

The voice of working Class in Dickens's *Christmas Carol***1)K.Thabrez Khan,****Research Scholar, Department of English and Comparative Literature,****Sri Krishnadevaraya University,****Anantapuramu - 515003 (A.P), India.****2) Dr.V.B. CHITHRA****Professor of English Department of Humanities,JNTUA College of Engineering****(Autonomous) Anantapur AP, India. chitra.hss@jntua.ac.in****Abstract**

Mid-Victorian Britain witnessed not only the rise of the culture of new industrial capitalism but also its critique with the birth of communism and other philosophical challenges to the free market political economy. These ideas were circulated through a new economy of publication in Europe, producing newspapers, periodicals, pamphlets, novels, and serialised fiction. Readers in Europe were confronted with a spectacular critique of their social circumstances in philosophy, journalism, and literature. This paper proposes to study some of the impetus of this critique by focusing on the most famous works of the 1840s: Charles Dickens's book, *A Christmas Carol* (1843); the apparent generic perspective of this work and its volatile political impact distracts from *A Christmas Carol* and the response to the culture of capitalism in the Hungry 40s of Victorian Britain. While there is a wealth of critical history in the treatment of this text, few have ventured into the figurative treatment of contemporary economic and social issues. In the context of a literary conference at France's leading University for the study of Economics, it seemed timely to re-read these fundamental works produced in an era where political economists were both heroes and villains in British public discussion.

Keyword: *serialised fiction, generic perspective, impetus figurative treatment*

This essay will trace the figures of the greed of revolution and that of the ghost in the *A Christmas Carol* texts. Charles Dickens challenged the Victorian British establishment in his works, serials, and journalism, earning him the most excellent "social writer" in English during the nineteenth century. The gloomy, filthy urban environments and people based on genuine Victorians gave Dickens' stories the reputation of realism. However, it has often been pointed out that the stories are laced with the most improbable coincidence, fairy tale endings, hyperbole and

imaginative description mixing tropes ranging from metaphor to anthropomorphism. Indeed, Dickens' work is highly rhetorical, yet in the dramatic and often satirical stories of this writer-journalist's literary output, some of the sharpest critiques of industrial culture were made. Dickens also aimed the social and political thought burgeoning in academia and public policy. From contemporary Victorian critics to George Orwell and Edward Said, literary criticism has discussed the novels of Dickens in terms of their social importance. Furthermore, many stories and novellas have been studied for their approach to Victorian political philosophy and political economy. *Oliver Twist* has become *the* most celebrated fictional image of the workhouse system of England's New Poor Law of 1834. Dickens' caricature of utilitarianism in *Hard Times* in the character of Mr Gradgrind and his children, little 'Adam Smith and 'Malthus', named after the major British economists, was praised by Walter Allen as « an unsurpassed critique of industrial society » (Allen). Economists such as James P. Henderson have studied the ethical questions raised by such books as *The Chimes* (1844) that satirized Victorian statistical political economists like John Ramsay McCulloch.

Dickens' countless short stories and journalistic pieces also testimonials to Victorian institutional life. Journalistic pieces such as "A Walk in the Workhouse" (1850) or "A visit to Newgate" (1836) were widely read and also provided material for more excellent fictional works. With their record circulation, Dickens' periodicals, *Household Words*, and *All the Year Round* mixed non-fiction journalism with serialized fiction. It has also been pointed out that news stories often inspired episodes and characters in Dickens' novel in the contemporary press – women giving birth on the pavement before workhouses, boys made to sleep on coffins, etc.

Hence, Dickens' career in journalism gave a certain realistic depth and authority to his famous stories, and as a recent book by Dallas Liddle (Liddle) demonstrates, the Victorian period saw an intertextual movement between news narrative and the novel. The serialization of novels by Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell, Wilkie Collins and others coincided with the industrial boom in the press in the context of technological advancement and increased literacy in the 1830s and 40s. As Terry Eagleton has argued, Dickens' success can be understood by its conditions of production (Eagleton). The development of print capitalism in the United States and Victorian Britain, facilitated by the steam press and mechanized transport, created new reading practices, including reading on trains (Flanders), where news and fiction were consumed in commodifying the written word.

