainly, such a situation characterizes Scrooge. In this respect, he is similar to William Dorrit in *Little Dorrit*.

However, Scrooge's isolation removes him from the stimulation that revitalizes people and even from reflecting on himself. Inevitably, his psychological world would have withered, and he would have lapsed into complete dysfunction sooner or later. What exactly did Scrooge see as he worked diligently in his office every day? Although his eyes were open, they surely perceived nothing—not the landscape outside, the state of other people, or even his own state. While prisoners' self-preservation was possible in Dickensian works, Scrooge's own prison awaited the certain destruction of his self.

## II

In short, Scrooge's change of heart, *A Christmas Carol's* theme, is synonymous with freeing himself from the prison he created. The ghosts find ways to reopen the door to Scrooge's closed-off world and guide his first steps towards new life. Frequent descriptions of wide open doors and windows symbolize Scrooge's freedom. The ghosts use various methods for Scrooge's salvation, but, in common, they force him to consciousness of the outside world, revitalize his heart, and compel him to rebuild human relationships.

First, Marley appears in Scrooge's private room, which is steeped in thick fog and the darkness of night; this seems an obvious intrusion into Scrooge's own heart. Clearly, Scrooge's restoration after such long repression is impossible by ordinary means. Shock treatment is necessary, and Dickens' choice of treatment is that Scrooge suffers a rough reawakening resembling phantasmagoria. Phantasmagoria, needless to say, is a show by optical devices that achieved popularity in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Europe, and as Graham Smith says, its core was ominous supernatural images:

Given this apparently uncanny absence of the means by which its illusions were created, the phantasmagoria was able to specialize in the supernatural and conjure up, seemingly out of nowhere, skeletons, spirits, ghosts, and so on. However, its key distinguishing feature was the ability to enact the effect of 'images appearing to approach and recede from the spectator.'<sup>(2)</sup>

Amazement, fear, and excitement must have seized 19<sup>th</sup>-century audiences when these realistic illusions were presented, accompanied by sound effects. Could Dickens have been among such audiences and applied his experience to Marley's appearance?

By giving Scrooge an experience similar to 'this assault on the audience's nerves,'<sup>(3)</sup> Marley aims to shake his inner world from its foundations, and his intentions can be considered to have resulted in a resounding success. As soon as he returns home—in other words, from the moment the front door knocker transforms into Marley's face—Scrooge displays a human-like panic that is completely different from the coldness shown until that point. However, this cannot be helped as fear-inducing devices attack him in

every possible way. Sensing a threatening atmosphere, 'he [Scrooge] closed his door, and locked himself in; doubled-locked himself in, which was not his custom,'(16) strengthening his defenses, but Marley defiantly approaches him through the door even when it has been locked twice. The doorbell on the wall begins to sway, and as the swings grow bigger, its sound grows more amplified, and finally, the doorbell is ringing throughout the whole building. Further, as soon as the sound of chains dragging in the distance is heard, the door downstairs opens with a loud noise, and the sound of chains ascends the stairs and comes closer. Then, with cold empty eyes, hair and clothes that look like they have been blown by the ghostly air of hell, and a jaw that hangs down to his chest when removing his bandage, the ghost of Marley's outward appearance is also shocking.

In these scenes, it is to be particularly kept in mind that supernatural phenomena thoroughly assault Scrooge's sight and hearing. Dickens clearly recognizes the importance of the five senses, linking them to Scrooge's rebirth. For example, Marley's ghost asks the protagonist who pretends not to acknowledge the scene in front of his eyes, 'What evidence would you have of my reality beyond that of your senses?' 'Why do you doubt your senses?'"(18)

The five senses are rooted in human instincts and are inseparable from life, and they mediate between inner and outer worlds. With these sensors, we perceive color, shape, texture, sound, smell, taste, etc. Through thoughts and emotions that occur as a result, we understand the world and experience satisfaction in living. Domains involving the five senses have been completely missing from Scrooge's daily life, and perhaps Dickens thought reclaiming sensory experience was the first condition of Scrooge's salvation.

By encountering Marley's ghost, Scrooge begins to react towards the outside world regardless of his will. This change in his condition indicates a change in his psychological world.

