

The Christmas Books: a non-Dickensian Paradise of Fantasy, Magic and Supernatural

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Abstract

'Fantasy', 'magic', and 'supernatural' – all these words reside far away from the world of Charles Dickens's novels. The realistic representation of the Victorian society and its cruel maladies in novels like *Oliver Twist*, *David Copperfield*, *Great Expectations* have enriched the English literature and genre novel to a great extent. But *The Christmas Books* containing *A Christmas Carol* (1943), *The Chimes* (1944) and *The Cricket on the Hearth* (1945) stands as something different from the worn-out tradition of Dickensian novels. With the free play of fantasy, magic and supernatural these stories not only trade the ground of children's fiction but also verge on the boundary of magic-realism. The paper explores the dominant features of a children's fantasy and magic realistic elements that are embedded in these novellas with focusing on the major themes and ideas.

[Keywords: Fantasy, supernatural, magic-realism, children fiction]

Discussion about Dickens's writings obviously opens up colourful array of themes, characters and ideas. With his journalistic aptitude and an eye for intricate details he has made the genre of 'novel' a new form of middle-class entertainment. The combination of the critical and sentimental has given many of his famous novels - like *The Tale of Two Cities*, *Oliver Twist*, *Great Expectations*, *David Copperfield* – the Dickensian touch. The flickers of "the odd, the colourful and the dramatic in urban life and in human character" are caught in his writings in photographic perfection (Daiches, 1050). *The Christmas Books* – combining three stories *A Christmas Carol*, *The Chimes*, *The Cricket on the Hearth* depicting the essence of the Christmas festivity – stands a bit aside from the beaten track of Dickens's writing. All the three stories, especially *A Christmas Carol*, break away from the Dickensian realistic portrayal of the Victorian Society and its ills. Though the stories have the rhythmic beats of sentimentality, social conscience and political provocation, they breathe in the air of fantasy and supernatural those open up the trap door of the world of children's literature. Though many of his novels have been considered as children's books in abridged and illustrated forms, but the play of fantasy, magic and supernatural is not a trademark of the Dickensian world. His world – mundane, urban and drab with tinges of emotions and finer feelings – does not seem to

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A Christmas Carol a short novella by Charles Dickens is both a Christian allegory of redemption and a critical stake on the Victorian capitalist system. The short novella presents the experience of Ebenezer Scrooge, an epitome of the rich capitalist section of the society. Scrooge with his 'Bah! Humbug!' attitude looks down upon Christmas and its all pleasures, and judges everything from a monetary point of view. Charity, pity, sympathy, forgiveness – all values Christian qualities- are totally banished from his life and he has immersed himself in the dark, miserly, crooked life of accumulation money at the present capitalist time. But on the Christmas Eve he is visited by the ghost of his seven years dead partner Marley and by three other apparitions named as 'Christmas past', 'Christmas present' and 'Christmas yet to come'. He goes through a total transformation after the visitations and his fantastical experiences with them. He not only learns the Christian benevolence and fellow-feeling, rather he transcends the barrier of present time and turns able to integrate three tenses (past, present and future) into a redemptive vision of humanity to gain Christian salvation.

With several adaptations of the story in film and drama *A Christmas Carol* is not bound with such small arena. While Dickens' other major writings present the realistic representation of the then Victorian England with intricate details and deft character portrayals, this novella is a multilayered one. *A Christmas Carol* (1843) is frequently presented as a children's story associated with Christmas. But on the superstructure where the Christian allegory and criticism of the cruel division between the haves and the have-nots reign supreme, in the deep-structure there continue the workings of dream, fantasy and imagination that are the staple criterion of a children's writing. It is at this point Dickens departs from his usual scheme of realistic representation of condition of London in Victorian era rather he verges on a different genre - 'supernatural fantasy'. The ghosts and the sweep of time place the readers on a high speed rocket and lead them to a fantastic time travel that reminds one of *The Time Machine*. Though Dickens has cloaked the apparitions with somber Christian ideological robes but the supernatural quality is heightened by his description:

The air was filled with phantoms, wandering hither and thither in restless haste, and moaning as they went. Every one of them wore chains like Marley's ghost; some few (they might be guilty of Government) were linked together; none were free. (22)

Such descriptions and Scrooge's time travel with three ghosts are perfect creation of 'fantasy' genre. "Fantasy also spelled phantasy, is imaginative fiction dependent for effect on strangeness of setting (such as other worlds or times) and of characters (such as supernatural or unnatural beings) (Britannica)" So the novella aptly fulfills the bare ingredients of this fascinating genre. Even at times the narrative verges on magic-realistic situations. Magic-realistic writings deftly show the "mingling and juxtaposition of the realistic and the fantastic or bizarre, skilful time shifts, controlled and even

