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Scrooge's Asocial Character in *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens

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Résumé

Marquée par la stratification des classes et les injustices sociales, la période victorienne a enregistré des romanciers remarquables et talentueux qui critiquaient les conditions de vie de la classe ouvrière. Parmi eux figurait le plus prolifique de son époque, Charles John Huffam Dickens (1812-1870). Ce dernier a écrit une grande quantité de best-sellers tels que *The Pickwick Papers* (1836), *David Copperfield* (1839), *Oliver Twist* (1850), *Great Expectations* (1861) ..., et le plus célèbre de tous les temps, *A Christmas Carol* (1843), dans lequel l'auteur dénonce l'égoïsme de la bourgeoisie pendant la fête de Noël. Par conséquent, cet article vise à examiner les défauts moraux du personnage principal, Ebenezer Scrooge, en particulier son indifférence envers ses concitoyens victoriens démunis (employés, membres de la famille, voisins...).

Mots clés: *A Christmas Carol*, Scrooge, Capitalisme, Egoïsme.

Abstract

Marked by class stratification and social injustice, the Victorian period recorded remarkable and talented novelists who criticized the living conditions of the working class. Among them was the most prolific of his time, Charles John Huffam Dickens (1812-1870). The latter wrote a great number of bestsellers such as *The Pickwick Papers* (1836), *David Copperfield* (1839), *Oliver Twist* (1850), *Great Expectations* (1861) ..., and the most famous of all time, *A Christmas Carol* (1843), in which the author denounces the selfishness of the bourgeoisie during the Christmas feast. Therefore, this article aims to examine the moral flaws of the main character, Ebenezer Scrooge, in particular his insensitivity towards his destitute Victorian fellow citizens (employees, family members, neighbours, ...).

Keywords: *A Christmas Carol*, Scrooge, Capitalism, Selfishness.

Introduction

Named 'Navidad' in Spanish, 'Natale' in Italian, or Noël in French, Christmas (mass on Christ's Day) originates from the Roman Sextus Julius Africanus who, in 221 identified December 25 as the date of Jesus's birth, a thought that was universally accepted. Nowadays, the common belief has it that Christmas is children's day; others sustain that it is "*a kind, forgiving, charitable, pleasant time*" (Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*, 2009, p. 12) that concerns people of all generations. Giving his opinion on the influence of Christmas, Joseph F. Kelly (2004) expertly informs: "*Christmas is unique. It impacts us in ways that other seasons and holidays do not. Many people have grown up with Christmas, mostly with happy memories, occasionally with sad ones, but they all wish to make it a joyous occasion for themselves, their families, and their friends.*" (p. 13). Conscious of the substantial influence of Christmas on the Victorian society, Charles Dickens built up a social class-oriented story.

The novel relates the story of Ebenezer Scrooge, the main character who cultivates misanthropy and a capitalistic spirit towards everyone around him. In that vein, the researcher is mainly interested in delving into Scrooge's relationship with his clerk Bob Cratchit, his nephew Fred, some other minor characters, and his deceased business partner Jacob Marley at the beginning of the novel. This attempt drives to the key question: How does Charles Dickens depict Scrooge's behaviour towards his fellow Victorian creatures? We hypothesize that it is asocial. Scrooge rejects socialization because he is money obsessed. On that basis, the researcher would like to show the effects of capitalism on the poor and on capitalists themselves.

