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ENG 375

14 December 2017

Christmas Hauntings: Similarities and differences in *A Christmas Carol* and “A House to Let”

Dickens’ feelings on ghosts were complicated, with skepticism on the one hand and fascination on the other. On September 6, 1859, Dickens wrote to an acquaintance, William Hewitt, of his skepticism of ghost stories, “I have not yet met with any Ghost Story that was proved to me, or that had not the noticeable peculiarity in it—that the alteration of some slight circumstance would bring it within the range of common natural probabilities” (Stone 10). This letter led to a protracted, multi-year battle of letters and published articles between Dickens and Hewitt about ghosts and the haunting of certain buildings. However, in the same letter to Hewitt, Dickens also acknowledged his “strong interest in the subject” of ghosts and that he “never knowingly [lost] an opportunity of pursuing it” (Stone 10). Later Dickens’ friend John Forster wrote in his biography of Dickens that Dickens had “something of a hankering” after ghosts (Henson 22). Thus Dickens’ skepticism of ghosts contrasts with his persistent desire to hear ghost stories.

Despite Dickens’ skepticism and perhaps because of his fascination, he used ghosts and hauntings frequently in his writing. As Miller notes, Dickens “exploited the spiritual machinery which, outside of his fiction, he actively disdained” (326). He wrote about ghosts in his

Christmas books (such as *A Christmas Carol*), the Christmas editions of *Household Words* and *All the Year Round*, and collected ghost stories by other authors in those periodicals (Henson 44). As a popular author and the editor of widely circulated periodicals, Dickens made ghost stories widely available to the reading public. He used them as a tool in part of a larger social and moral debate (Miller 325; Henson 45). It is this use of hauntings in the novella *A Christmas Carol* and the portmanteau story, “A House to Let,” in the Christmas edition of *Household Words* as either an explicit or implied commentary on ignorance of the poor which I wish to examine. In Dickens’ 1843 *A Christmas Carol*, the ghosts teach Scrooge the personal and societal dangers of Ignorance, which becomes the catalyst for his change of heart, and thus spurs his actions to help the poor. Similarly, in the 1858 story “A House to Let,” Sophonosiba is haunted by a House/Eye which fuels her quest for knowledge (or quenching ignorance). However, in “A House to Let,” it is clear that action is required to gain knowledge as well as to make a difference in the social problems explored in the text by helping the poor children, whereas in *A Christmas Carol* gaining knowledge precedes helping the poor. This difference suggests that Dickens’ perspective on ignorance, knowledge, and helping the poor shifted in the 15 years between the two stories.

At the beginning of *A Christmas Carol*, Scrooge acknowledges his ignorance and decision to remain ignorant. In the opening stave, Scrooge is asked for a donation to “make some slight provision for the poor and destitute, who suffer greatly at the present time” (Dickens 44). He responds by asking if the prisons, Union workhouses, Treadmill and Poor Law have been disbanded. When he is told they have not, he says that “those who are badly off must go there”

although the other gentlemen tell him that “many can’t go there; and many would rather die” (Dickens 45). In the conversation that follows, Scrooge declares that the poor and destitute are none of his business:

“If they would rather die,” said Scrooge, “they had better do it, and decrease the surplus population. Besides—excuse me—I don’t know that.”

“But you might know it,” observed the gentleman.

“It’s not my business,” Scrooge returned. “It’s enough for a man to understand his own business, and not to interfere with other people’s.” (Dickens 45)

Scrooge declares “I don’t know that” the poor are in that bad of a situation, arguing that he is ignorant of their situation. He then claims, “It’s not my business” which suggests he is not responsible to know the situation of the poor. It is as if he believes his ignorance is a right. However, Scrooge’s claim of his right to ignorance is quickly proved wrong by the ghosts.