Here, Dickens' stories captivated readers before typically presenting them with brutal societal realities. As George Orwell noted, "Dickens attacked English institutions with a ferocity that has never since been approached" (Orwell part I). It is arguably through Dickens' characterization that he struck his most mordant social critique. Dickens' characters are often personified arguments or even caricatured philosophies. For example, Thomas Gradgrind, the factory superintendent in *Hard Times*, embodies a combination of utilitarian arguments – his views on educating children are a reference to John Stuart Mill, and his struggle against the imagination is a caricature of the rationalization of Jeremy Bentham. The joke of the Victorian Self-Made Man, as described by Samuel Smiley in his best-selling book *Self Help*, may be found in the character of Mr Bounderby from the same novel. According to critic Susan Walsh, Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations* is a rhetorical character representing women's place in the Victorian economy. (Walsh) As pointed out by Walsh, Miss Havisham's destruction of her brewery and her femininity is seen as a rejection of women's economic and corporeal capital under industrialism. The Bank of England has been associated with her, and "The Old Lady of Threadneedle Street" has been coined to describe her. In this way, even if Dickens' characters are based on the reality of his day, they may be interpreted in a deeply symbolic way.

The most infamous of Dickens' allegorical characters and the one who has most marked Western popular culture would have to be Ebenezer Scrooge. Scrooge is remarkable for being a combination of ancient stereotypes and a caricature of some of the real personalities of the rising industrial bourgeoisie. Scrooge's traits and the things he says form an argument recognizable to an educated Victorian reading public.

Scrooge is traditionally taken as an allegorical representation of miserliness - similar to earlier Baroque allegories, his every trait refers to meanness and avarice. Like many Dickensian characters, his name is onomatopoeic, connoting the squeezing and scrounging of a miser. To 'scrooge' draws on the slang verbs to "scrouge" or "to scruze", meaning "to squeeze" or "to press." The famous written portrait in *A Christmas Carol's* first episode or 'stave' is a declination of paradigms around the cold, the closed and the hardness of stone.

“Oh! But he was a tight-fisted hand at the grind-stone, 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, self-contained, and solitary as an oyster. The cold within him froze his old features, nipped his pointed nose, shrivelled his cheek, stiffened his gait; made his eyes red, his thin lips blue and spoke out shrewdly in his grating voice”.

In true allegorical tradition, his moral character is translated into bodily traits. Scrooge's eternal iciness has led some critics to interpret him as an allegory of winter.

Scrooge's cold, hard being appears as a frame of negativity, where conserving and exploiting are exposed as the implosion of egotistical humanity. The narrator's distaste for Scrooge's selfishness argues thus in favour of the warmth and light-hearted generosity of his nephew. Scrooge's physical confinement to his counting house also emphasizes themes of stagnation and accumulation of capital. Scrooge is non-action, negative energy, and lack of flow – his body has become cold through this accumulative non-circulation. Meanwhile, his nephew, who walks around the city on Christmas Eve and even dances, emanates a warm, circulating energy.

Several critics have tried to identify Dickens' real-life model for Scrooge, with some insisting that he is a reference to the politician John Elwes. However, Scrooge is most notably a caricature of British political economist Thomas Malthus or at least a personification of his argument. Scrooge reiterates Malthus on *the Principle of Population*, published at the end of the 18th century, in which he argued that the increase in population was more substantial than the increase in food resources. Malthus calculated a coming food crisis with the difference between the number that wants to eat and those who can be fed, making up the 'surplus population'. Malthus had opposed the Elizabethan poor laws in that they maintained and encouraged this 'surplus', namely what Victorian authorities called "the idle, the improvident and the vicious". He was vastly influential in creating the new Poor Laws with the idea that the poor needed to be dissuaded through punitive work and prevented from reproducing to *engineer* this surplus population. Thus the Workhouse system, which involved segregating the sexes, was an exercise of state bio-power over the indigent. Malthus was anti-utopian, pessimistic about the future of populations in the face of diminishing resources, anti-charity and one of the main influences on

Darwin's natural selection. Malthus predicted a narrowing future radically opposed to optimistic Enlightenment views. Like Scrooge, Malthus' vision is both harmful and anxious.