The social conflict perspective according to Karl Marx is perfectly apposite to this demonstration as it bases the structure of society on social stratification and social conflict. In their seminal work *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels (2002) declare: "*The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles*" (p. 148). From this quotation, one easily understands that society is made up of social classes that interact with one another. However, these interactions are fundamentally confrontational because of the divergent interests of each social layer. On that account, Marx and Engels reiterate: "*[...] every form of society has been based [...] on the antagonism of the oppressing and oppressed classes*" (p. 157). Therefore, Scrooge's tumultuous relationships with his fellows can be recorded in such a conflicting perspective. Of even greater significance, the choice of the sociological approach is pertinent to this study because Marx himself praised Dickens and his contemporary Victorian novelists' skillful ability to describe the

incongruities of the social class system (particularly the middle class) in their respective works. He wrote in *The New-York Daily Tribune* (1854):

“The present splendid brotherhood of fiction-writers in England, whose graphic and eloquent pages have issued to the world more political and social truths than have been uttered by all the professional politicians, publicists and moralists put together, have described every section of the middle class [...] And how have Dickens and Thackeray, Miss Brontë and Mrs. Gaskell painted them? As full of presumption, affection, petty tyranny and ignorance; and the civilized world has confirmed their verdict with the damning epigram that it has fixed to this class that “they are servile to those above, and tyrannical to those beneath them.””

The above stance incontrovertibly demonstrates that Dickens’s, Thackeray’s, Brontë’s, and Gaskell’s literary works give voice to Marx’s ideologies and serve as complementary tools to the Marxist thought. Keeping this in mind, one may conclude that *A Christmas Carol* does not depart from that norm.

Scholarly works were undertaken by academic researchers on the present work. They will be taken as the groundwork of our reflection. As far as the contemporary reception of *A Christmas Carol* is concerned, let us remind that the book was an immediate success. Many reviewers, editors, writers, and public figures had a positive comment to make on the treatise. The first critic was John Foster, Dickens’s friend and first biographer. He proudly noted: *“Never had a little book an outset so full of brilliancy of promise. Published but a few days before Christmas, it was hailed on every side with enthusiastic greeting. The first edition of six thousand copies was sold the first day”* (as cited in Kinser, 2010, p. 9). Not one of the least, the second critic, William Makepeace Thackeray, delightfully advised: *“Rush to the Stand! And purchase five thousand more copies of the Christmas Carol!”* (as cited in Kinser, p. 9). In the January 1844 edition of his *Hoods Magazine*, Thomas Hood acclaimed *A Christmas* in laudatory terms. He observed: *“It was a blessed inspiration that put such a book into the head of Charles Dickens; a happy inspiration of the heart that warms every page”* (as cited in Kinser, p. 10). These few occurrences inexorably show that *A Christmas* received a thumbs up. A drawback was though recorded. Lower classes could not afford the book at the beginning, till it became accessible to every layer of society. Such an audience considerably amplified the effect of the book. 20th Century researcher Linda Hooper (1993) believes that if *A Christmas Carol* is still successful, it is because *“each generation [finds] in it a message—spiritual, psychological, or political—applicable to the different audiences”* (p. 7). Incredibly remarkable, the book’s success lives on among 21st-century readers.

In their relentless quest for academic achievements, researchers have been working on *A Christmas Carol*. For example, Tina Islam Miyati (2014), in *The Miserly of Ebenezer Scrooge Reflected at Charles Dickens's A Christmas Carol Novel (1843): A Sociological Approach*, uses the sociological approach to analyze the novella based on the structural components of Nineteenth Century England. In her work entitled *Scrooge's Character Development in Charles Dickens A Christmas Carol*, Theresa Erwindriani (2012) intently studies Scrooge's character, indicating that a rich, cold-hearted, miserly, misanthropic, and anti-Christmas-old man, Scrooge undergoes a gradual psychological development. In *Capitalism with a Conscience: A Marxist Echo Found Voice in Charles Dickens's "A Christmas Carol"*, Puja Chakraborty (2014) demonstrates that *A Christmas Carol* can be studied in a Marxist perspective. She particularly examines the idiosyncrasies of the bourgeoisie which needs a spiritual change.

The paper comprises four (4) main sections. The first section tackles Scrooge's ill-treatment of Bob Cratchit. The second section treats Scrooge's rejection of his nephew Fred. The third section examines Scrooge's complex interaction with some minor characters. The last section interrogates Jacob Marley's close intimacy with Scrooge.