The first ghost, Marley, teaches Scrooge the personal dangers of ignorance. When Marley arrives, he tells Scrooge that “Mankind was my business. The common welfare was my business; charity, mercy, forbearance, and benevolence, were, all, my business. The dealings of my trade were but a drop of water in the comprehensive ocean of my business!” (Dickens 56). Thus, business encompasses not just one’s own trade, but also the welfare of others. If Marley is correct that it is not “enough for a man to understand his own business,” then Scrooge ought to know the situation of the poor and help them. Otherwise, after his death, he will be “doomed to wander through the world,” to “witness what [he] cannot share, but might have shared on earth

and turned to happiness!” (Dickens 54). The personal danger of ignorance is being condemned to wander the earth after death and being unable to help others.

In addition to the personal dangers of ignorance, Scrooge is taught about the societal dangers of Ignorance as the Ghosts of Christmas show him the poor and erase his ignorance. The Ghost of Christmas Present warns Scrooge of two scrawny, child-monsters, Ignorance and Want, the children of mankind. The Ghost of Christmas Present says, “This boy is Ignorance . . . most of all beware [Ignorance], for on his brow I see that written which is Doom, unless the writing be erased.” (Dickens 101). Thus, the society is in danger of doom unless, as the spirit says, their ignorance is erased. This erasure of Scrooge’s conscious ignorance is accomplished as three ghosts show him the poor. First the Ghost of Christmas Past shows Scrooge his own lonely childhood and the happiness others gave him. Then the Ghost of Christmas present shows Scrooge the poor “carrying their dinners to the beakers’ shops,” the Cratchit’s Christmas dinner, miners on the blackmoor, men in a lighthouse and on a ship, and the “almshouse, hospital, and jail, in misery’s every refuge” (Dickens 84, 87, 92-93, 99). Finally, the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come shows Scrooge how, because of his determined ignorance, the poor may rejoice and profit rather than mourn at his death. Each of the ghosts of Christmas show him scenes depicting the life experiences of the poor. As a result, he can no longer claim ignorance of their situation and realizes the error of his previous attitude. Scrooge’s new knowledge makes him want to help the poor; however, while traveling with the spirits, he is unable to act (Dickens 72, 110). Thus, his ignorance is erased as he sees the poor, but he is unable to act on his new knowledge.

After waking a changed and informed man on Christmas day, Scrooge acts on his new knowledge by helping the poor, and the novella ends by invoking the audience to be like him. In the last stave, Scrooge buys a turkey for the Cratchits (Dickens 120), donates to the poor and helps the beggars (121), gives Bob Cratchit a raise, and becomes a second father to Tiny Tim (123). These actions result from and follow the erasure of Scrooge's ignorance. They are the second step. *A Christmas Carol* ends with the affirmation that Scrooge "knew how to keep Christmas well, if any man alive possessed the knowledge. May that be truly said of us, and all of us! And so, as Tiny Tim observed, God Bless Us, Every One!" (Dickens 125). This ending challenges the reader to act on a social issue, as the ending of numerous other Christmas stories and books also do (Stone, 22). This plea that the reader will become like the changed, informed Scrooge is characteristic of Dickens' Christmas stories.

The short Christmas story, "A House to Let," has many similarities to Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* despite being a conglomeration of writing by four different authors. The first and last chapters of "A House to Let" were written jointly by Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins, his assistant editor. The intervening chapters were independently written by Elizabeth Gaskell, Charles Dickens, Adelaide Ann Proctor, and Wilkie Collins. Short transitions between chapters were also jointly written by Dickens and Collins. Objections to the comparison of Dickens' use of ghosts in *A Christmas Carol* and the haunting in "A House to Let" might be made because "A House to Let" was not only written by Dickens. However, in the Christmas issues of *Household Words*, Dickens "dominated each issue from its inception to its final publication: the various

contributors did not communicate among themselves, and Dickens was exclusively responsible for vetting all of the submissions, compiling them, and linking them together” and retained control “over the initial setting and overall context of the narrative itself” (Greggory 218). As for other Christmas stories, Dickens conceived the idea, requested and selected the intervening stories, and edited “A House to Let.” Because “A House to Let” was so directly under his control from start to finish, including the initial plot idea, the hauntings can be compared with those in *A Christmas Carol*. Furthermore, this analysis mainly examines the plot and the characters of the frame tale, which are essentially Dickens’.

