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a

FIG. 1. The ghost of Jacob Marley appearing to Scrooge (a). In Dickens's *Christmas Carol*, this visitor is followed by three other specters, including the Ghost of Christmas Present (b), who succeed in converting Scrooge from a cold, grasping miser to a man of charity, mercy, and forbearance. Minus the ghosts, published Christmas stories for Latter-day Saints also portray mighty changes within individuals. These stories reveal cultural priorities that differ somewhat from Dickens's. Illustrations by John Leech, from Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1843), facing 25 and 78.



b

Culture Carol: Dickens's Influence on LDS Christmas Fiction

Rosalynde Frandsen Welch

During the festive weeks before Christmas feasts, everybody loves to hate Scrooge. That's how it always was in the household of my childhood. On the first Sunday afternoon of December, my father would gather the children in the family room and ceremonially produce our green, hard-bound edition of *A Christmas Carol*. He worked his way through the five staves of the *Carol* during that afternoon and the Sunday afternoons that followed, in order to complete the reading before Christmas Day. Although the younger children would fidget and the older children would complain, we needed the annual retelling of the tale to demarcate the ritualized realm of "the holidays" and signal our entry into sacralized Christmastime. All rituals require narrative; *A Christmas Carol* supplied the narrative structure (fig. 1)—the good guys and bad guys, the beginning, middle, and end—of our suburban, middle-class Christmas ritual.

I suspect that my family was not unique in this respect. Since its publication on December 19, 1843, Dickens's Christmas fable has supplied the cultural myth that informs the rituals of America's greatest urban festival, and thus it has been revised, retold, re-released, adapted, condensed, and modernized more than any other seasonal story. Thinly disguised as the Grinch or more subtly rendered as the narrator of the enormously popular *Christmas Box*, Scrooge is alive, to begin with. But his enduring popularity does not imply that the *Carol* has ossified into an institution immune from the transformative power of time. Rather, Scrooge continues to haunt the American cultural imagination as the most protean of men, changing guises as frequently as the reasons for retelling the story. But whereas most cultural stories begin as collectively imagined, orally transmitted folktales, recorded and reified much later (think of Homer or the Grimm brothers), the *Carol* inverts the process: it was first a written text but has become a shared cultural artifact. The collaborative product of accumulated retellings over the past century and a half, the *Carol* is what Paul Davis calls a "culture-text."¹ Each generation re-interprets the tale according to its underlying biases and values and then re-creates the *Carol* in its own cultural image. Each new version of the *Carol*, then, registers a new set of collective anxieties, shared values, and cultural contradictions. And if the culture-text of *A Christmas Carol* serves as a site for working out issues of

cultural identity, then an examination of a community's Carols provides a rich site for working out cultural history.

So what can Latter-day Saint Christmas stories, our Carols, tell us about Mormon culture? Deseret Book's 1997 anthology of fictional Christmas stories, *Once upon a Christmastime*,² and five earlier Christmas anthologies represent a rich collection of literary materials that suggest answers for this question. Nearly every story in this handsome volume takes up themes and characters of *A Christmas Carol* as a subtext, some with very little difference and some with significant revision. The ruptures and continuities registered in these re-imaginings of Scrooge and Tiny Tim reveal the anxieties, values, and contradictions of the social matrix, namely the North American subsection of LDS culture, which binds together the writers and readers of these stories. Thus in comparing LDS Christmas stories to the culture-text of the *Carol*, we discover not only our literature but also our lives. But in order to compare, we must first understand. After evaluating the cultural meaning and function of Dickens's *Carol* within its historical moment, we will be prepared to understand the meaning and function of LDS Christmas stories.