Scrooge performs Malthus as a tight-fisted pessimistic businessman bordering on what would later be called a eugenicist. The reference to Malthus is apparent in Stave 1 when two "portly gentlemen" ask Scrooge for money for the poor and are greeted with this reply—

"Are there no prisons?" asked Scrooge.

"Plenty of prisons," said the gentleman, laying the pen again. "And the Union workhouses?" demanded Scrooge. "Are they still in operation?"

"They are. Still," returned the gentleman, "I wish I could say they were not."

"The Treadmill and the Poor Law are in full vigour, then?" said Scrooge. "Both very busy, sir."

"Oh! From what you said at first, I was afraid that something had occurred to stop them in their useful course," said Scrooge. "I am happy to hear it."

"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 rejoices. What shall I put you down for?"

"Nothing!" Scrooge replied. "You wish to be anonymous?"

"I wish to be left alone," said Scrooge. "Since you ask me what I wish, gentlemen, that is my answer. I do not make merry at Christmas and cannot afford to make idle people merry. I help to support the establishments I have mentioned -- they cost enough, and those who are badly off must go there."

"Many cannot go there, and many would rather die."

"If they would rather die," said Scrooge, "they had better do it and decrease the surplus population."

In Stave 1, Scrooge proposes a Malthusian solution to the problem of the poor and the unhealthy. In the third stanza, the Christmas Spirit responds to him with this same comment. Scrooge, by this time on the way to penitence, asks if the disabled child of his employee will live.

“Spirit....tell me if Tiny Tim will live” The Ghost predicts that if nothing changes, the child will die and adds, “What then, if he liked to die, then he better do it, and decrease the surplus population.”

The Scrooge story echoes a common critique of Malthus, who was accused of reducing human beings to their calculable value in an economy of limited resources. The phrase in Malthus’ *Principles of Population* that had caused the most furore was “that the poor man comes to the feast of Nature and finds no cover laid for him, and she bids him begone”. Victorian debates on poverty and hunger were the background for this novella, where descriptions of food in abundance and groaning Christmas tables would have resounded against Malthusian avarice. “The Lord Mayor...gave orders to his 50 cooks and butlers to keep Christmas as a Lord Mayor’s household should...and even the little tailor stirred up tomorrow’s pudding in his garret”. Even the poor Cratchits eat goose, mashed potato, applesauce and pudding, whereas Scrooge merely takes a “melancholy dinner in his tavern”. Abundance is celebrated rather than scarcity.

For Dickens, there is no expansion in a Malthusian society characterised by rational calculation and the submission of life itself to longer-term human stability. Furthermore, Dickens bemoans a culture where moral sentiments have been sacrificed to utilitarianism and cold analysis. His character Scrooge is notorious for his rejection of view – as we know, Christmas for him is “humbug”.

Meanwhile, as Dickens was hitting out at Malthus in *A Christmas Carol*, two German authors, Engels and Marx, were also writing about the same political economist in London.

Friedrich Engels published in German *The Conditions of the Working Class in England* in 1843, the same year as *A Christmas Carol* (though it did not come out in English till 1878). Engels and Dickens had both toured the factories of Manchester in the late 1830s. As shocked by the poverty and conditions in Britain’s large cities as the novelist, Engels embarked on this work that was one of the founding texts of communism. In it, Engels critiques Thomas Malthus as brutally unsentimental. In a passage very similar to *Carol* Stave 1, he explains:

‘Malthus himself drew this conclusion, that charities and poor-rates are, properly speaking, nonsense, since they serve only to maintain, and stimulate the increase of, the surplus population whose competition crushes down wages for the employed’ (Engels 1843)

Thus Engels exposes the Malthusian bourgeois' vision of charity as 'nonsense', *sign* in German or, in other words, Dickensian 'humbug'. He also emphasizes the proto-eugenic strain in *Principles of Population*. "Malthus declares in plain English that the right to live, a right previously asserted in favour of every man in the world, is nonsense." (Engels, 1843) We recall that Tiny Tim's right to live is a significant stake in *A Christmas Carol*. Dickens' Scrooge resembles Engels' Malthusian bourgeois – he who exerts the superfluosity of the surplus and proposes "they have merely to let it starve to death in the least objectionable way". (Engels 1843) Dickens' Ghost of Christmas Present chides Scrooge, "Will you decide what men shall live, what men shall die?" He then concludes with moral frustration at Malthusianism, "Oh God! To hear the insect on the leaf pronouncing on the too much life among his hungry brothers in the dust". (Dickens Stave III)