In the frame tale of “A House To Let,” Sophonosiba is haunted by a House and an Eye which create her desire for knowledge, implying her current state of ignorance. Shortly after moving, Sophonosiba looks out her window, “staring at the House through [her] glasses, as if [she] had never looked at it before” (Dickens et al. 2). She narrates, “All at once--in the first-floor window on my right--down in a low corner, at a hole in a blind or a shutter--I found that I was looking at a secret Eye. . . . I saw it shine and vanish.” (Dickens et al. 2). In this first sentence, the word Eye comes last, followed by a series of phrases (such as “all at once”) which place the reader in a state of suspense. This eye temporarily shines and then disappears, which makes it seem creepier to Sophonosiba. When she saw the eye, “. . . something struck through [her] frame, as if the sparkle of this eye had been electric, and had flashed straight at [her]. It had such an effect upon [her], that [she] could not remain by [her]self . . .” (Dickens et al. 2). This weird and creepy eye and the house she saw it in began to constantly haunt her: “In the cold winter sunlight, in the

thick winter fog, in the black winter rain, in the white winter snow, the House was equally on my mind. I have heard, as everybody else has, of a spirit's haunting a house; but I have had my own personal experience of a house's haunting a spirit; for that House haunted mine" (Dickens et al. 3). The eye and the house haunted her in the sense that she could not focus her attention on other things. They were always on her mind and seemed to always be in her presence, as she says, "I got no relief from having my curtains drawn when it came dark, and shutting out the house. The Eye then began to shine in my fire" (Dickens et al. 3). As a result of this Eye she had seen haunting her, Sophonosiba became obsessed with knowing the history of the House to Let. This obsession with a quest for knowledge suggests that Sophonosiba is, at this point in the story, ignorant. However, unlike Scrooge, she recognizes that ignorance without having it directly stated to her and decides to seek knowledge without having it forced on her like Scrooge. By doing this, she will deliberately get rid of her ignorance.

This ignorance is first addressed through knowledge narratives given by Jarber which attempt to erase her ignorance by discussing the house's distant history. When Sophonisba tells Jarber that she has become obsessed with that "House so mysterious," and "that I have had no peace for a month. I foresee that I shall have no peace" until she knows the history of the house, he offers to discover it for her (Dickens et al. 4). Jarber associates himself with the Circulating Library, Assessed Taxes, Water Rate, Medical Man, House Agent's, Churchwardens, and the Guardians (Dickens et al. 5). These are each sources of information or knowledge. Thus, it seems that Jarber is the perfect source of knowledge to erase Sophonosiba's ignorance. However, the

three narrative which Jabber brings back—the story of a man whose wife remarried while he was lost at sea, the tale of a circus dwarf, and a poem about a love triangle—do not answer the question of why the House to Let is empty still. Despite Jabbers’ talk and the information he provides on the distant history of the House, she is still ignorant of the answer to the question “why the House over the way doesn’t let” that haunts her (Dickens et al. 17).

Left ignorant by Jabbers’ attempt to answer her question, Sophonosiba’s ignorance is fully erased by Trotter’s narrative paired with and followed by action. Unlike Jabbers (who merely jabbars or talks), Trotter seeks knowledge and takes action. Sophonosiba describes him as one who “would take any trouble to gratify even a whim of his old mistress’s” (Dickens et al. 5). He is a man of action. Rather than offer her a literary tale or poem, Trotter “trots” across the street and returns to Sophonosiba with a “manuscript under the name of a Report” (Dickens et al. 26). The use of the word “Report” to describe it implies a different sort of truth than Jabbers’ stories and implies his personal investigative action. The description of Trotter’s first step in the report is significant because it describes this action in narrative form. It reads, “Carefully dismissing from his mind all nonsensical notions of former tenants and their histories, and keeping the one point in view steadily before him, he started to reach it in the shortest way, by walking straight up to the House, and bringing himself face to face with the first person in it who opened the door to him” (Dickens et al. 26-27). The many action verbs (dismissing, keeping, started, walking, bringing) pair the narrative report with Trotter’s action to obtain it. Throughout the rest of the report, Trotter describes the actions that he took to gain the knowledge Sophonosiba sought. His