***A Christmas Carol* as a Product of Dickens's Goal of Social Reform**

A Christmas Carol has been credited, with some hyperbole, with single-handedly rescuing the Christmas holiday from certain demise at the hand of frowning Puritan sobriety, and Charles Dickens has been hailed as the inventor of the Anglo-American Christmas, the veritable Founder of the Feast.³ Alternatively, the *Carol* has been accused of single-handedly destroying Christmas, replacing it with the frenzied seasonal circus of buying and spending that defines December. Russell Baker wryly charged Dickens with re-imagining Christmas as "a festival of consumption . . . in which a month-long celebration takes place not in the church, but in the department store."⁴

Hyperbole aside, Dickens undeniably sentimentalized the exchange of money and goods at Christmas and in doing so perhaps unwittingly prefigured its modern materialism. More likely, however, Dickens set out neither to resurrect nor to destroy Christmas; rather, in the *Carol* he figuratively relocated the Christmas festival of agrarian feudalism to the industrialized city. "Merry old England" lived again in the world of the *Carol*: the medieval manorial festivities drawing both serf and lord (fig. 2), the feudal games, and above all the boar's head and sacramental Christmas feast find a new urban incarnation in Fezziwig's party (fig. 3), Fred's memorable game of blindman's buff, and the Cratchits' Christmas feast. The relentless trajectory of industrialization and urbanization that had drawn Ebenezer Scrooge—and thousands more like him—from the country to the city by 1800 also brought a scourge of social ills that came to a head in the 1840s:



FIG. 2. Distributing Christmas largesse. Traditionally, wealthy landlords shared with the poor as part of the Christmas festivities. Dickens attempted to foster similar attitudes in urban England. Illustration by R. Seymour, from Thomas K. Hervey, *The Book of Christmas* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1888), facing 109.

intense population pressure, a sense of temporal and geographic dislocation, the disruption of established social structures, and a plummeting quality of life, among others. Dickens found in feudal Christmas traditions an antidote to these urban social ills, and the *Carol* represented his imaginative resolution of the real contradictions under which Victorian England labored.⁵

In March 1843, Charles Dickens received a copy of the Second Report of the Children's Employment Commission, the second part of a government investigation into the employment of children in mines and factories. The report was graphically illustrated with horrific images of naked children pulling coal carts twice their size to which they were chained, buried deep in mine shafts not even tall enough for the children to stand up straight. Together with the severe trade recession of the mid-1840s and the continuing discussion of vexing social issues in Parliament and the press, these reports fueled a heightened concern with the plight of the poor in industrialized urban England. Dickens, along with his fellow middle-class Victorians, was properly shocked by the report's revelation of misery and wrote on the same day that he was anxious to produce "a very cheap pamphlet called 'An Appeal to the People of England, on behalf of the Poor Man's Child.'" Four days later, his plan had changed: he would wait until the end of the year, and then "a Sledge hammer" would "come down with twenty times the force."⁶ That sledgehammer was *A Christmas Carol*, which appeared in December of that year.



FIG. 3. Fezziwig's party. On Christmas Eve, Fezziwig hosts a party for his family and all in his employ, regardless of their social standing. In Dickens's hands, this party becomes the urban equivalent of the feudal manorial feast. Illustration by John Leech, from Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1843), facing title page.

If the *Carol* represented Dickens's direct response to the parliamentary report, it also reflected his ongoing concern with the problems of greed, alienation, and exploitation that seemed inevitably to accompany industrialization. During the six weeks in November and December of 1843 in which he composed the *Carol*, he was simultaneously immersed in writing the American sections of his serial novel *Martin Chuzzlewit*. Relentless in its portrayal of characters driven only by hypocrisy and profit, *Chuzzlewit* is perhaps the most cynical and depressing of Dickens's novels and reveals Dickens's preoccupation with the troubling social consequences of industrial capitalism. The twin prom-

ises of progress and prosperity that accompanied early industrialization had failed to materialize fully, especially for the working classes; *Chuzzlewit* and the *Carol* both articulate the disappointment and frustration of a culture betrayed by its technology. Whereas the former merely catalogs the social ills attending industrialization and laissez-faire economic policy, the latter proposes a solution and imagines its happy resolution.