Furthermore, it is possible to discover a fragment of this in the following part:

'You may be an undigested bit of beef, a blot of mustard, a crumb of cheese, a fragment of an underdone potato. There's more of gravy than of grave about you, whatever you are!'  
(18)

Scrooge unthinkingly blurts out his first reactions to reduce his fear and internal confusion, which clearly demonstrates human grounding in sensory perception (food, taste, and effects of indigestion) and humor. Scrooge's unconscious, instantaneous connection of Marley's extraordinary ghost to extremely ordinary food is marvelously human indeed. Although small, a crack has appeared in Scrooge's tough armor, and his original self is visible. Having awakened Scrooge's inner human self, even by this small amount, Marley fulfills his objective of heightening Scrooge's sensitivity for receiving further extraordinary phenomena by speaking about the trial awaiting avaricious people sunk in worldly desires.

Next, the Ghost of Christmas Past appears to Scrooge. When the clock chimes one, the protagonist's bed curtains are drawn back. The ghost that appears has soft skin like a child and strong arms like a youth but still seems elderly. It holds holly, the symbol of winter, decorates its clothes with summer flowers, and its body grows brighter and darker here and there, as if it has decorative illumination. It is a striking being, a mosaic of various elements appealing to the visual sense in a way not at all inferior to that of Marley's ghost.

At this stage, however, Scrooge's heart still clings to its prison. When the ghost opens the window wide and attempts to jump out with Scrooge, Scrooge shrinks back in fright, indicating his uncertainty and passivity toward freeing his own heart. In response, the ghost gently touches the area around the protagonist's heart, and the sensory feeling of that touch remains. In addition, the spirit raises another sense, that of smell or scent:

The spirit gazed upon him [Scrooge] mildly. Its gentle touch, though it had been light and instantaneous, appeared still present to the old man's sense of feeling. He was conscious of a thousand odours floating in the air, each one connected with a thousand thoughts, and hopes, and joys, and cares long, long, forgotten! (26)

This is extremely interesting because in a sudden development of synesthesia, the ghost's gentle touch induces Scrooge's sense of smell. As we know, the sense of smell is the most primitive of the senses and gives rise to intense memories. Thus, the elderly Scrooge, through various scents, re-experiences past emotions that he had pushed into oblivion for many years. At various nostalgic sights and memories produced by the Ghost of Christmas Past, regardless of past unhappiness, the protagonist cries for joy.

'Why, it's Ali Baba!' Scrooge exclaimed in ecstasy. 'It's dear old honest Alibaba! Yes, yes, I know! One Christmas time, when yonder solitary child was left here alone, he did come, for the first time, just like that. Poor boy! And Valentine,' said Scrooge, 'and his wild brother Orson; there they go!...' To hear Scrooge expending all the earnestness of his nature on such subjects, in a most extraordinary voice between laughing and crying and to see his heightened and excited face; . . . (28)

In this description of Scrooge completely losing himself in the excitement of seeing characters from books and fairy tales he once read, sentences with multiple exclamation marks are extremely striking. Even though receptivity is most abundant in childhood, we are surprised at the protagonist's formerly intense and plentiful emotions. Furthermore, his casting off of his long-worn stiff mask and his process of becoming one with his past self are touching. Childhood memories had an immense effect in melting his hard-frozen heart.

In the next stage, past scenes give birth to Scrooge's self-pity, usually considered a negative emotion involving victimhood. Often, in self-pity, one keeps others at a distance and falls into solitude. In Scrooge's case, however, pity for his younger self instead transcends to feelings for others in the outside world. He sympathizes with the young boy he drove harshly away on Christmas Eve morning. In other words, Scrooge expands the object of his vision from himself to others. He has transcended his self-imprisonment.

However, his transformation remains as yet incomplete. When the ghost presents an image of Scrooge as a youth or a cheerful family of his now-deceased fiancée spur his heart's retreat into obstinacy and isolation.

### III

The philanthropist who visits Scrooge's office on Christmas Eve says the following.