labyrinthine narratives and plots, miscellaneous use of dreams, myths and fairy stories, expressionistic and surrealistic description, arcane erudition, the element of surprise or abrupt shock, the horrific and the inexplicable. (Cuddon, 488)". *A Christmas Carol* (1843) blends the hard-hitting reality (the description of the poverty-stricken Cratchit family, the poor lot of London and the rich miser Scrooge) and the fantastic magical realm (the sweeping journey through time with the ghosts and the surrealistic descriptions) to make a fine concoction. The fabulous description of Scrooge's room during the presence of the ghost of 'Christmas present' is an extraordinary example of magical world. As if some magician has created a charm with his wand and has turned the gloomy room bedecked with all the jolly, dazzling and glittering things of Christmas. With all these fantastic descriptions the reader comes across gruesome reality through the ghost of 'Christmas-yet-to-come'. His journey with Scrooge reveals the selfish nature of the people and the death of Tiny Tim, the little son of Cratchit family. In that sense the story reminds us another touching children's story *The Little Match Girl* where a poor desolate match girl on the snowy New Year's Eve sees three fantastic visions in the tingling light of little matchsticks before her pathetic death in cold. The visions show the little girl's latent desires, hopes and wishes that cannot be fulfilled due to her poverty stricken condition. *A Christmas Carol* shows Scrooge's inner psychology through the time travel and helps him to change himself to emerge out as a new man. This blend of reality and fantasy can be found in Dickens's another Christmas story *The Chimes* (1844). *The Chimes* is literally the call of the church bell that presents Trotty Veck, the ticket porter, a series of visions. The active performance of the bell-fairies and the goblins along with the crooked condition of the Trotty's life in future heightens the tension of the story. The magical world of disbelief and the real gruesome world are juxtaposed in a superb manner and at times reader fails to distinguish between the two. Trotty - the representative of the poor mass that dwells on the fringes of the capitalist society - transcends the border of the mundane and distressed world and grabs a profound truth through his dream visions. Even in *The Cricket on the Hearth* (1845) the chirping cricket on the hearth of the Peerybingle family acts as guardian angel assuming the mellifluous voice and professes the idea of love, fellow feeling and understanding of human characters. It's intervene solves the real life problem of John and Dot Peerybingle. The inclusions of the magical into the real and fantastic elements in the self-coherent structure have made the stories superb instances of the children's fantasy. They create their own worlds where the supernatural elements, magic and fantastic devices leak into the setting of the grim real world.

Due to the presence of all these qualities *A Christmas Carol* has been adapted in animation, cartoon and movies for children. The animated film version of 1997 *A Christmas Carol* exploited these supernatural qualities and magical actions to a great extent to catch the eyeballs of the children. Other adaptations like *The Muppet Christmas Carol* (1992) and *Scrooged* (1988) are worth mentionable. *The Muppet*

Christmas Carol is a humorous version of Muppet mayhem. It is full of funny sentences, jokes and songs to attract the children. Not only the enchanting elements of story but also the embedded moral and Christian ideologies make it a superb example of children's fiction. Over and above children's literature is generally taken to be "the last repository of the 'ducis et utile' philosophy" (Hunt, 10). People in general want children's books to be enjoyable and at the same time useful. Peter Hunt in his *Introduction to Children's Literature* has pointed it out perfectly:

It is arguably impossible for children's book (especially one being read by a child) not to be educational or influential in some way; it cannot help but reflect an ideology and, by extension didacticism (10).

Though *A Christmas Carol* (1843) is not an out and out didactic presentation of Christian ideals, it professes the doctrines love, fellow-feeling, sympathy and generosity through the gradual transformation of Scrooge. Even the animations and movies like Disney's 2009 '*A Christmas Carol*' starring Peter Carry, 2004 animation *A Christmas Carol* and so on has produced these moralistic teachings because 'the checks and balances available to the mature reader are missing in the child' (Hunt, 10).

Even if all these qualities lead one to consider the novella as a veritable children's story, but none can ignore the direct criticism of the capitalist strata of the society. Scrooge represents the greedy, selfish section of the capitalist society which harshly focuses on the guidelines of Poor Laws to oppress the downtrodden people of the society. Scrooge's machine like money-making tendency is emphasized through his awareness of 'time'. The clock's bell at the background reminds one of the present time and also makes one aware of the 'time' to come. This idea of linear time is also seen in *The Chimes* (1844) where the chimes of the church bell combines the past, present and future in a continuing flux. Scrooge's capitalist awareness of time to accumulate money rubs off after the visit of the third apparition. His 'epiphany' comes through his vision of the future time heralding Bergson's idea of 'time and free will'. It is in one's power to change his or her future with his or her present actions. Dickens professes this idea of 'free will' to the reader in general through the portrait of Scrooge. This Scrooge steps out of the shell of obsessive Capitalist time and enters into a new timeless framework with a new understanding of life. Dickens's idea of 'TIME' is more clarified much later in T S Eliot's '*Burnt Norton*':

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past.
If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable. (1-5)

The idea of time runs along with the magic-realistic world and this makes the stories hugely popular even in this post-modern era.

Dickens with his fine skill has made these novellas kind of Pandora's Box with all its good and bad, light and dark in perfect balance. With all these ideas wrapped in the colourful cloak of magic, fantasy and supernatural happenings they have become multifaceted gems that shoot its glittering rays from diverse angles to mesmerize the readers.

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