1. Capitalist Scrooge's Mistreatment of Bob Cratchit

"[Scrooge] underpays and bullies and terrifies his clerk, and grudges him even enough coal in his office fire to keep warm" (Edgar Johnson, 1953, p. 485).

Capitalists' treatment of their employees is a key topic to be investigated in *A Christmas Carol*. Indeed, in the specific case, it is worth examining Scrooge's interaction with his unique employee and clerk, Bob Cratchit. It appears that Scrooge is never kind to Bob. Johnson (1953) justifies Scrooge's coldness by the fact that he is an *"economic man, who never perform[s] any action except at the dictates of monetary gain"* (p. 485). The thinker goes further in expounding how money-driven men behave with their operatives. He states: *"Ideally, no sentimental conceptions must be allowed to obstruct the workings of the law of supply and demand. Cash nexus [is] the sole bond between man and man"* (p. 485). Accordingly, the relationship between Scrooge and Bob is purely economic.

More to the point, Scrooge keeps his clerk at a due distance to the extent that the latter is like a prisoner. Illustrative evidence is when the narrator tells the reader that Scrooge keeps watch on

Bob Cratchit. The text reads: *“The door of Scrooge’s counting-house was open that he might keep his eye upon his clerk, who in a dismal little cell beyond, a sort of tank, was copying letters.”* (Dickens, p. 11). Here, it is evident that Scrooge does not rely on his clerk’s capacity to perform his task responsibly. Scrooge makes sure that Bob efficiently performs his duty; he, above all, makes sure Bob never takes a break during his working hours. Scrooge must have his money’s worth. That is why, as a good capitalist he is, he has put Bob in a cell-like office to keep him under constant surveillance.

Given that the story takes place at a wintry time, the episode of the fire and the coal-box highlights Scrooge’s economic miserliness and extreme meanness. The narrator tells the reader: *“Scrooge had a very small fire, but the clerk’s fire was so very much smaller that it looked like one coal. But he couldn’t replenish it, for Scrooge kept the coal-box in his own room”* (Dickens, p. 11). The symbol of the coal-box is meaningful in that one understands that the way Scrooge is parsimonious with his coal is the same way he is with his money. Another way of looking at the situation is that Scrooge’s coal-box represents his fortune. The sizes of their respective fires (very small for Scrooge and so very much smaller for Bob), indicate their respective social class positions. As does his money, Scrooge’s fire outdistances his worker’s. However, the fact that Scrooge can unilaterally extinguish that fire if he so desires, demonstrates the absolute power of the upper class over the lower class.

The author returns Scrooge’s oppression towards Bob Cratchit when Scrooge threatens Bob for his involuntary approval of Fred’s (Scrooge’s nephew) optimistic comments on Christmas holiday. Scrooge menacingly tells Bob: *“Let me hear another sound from you [...] and you’ll keep your Christmas by losing your situation”* (Dickens, p. 12). For an involuntary gesture and because of a universal topic, Bob has jeopardized his occupation. He surely regrets his action and inwardly promises not to intervene in his boss’s conversations again. With this incident, Scrooge wants to remind Bob his subordinate position. He desires his employee to act like a robot, deprived of opinions, and ready to execute the task for which it has been patented.

Even more central, Scrooge is so pitiless towards Bob that he does not want to give his clerk the unique yearly day off he deserves, nor does he want to pay for it knowing that his clerk will not work on that specific day. As if it were not enough, Scrooge demands that Bob comes earlier the morning following Christmas day, certainly to exploit him before the opening hour. Because Bob

needs a wage to support his family, his employer overexploits him. He has one choice to make to alter his situation: deciding to come into an overt conflict with Scrooge. However, in taking that path, Bob will be dismissed and supplanted by “*a large body of other men able to do the same job*” (Johnson, p. 486). Seen from this perspective, it would be hazardous for Bob to embark on such a venture.