active pursuit and personal detective work bring more relevant information than Jabbers' repetition of others' stories. After the narrative concludes, Jarber continues acting researching and Sophonosiba joins him in clearing up the last few questions about the House to Let by going across the street with him. In the end, Trotter not only erases most of Sophonosiba's ignorance by providing information about the House to Let, but also works with her to rescue a poor, young boy who had been imprisoned there. Sophonosiba then buys the House to Let and turns it into a "Hospital for Sick Children" (Dickens et al. 36). The difference in this ignorance, knowledge, and action plot suggests that ignorance is better combatted and the poor are better helped by knowledge paired with and followed by action than with action alone.

"A House to Let" concludes with an implied plea to the reader to take action like the main character, Sophonosiba, an ending which is characteristic of Dickens' Christmas stories. Sophonosiba's concluding paragraph is a description of her hospital, the changes made across the street which ended the haunting, and the poor children who are now there:

Many an Eye I see in that House now, but it is never in solitude, never in neglect. Many an Eye I see in that House now, that is more and more radiant every day with the light of returning health. As my precious darling has changed beyond description for the brighter and the better, so do the not less precious darlings of poor women change in that house every day of the year. For which I humbly thank that Gracious Being whom the restorer of the Widow's son and of the Ruler's daughter, instructed all mankind to call their Father. (Dickens et al. 36).

She stills sees Eyes, but they no longer haunt her. Her ignorance has been erased and the haunting Eye has been replaced by many young and happy ones. It seems fitting that the concluding plea to help the poor as she does is implied in this Christmas story, just as the discussion of ignorance and want is implied throughout. If the plea is to be like her, one could assume that means recognize ignorance, seek knowledge, and help poor children.

The Christmas stories of *A Christmas Carol* and “A House to Let” each use hauntings differently to discuss ignorance and knowledge in regards to acting and helping the poor. In *A Christmas Carol*, Scrooge’s ignorance must first be erased by the ghosts before he is permitted to act and help the poor. In “A House to Let,” which was published 15 years later, Sophonosiba recognizes her ignorance through a haunting, but that haunting does not play a large role in the rest of the story. Her ignorance is not erased merely through knowledge obtained by her living friends, but through knowledge paired with and followed by action. Perhaps through these differences, the texts suggest that Dickens’ view of the relationship between erasing ignorance and helping the poor had evolved with 15 more years of life experience. Rather than advocating learning before acting, he now paired learning with the acting as a way to make a bigger difference to the poor.

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Abstract

Throughout his life, Dickens was both skeptical of and fascinated with hauntings. He used them often in his writing as a way of examining social issues. In this paper, I examine his use of hauntings in his 1843 novella *A Christmas Carol* and the portmanteau story, “A House to Let,” in the Christmas edition of *Household Words* and how the stories are either an explicit or implied commentary on ignorance of the poor. In *A Christmas Carol*, four ghosts haunt Scrooge and teach him the personal and societal dangers of Ignorance. This experience, which erases his personal and deliberate ignorance, becomes the catalyst for his change of heart. As a result, he acts to help the poor and the novella closes by inviting the reader to be like him. Similarly, in the 1858 story “A House to Let,” Sophonosiba (the main character) is haunted by a House/Eye which helps her recognize her ignorance. This experience fuels her quest for knowledge (which will quench her ignorance). She pursues this quest independently of the hauntings with the aid of two of her very much living friends. However, in “A House to Let,” it is clear that action is required to gain knowledge as well as to make a difference in the social problems explored in the text by helping the poor children, whereas in *A Christmas Carol* gaining knowledge precedes helping the poor. This difference between the two texts suggests that Dickens’ perspective on ignorance, knowledge, and helping the poor shifted in the 15 years between the two stories.