'Under the impression that they scarcely furnish Christian cheer of mind or body to the multitude, returned the gentleman, 'a few of us are endeavouring to raise a fund to buy the Poor some meat and drink, and means of warmth. We choose this time because it is a time, of all others, when Want is keenly felt, and Abundance rejoice.' (12)

The opposing concepts of 'abundance' and 'want' referred in here flows through the whole of *A Christmas Caro* from beginning to end as a bassline ensemble, accompanied by the outline of the former = good and the latter = bad. This especially becomes a dominant theme in the protagonist's travels with the Ghost of Christmas Present and the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come.

The abundant world that gushes forth from Dickens's pen is, to sum up in one word, magnificent, to the point that one would think that no one can surpass him in terms of describing the exciting Christmas landscape.

The walls and ceiling were so hung with living green, that it looked a perfect grove; from every part of which, bright gleaming berries glistened. The crisp leaves of holly, mistletoe, and ivy reflected back the light, as if so many little mirrors had been scattered there; and such a mighty glaze went roaring up the chimney, as that dull petrification of a hearth had never known in Scrooge's time. . . Heaped up on the floor, to form a kind of throne,

were turkeys, geese, game, poultry, brawn, great joints of meat, sucking-pigs, long wreaths of sausages, mince-pies, . . . and seething bowls of punch, that made the chamber dim with their delicious steam. (39)

In order to move Scrooge to a new stage of transformation, the Ghost of Christmas Present prepares this space overflowing with objects that mainly appeal to the senses of sight, taste and smell, such as decorations, various dishes of food, light or blazing fires and brightness, as if to say that abundance is the very greatest form of happiness.

And with that as a starting point, in Stave III, which displays geographical and spatial expanse, Scrooge is guided through Christmas scenes filled with warm-heartedness in the various areas of England (these, through Dickens's talents, are expressed as seeming like the most luxurious of banquets no matter how simple and meagre they are), from the city of London, with its cheerful atmosphere in the air and unbelievably delicious-looking food stacked up in the fronts of the shops, to the people who live in remote areas, up to the simple dinner at the home of the Cratchits. As a result, through immersing himself in sceneries such as these and sharing in the delight alongside the Christmas ghost, it becomes possible for the protagonist to recognize the importance of not just material wealth, but the abundance of the inner self, for example love, joy, charity, etc., which are factors that make up the foundations of the Christmas spirit, as well as the importance of the bonds between others that are supported by this abundance.

On the other hand, the Scrooge in the opening of the book is a great example of 'want.' Scarcely using lights and heating out of frugality, his life appears to be symbolized in his room that only has a few simple furnishings, and the contrast can be said to be all the more striking just by presenting the intense impression of the description of Christmas's 'abundance.' The issue of 'want' is connected to the appearance of the two hideous-looking children that peer from the hem of the robes worn by the Ghost of Christmas Present—products of a restrictive society and embodiments of ignorance and want—and functions as a criticism towards society and, at the same time, a criticism towards Scrooge's way of life up until that point as well, which is characterized by its material and inner want.

The destination of want surrounding Scrooge is surely the following grotesque scene in the sight presented by the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come.

. . . beneath a ragged sheet, there lay a something covered up, which, though it was dump, announced itself in awful language. . . . A pale light in the outer air, fell straight upon the bed; and on it, plundered and bereft, unwatched, unwept, uncared for, was the body of this man. (64)

The corpse of the protagonist lying on the bed, stripped of all his belongings, from the bed curtains and blankets to even his clothes, by the extremely greedy charwoman, laundress and undertaker. The scene, which thoroughly excludes objects, people, warm-hearted emotions, etc., and seems to state that although some show expressions of joy, not a single person mourns his death, sheds tears and so forth, suggests the end that Scrooge would have followed if he did not have a change of heart. At the same time, it can be read as an allegory showing Scrooge's inner world, which has met its fate of disappearing as a result of its suppression and continued decline. The protagonist's closed lifestyle of seeing nothing, hearing nothing, feeling nothing and giving nothing is, as expected, unacceptable to Dickens, even if it was a measure for defending himself.

Scrooge becomes aware that he is alienated from the circle of people as a complete outsider at the party in Fred's home, where he is made the subject of jokes as an eccentric man, and Mrs. Cratchit openly displays emotions almost close to hatred with, 'an odious, stingy, hard, unfeeling man.' (48) To him, who saw his own existence as well as the existence of others as outside his consciousness until he met the ghosts, it is the first time he recognizes the unpleasant image of himself, and it becomes an opportunity to confront it directly. This is a great trial, but the elderly protagonist can be seen accomplishing the growth of being willing to accept this pain while no longer shrinking away.