Decidedly, Bob Cratchit is not the sole character with whom Scrooge has a rocky relationship: The situation is similar with Fred.

2. Uncle Scrooge’s Stony Relationship with his Nephew Fred

“*Dickens shows us that meanness is often connected to the pursuit of wealth*” (LitCharts, 2014, p. 3).

Though Scrooge’s unique living family member, Fred suffers from his uncle’s rejection. Scrooge has never visited his nephew. Nevertheless, when his nephew comes to see him, Scrooge has no better idea than being cold. Joseph (Jody) H. Clarke (2009) suggests that Scrooge’s behaviour should be scrutinized from a psychological standpoint. He strongly believes that Scrooge is projecting his hostility onto Fred, because “*Fred’s presence likely brings to the surface a myriad of mixed feelings in Scrooge. His physical presence reminds Ebenezer of his now dead sister*” (p. 251). Normally, in such a situation of grief, Scrooge should have transferred his tender love for his sister to her only offspring. He should have cherished Fred to honour her memory. He acts otherwise because of his maxim, the frantic pursuit of wealth.

It should be remembered that Fred is the first character from whom the Christmas spirit is perceived in the novella. To his cheerful “*A merry Christmas Uncle*”, Scrooge retorts: “*Humbug*” (Dickens, p. 11). If Scrooge rejects Christmas, it is because he thinks that it does not alter the individual’s social status. He tells Fred: “[...] *What reason have you to be merry? You’re poor enough*” (p. 11). Despite his nephew’s logical riposte, Scrooge remains firm in his negative opinion on Christmas. He realistically and indignantly asks Fred: “*What’s Christmas time to you but a time for paying bills without money; a time for finding yourself a year older, but not an hour richer; a time for balancing your books and having every item in ’em through a round dozen of months presented dead against you?*” (p. 11). For Scrooge, Christmas has no financial impact on its

celebrator. Christmas over, the poor become poorer and wonder how to pay their bills, whereas the rich get richer.

In rejecting Christmas as he does, Scrooge also rejects his nephew, his ideals, and his social class. An upper middle-class citizen, Scrooge is embarrassed to interact with lower middle-class Fred that he reminds his poverty. Paradoxically, the Victorian ideology of class was so rigid that one could have a rich uncle and a poor nephew. That situation can be explained by the fact that Scrooge is a self-made man. His wealth has been gained from his workaholic attitude, not from blood lineage. Therefore, as long as the uncle lives, the nephew's status will remain unaltered. However, when Scrooge dies, Fred will certainly be bequeathed an inheritance. In their case, it might be systematic because Fred is Scrooge's unique relative in the novella.

Considerably, the tension between Scrooge and his nephew culminates when Fred invites Scrooge to dinner with him and his wife. Scrooge's answer to the invitation is very peculiar. He asks Fred: "*Why did you get married*" (Dickens, p.12). As one may see, Scrooge seems to dislike love and marriage. One can go as far as to say that Scrooge is jealous of his nephew in that domain. That thought seems to be verified when later, we discover that Scrooge fell in love with Belle, his then fiancé with whom he had marriage prospects. They broke up because Scrooge had changed and "*All natural affection he ha[d] crushed*" (Johnson, p. 487). He had a "*golden*" idol, the pursuit of wealth which must take precedence over everything. On the matter, Frank Gammon (2010) is absolutely right when he declares: "*His family and fiancée have all been pushed aside in his quest for wealth*", before concluding: "*[he]has lost his sense of humanity*" (p. 20). In that framework, one can understand that Scrooge reproaches his nephew a different lifestyle choice as his. He thinks that Fred's choice is not a "*wiser*" one (Dickens, p. 38). Had Fred opted for the pursuit of wealth in the same way as his uncle's, he would have been a perfect disciple to Scrooge to the extent that he would have become his uncle's partner, perhaps at Marley's (Scrooge's deceased business partner) place, or they would have been a trio of businessmen. In choosing Love in the detriment of money, Fred has erected a social barrier between his uncle and him.