Scrooge is thus as much of a villain as Marx and Engels' bourgeois capitalist. "Scrooge is the first corporate scumbag", stated Jim Carrey, who provided his voice in the recent Disney animation. Scrooge's relationship with accumulation, and his employee, illustrates the new rapport capitalism created between the bourgeois and the working class. Thus, like Engels, Dickens' critique was also applied to labour relations. Scrooge's economics are rationalist - he is opposed to Christmas for its lack of return on investment and resents Cratchit's unproductive Christmas holiday. When his clerk remarks that it is only one day of the year, Scrooge complains, "A poor excuse for picking a man's pocket every 25th December". Scrooge's office is also cost-efficient, providing his employee with a single-coal fire in freezing winter.

In *A Christmas Carol*, there is no proletarian revolution; Cratchit does not unite with other workers to overthrow his master. We remember that Marx warns that the proletariat will seize power:

"War breaks out into open revolution, and where the violent overthrow of the bourgeoisie lays the foundation for the sway of the proletariat." (Marx, Engels 1848)

On the other hand, Cratchit's situation is resolved by an internal revolution of the bourgeois master himself. Scrooge, through the intervention of the three spirits, experiences a process of the heart. The individual is converted, not society. He is cured of egotism and lack of sympathy and becomes the opposite of himself:

"He became as good a friend, as good a master, and as good a man, as the good old city knew, or

any other good old city, town, or borough, in the good old world.” (Dickens Stave V)

Scrooge thus does experience a “coming into consciousness”, but Bob does not. Unlike in the Communist Manifesto, Dickens presents a return to humanist sentiment in a conversion that will not challenge the order of labour relations.⁶ Scrooge becomes a generous, charitable boss stripped of his Malthusian arguments. Indeed, the final stave, Scrooge, corresponds precisely to what Marx and Engels labelled bourgeois liberal humanitarians.

Marx and Engels wrote:

"A part of the bourgeoisie is desirous of redressing social grievances to secure the continued existence of bourgeois society... Organizers of charity, temperance leagues and hole and corner reformers are condemned for they only seek to improve and prolong the conditions of the bourgeois masters." (Marx, Engels 1848)

Thus Scrooge's new patriarchal generosity to Bob – raising his salary, providing funds to Tiny Tim, and providing the family with a giant turkey for dinner - will preserve Scrooge.

"I'll raise your salary and endeavour to assist your struggling family, and we will discuss your affairs this very afternoon, over a Christmas bowl of the smoking bishop." (Dickens Stave V)

The Final Stave Scrooge is a liberal reformer, not a revolutionary and returns to pre-New Poor Law values – generosity, charity and good humour. The original illustrated edition of *A Christmas Carol* concludes with the John Leech engraving of Scrooge and Cratchit sharing a democratic drink (*smoking bishop*) by the fire⁷. It is indeed a Utopian image. Yet, while Scrooge has undergone a ‘revolution’ through moral sentiments, the social order has shifted but not transformed. Scrooge remains the paternalist boss, and Cratchit’s salary raise is an individual patronizing response to discontent. Income equity is increased, but systemic inequality is not redressed.

What we must note here, however, is the similar structure in the narratives of Marx and Dickens – both propose a Hegelian dialectical transformation – Marx through materialism and Dickens through sentiments. The spirits are the violent agents of fear that turn Scrooge’s life upside-down

– revolve him and face him in a new direction. Marx and Engels predict a proletarian revolution that will turn the master-slave relationship on its head and create a utopian *telos*. Unlike Malthus' downward spiralling disaster – Dickens and Marx illustrate the Hegelian promise of a new order brought about through coming into consciousness and action.

Thus, we can conclude that economics and literature were in no way divorced in the writings of the 1840s. Dickens is one of the Victorian luminaries who rushed to seize the meaning of the rise of *homo economicus*. He saw the cult of selfishness that capitalism was inciting. On the eve of the wave of revolutions that shook Europe in 1848, spectres of, on the one hand, communism and, on the other, its dialectical opposite, Christmas, were simultaneously invoked as dramatic gothic warnings to civilization in disarray.

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