However, even then, he had been seemingly unable to imagine the sight of himself being hated to the

point that no one would tend to him, and he receives a profound shock at seeing his own name carved on the gravestone that the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come silently points toward in the desolate graveyard. This may have been an even more terrifying shock treatment than what was carried out by the ghost of Marley, but through this, surely it is unobjectionable that the preparation for the protagonist's rebirth can be considered as finally completed. The fact that in comparing the inner and material abundance around him to his own state, he is finally able to reflect on his life from the bottom of his heart and entrust himself to feelings of repentance is something that should be considered with importance.

And so, Christmas morning arrives.

'I don't know what day of the month it is!' said Scrooge. 'I don't know how long I've been among the Spirits. I don't know anything. I'm quite a baby. Never mind. I don't care. I'd rather be a baby. Hello! Whoop! Hallo here!' (72)

These lines, cried out by the protagonist as he crawls out of bed and jumps with joy, is nothing short of strongly declaring that his old self has died and is now reborn, about to start life once more from the stage of a baby. The sight of Scrooge, drunk with happiness and performing virtuous acts in order to regain his lost past, based on the teachings he had acquired from his encounter with the ghosts, is exactly an embodiment of 'abundance,' and it is a surely Dickens-like, moving sight suited for the book's finale.

There are criticisms regarding Scrooge's rebirth as too unrealistic and abrupt, but this can be thought of as misdirected. It is not a sudden, incoherent transformation that a villain undergoes through the author's forcefulness in a *deus ex machina* manner.

The device that brings Scrooge to his knee is a proleptic vision of his own neglected grave. This life-size *memento mori* alters Scrooge to the full, eternal impact of the lovelessness he has manifested.<sup>(4)</sup>

It is jumping to conclusions too quickly to think that Scrooge is so frightened that he regrets his past and undergoes a change of heart just by seeing the prophetic scene of his own death before his eyes, as this view states.

While in the story, Scrooge's transformation appears to have been achieved very easily overnight, it is clear from what has been seen up to this point that it was actually made possible for the first time through a detailed plan and a complex process. It is simply a result of the heart originally possessed by Scrooge (although it was in a state of almost dying at the start) being awakened and changing due to ceaseless stimulation of the five senses from the outside. To do this, it can be said that the order of appearance of Marley's ghost to the Ghost of Christmas Past, the Ghost of Christmas Present and then the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come has great meaning. Marley strongly forces his way to Scrooge, who had shut himself up in his private room. The Ghost of Christmas Past comes to his bed and has no choice but to take the frightened Scrooge outside by force. However, when the Ghost of Christmas Present visits, Scrooge, while still fearful, opens the door of his room himself to meet the ghost, and in the case of the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come, Scrooge is instead the one who actively speaks to and approaches the ghost. This sort of change in attitude shows Scrooge's progress well, and recognizes the importance of freeing himself from the shell he shut himself up in, expanding his relations with the outside world and establishing strong, sympathetic bonds there through climbing up the steps with certainty. There is no mistake that by attaining this, the protagonist's change of heart and rebirth was finally made possible.

. . . the path to redemption involves learning to connect the self with the other, the personal with the social, the past with the present, and present actions with future consequences.<sup>(5)</sup>

It is just as this indication of Kyn Pykett states. When thought of in this way, *A Christmas Carol* should be valued as an extremely convincing work.



## NOTES

References to Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* are to *The Oxford Illustrated Dickens* (London: Oxford University Press, 1987). Page numbers for quotations are given in parentheses.

1. G. K. Chesterton, *Charles Dickens* (New York: Schocken Books, 1965), p.170.
2. Graham Smith, *Dickens and the Dream of Cinema* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), pp.27-28.
3. *Ibid.*, pp.27-28.
4. John R. Reed, *Dickens and Thackeray: Punishment and Forgiveness* (Athens: Ohio university Press, 1995), p.155.
5. Lyn Pykett, *Charles Dickens* (Houndsmill: Palgrave, 2002), p.93.