Overpoweringly, Scrooge's coldness does not stop to Bob Cratchit and Fred. It extends to some minor characters.

3. Scrooge's Complex Interaction with Other Characters in *A Christmas Carol*

Some minor characters have also experienced Scrooge's asocial behaviour. Right at the beginning of the novella, the author describes Scrooge's icy character. He uses Scrooge's indifference to the wintry weather to warn us of how stoical Scrooge is. He sarcastically notifies:

"External heat and cold had little influence on Scrooge. No warmth could warm, no wintry weather chill him. No wind that blew was bitterer than he, no falling snow was more intent upon its purpose, no pelting rain less open to entreaty. Foul weather didn't know where to have him. The heaviest rain, and snow, and hail, and sleet, could boast of the advantage over him in only one respect. They often 'came down'* handsomely, and Scrooge never did. (Dickens, p. 10).*

Strikingly, the above descriptions are so poignant they showcase Scrooge's cold and capitalist character. He is focused on his pursuit of wealth no matter the season of the year. His fellows are so aware of his negative comportment that they do not socialize with him. Fachriza Amalia Rakhman et al. (2015) confirm: *Scrooge is a very bad person so no one wants to get closer with him or even greets him. He only thinks about himself and his business. Dickens, through his work, illustrated how money can change people drastically just like what happened to Scrooge (p. 28).*

The narrator goes deeper when he sustains:

Nobody ever stopped him in the street to say, with gladsome looks, 'My dear Scrooge, how are you? When will you come to see me?' No beggars implored him to bestow a trifle, no children asked him what it was o'clock, no man or woman ever once in all his life inquired the way to such and such a place, of Scrooge. Even the blind men's dogs appeared to know him; and when they saw him coming on, would tug their owners into doorways and up courts; and then would wag their tails as though they said, 'No eye at all is better than an evil eye, dark master!' (Dickens, p. 10)

Scrooge's character is so severe that even dogs flee him. No neighbour comes to visit him because they do not have any added value that would urge him to welcome them. Appallingly, most of those people are poor. Thus, they do not deserve his consideration of them. Even Children do not deserve his sympathy. The young boy who has come to sing a Christmas carol to his counting house is a case in point. Scrooge cavalierly and brutally dismisses him. The narrator reveals: *"[he] seized the ruler with such energy of action that the singer fled in terror"* (Dickens, p. 15). Through this deplorable incident, one can convincingly conclude that Scrooge's meanness has no limit: he has dogs, blind people, and now innocent children in his sight.

Another resounding evidence that states Scrooge's rigidity, selfishness, miserliness, and meanness, is the scene with the overweight business gentlemen. The two men have come to have Scrooge's effort to social solidarity on behalf of the poor. They respectfully suggest to him: *"[...] 'it is more*

than usually desirable that we should make some slight provision for the Poor and destitute, who suffer greatly at the present time. Many thousands are in want of common necessities; hundreds of thousands are in want of common comforts, sir.’” (Dickens, p. 13). Scrooge’s answer is strange. He asks: “*Are there prisons?*”; “*And the Union workhouses?*” Naively replying in the affirmative, the men think Scrooge will be sensitive to the poor’s plight. Consequently, they ask their ‘donator’ how much he would like to give as a contribution to the charitable cause. Indifferently, Scrooge replies: “*Nothing*”; “*I wish to be left alone*” (Dickens, p. 14). Imploringly trying to convince him that the poor might die if they were not cared for, Scrooge cynically rejoinders: “*[they] had better [die] and decrease the surplus population.*” (Dickens, p. 14). Outstandingly, from the above passage, the reader is informed of Scrooge’s dearest wish for the poor: he desires the extinction of the jobless or the handicapped (like the blind man with the dog). Chakraborty (2014) underlines Scrooge’s avariciousness and nastiness when she holds: “*No matter how much he earns, he is peevish and reluctant to part with it, even in the name of charity*” (p. 29). Johnson, for his part, depicts the situation in the following manner:

“[Scrooge] feels that he has discharged his full duty to society in contributing his share of the taxes that pay for the prison, the workhouse, the operation of the treadmill and the Poor Law, and he bitterly resents having his pocket picked to keep even them going. The out-of-work and the indigent sick are merely the idle and useless; they had better die and_ decrease the surplus population” (p. 485).

Already compelled by the government to pay taxes in favour of social policies, Scrooge refuses to be doubly levied for the sake of useless people who serve no capitalistic agenda at all. He resents the fact that the state is taking care of lazy people and considers the two men’s request as a scam. As incredible as it might seem, he prefers to sacrifice human lives to avoid sharing a wealth that he does not make use of, not even for himself. Hopefully, despite his insensitive and criminal demeanour, Scrooge has a lifelong friend in the name of Jacob Marley.

4. Jacob Marley: Scrooge’s Best Friend in the World

A Christmas Carol begins with the death of Jacob Marley, Scrooge’s associate in business. The reason for Marley’s death is unknown to the reader. Only the duration of his death is revealed: “*He died seven years ago*” (Dickens, 2009, p. 13). As the novel evolves, the reader begins to understand that the narrator emphatically repeats Marley’s death because of the supernatural role he will play in the novella. One fact remains, though. Whereas the reader is intrigued and saddened by such a beginning, he/she learns that Marley was close to Ebenezer Scrooge, the protagonist.

Astonishingly, that news overshadows Marley's death. The reader now seeks to understand how much special the connection between Marley and Scrooge is/was.

Scrooge's and Marley's relationship is first established when we learn that the former signed his deceased friend's/business partner's burial. About Marley's connection with other people, we discover that none exists. The narrator specifies: "*Scrooge was his sole executor, his sole administrator, his sole assign, his sole residuary legatee, * his sole friend, and sole mourner.*" (Dickens, p. 9). These words are shocking because the reader is aware that Marley has been living a reclusive life. Scrooge was the sole character he used to socialize with. That is reasonably why Scrooge handles Marley's obituary. Chakraborty (2014, p. 29) confirms Scrooge and Marley's closeness in the following words: "*[Scrooge] used to have a friend and Jacob Marley was that "sole" friend. The pun on words is, he was the sole everything to Scrooge, just as Jacob was his*". Here, it is crystal clear that Marley's lifestyle gives us some indications on Scrooge's.

Scrooge and Marley's connection is so intimate that their business is coined "*Scrooge and Marley*" (Dickens, p. 9). They are so ideologically connected that "*Sometimes people new to the business called Scrooge Scrooge, and sometimes Marley, but [Scrooge] answered to both names. It was all the same to him.*" (Dickens, p. 9). Both men constitute a perfect capitalistic pair. They share the same philosophy, which is to make profit regardless of any social strings. That is certainly why none of Marley's sibling attends his funeral, nor signs the burial. Marley has undoubtedly cut off his ties with his nuclear family, in the same way as Scrooge has with his unique family member, Fred.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens stands as a fascinating material for bitter criticism of the social class system. The latter lies on social layers and hierarchies, where the most powerful oppress and discriminate the weakest. Through Scrooge's ill-treatments of his employee Bob Cratchit, his rejection of his nephew Fred, his miserliness with the overweight businessmen asking for charity on behalf of the poor, his brutal dismissal of the young boy singing the carol, his coldness towards the blind man and his dog, one has had the opportunity to see the horrible facet of capitalism. For financial motives, capitalists choose a seclusive life. People like Scrooge are so alienated by the pursuit of money that they see their working and lower middle-

class fellow creatures as sub-men. In contrast, they carefully consider people from the same cast as theirs. That is understandably why Scrooge signs Marley's burial and arranges his funerals.

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