But given the wide array of pressing social issues, where might a reformer—even a reformer with the energy and optimism of Charles Dickens—begin an attempt at meaningful change? Dickens wanted to begin with the most egregious of the problems, of course, and in the world of the *Carol* that problem turns out to be the economic alienation dissolving human relationships at the levels of class, family, and individual. It has been much remarked that one can be most alone in the midst of the largest crowd, and Ebenezer Scrooge is figurative proof of that irony: although he lives in the largest population center in England, the unredeemed Scrooge is absolutely isolated. That he works beneath the sign “Scrooge and Marley” only accentuates his singleness: “Scrooge was [Marley's] *sole* executor, his *sole* administrator, his *sole* assign, his *sole* residuary legatee, his *sole* friend, and *sole* mourner.” It becomes clear that the pun on “sole” is not

made frivolously: Dickens continues on to describe Scrooge as “secret, and self-contained, and solitary as an oyster,” a man who likes “to edge his way along the crowded paths of life, warning all human sympathy to keep its distance.” Scrooge’s estrangement from humanity leads him to reject opportunities for charitable giving—“I wish to be left alone,” he informs the two gentlemen solicitors who visit his office⁷—and disregard the obvious poverty of his clerk. If Scrooge’s self-absorbed alienation allows Tiny Tim’s illness to persist, then an entire class of Scrooges has allowed the acute social illnesses of Victorian society—ignorance and want—to persist.

Scrooge’s alienation does not stem from generalized psychological or emotional pain; rather, it results from his insistence on defining all relationships in terms of economics. In the opening scene, for example, Scrooge identifies his clerk not by name but only as “my clerk, with fifteen shillings a week.”⁸ The clerk is nameless because his relationship to Scrooge consists solely of a particular use-value (“my clerk”) and a particular cost (“fifteen shillings a week”). Similarly, when his nephew Fred arrives to deliver a Christmas dinner invitation, Scrooge immediately points out the economic gulf between them (“You’re poor enough”) and refuses the invitation on grounds of Fred’s economic imprudence in marrying, disregarding Fred’s non-economic status as a nephew.⁹ Money constitutes the matrix of Scrooge’s human relationships; like Shakespeare’s Shylock, Scrooge’s miserly prototype who cannot distinguish between his ducats and his daughter, Scrooge cannot conceive of human relationships in non-economic terms. It is in this sense that biographer Edgar Johnson calls Scrooge “nothing other than a personification of economic man” and “the embodiment of all that concentration upon material power and callous indifference to the welfare of human beings that the economists had erected into a system.”¹⁰

Scrooge is the human product of the economic system in which he exists. For the same laws of economy that remake Bob Cratchit into a fifteen-shilling clerk just as surely remake Scrooge into a nameless economic functionary, a single, interchangeable cog (“Scrooge or Marley?”) in the vast machinery of the London economy. Scrooge himself observes that “[my business] occupies me constantly.”¹¹ He defines himself as wholly a function of political economy and thus cannot help but model his human relationships from the impersonal medium of money. And since he forces all human relationships to obey the profit-driven laws of capitalism, concepts such as “family” and “community” that denote non-economic relationships have no meaning for Scrooge. One need not agree with all of Marx’s critique of capitalism to see his concept of “commodification” (the turning of people and human relationships into products of exchanges) at work in the world of the *Carol*.

If economic problems cause social machinery to seize up, then love allows it to run smoothly, according to the *Carol*. Charity, in other words, can compensate for the alienating forces inherent in a capitalist economy. Scrooge's transformation from alienated miser to charitable giver sets the world aright: Tiny Tim does not die, and the specters of Ignorance and Want are banished. Fred's meditation on Christmas charity articulates an important theme of the story:

I have always thought of Christmastime . . . as a good time; a kind, forgiving, charitable, pleasant time; the only time I know of, in the long calendar of the year, when men and women seem by one consent to open their shut-up hearts freely, and to think of people below them as if they really were fellow-passengers to the grave, and not another race of creatures bound on other journeys.¹²

For Dickens, then, Christmas functions as a sacralized time set apart from the rest of the year, a time of transformation during which the law of love replaces the laws of economics, and sympathy replaces alienation. By relieving the tensions that accumulate during the year, Christmastime acts as a period of ritual purification from stains of greed and isolation—a temporary respite from the unpleasant economic reality to which men and women must return after the holidays. In this way, the *Carol* constructs Christmastime as an imaginary emancipation from the iron laws of economics, a way of restabilizing human relationships and allowing social good and self-interest to coexist.

How exactly does Dickens liberate Christmas from those iron laws of economics? First, he establishes a model of economic abundance to replace the scarcity model that governs the thinking of the unredeemed Scrooge. In the first scene of the *Carol*, Scrooge memorably demonstrates the Malthusian scarcity model under which he labors, when he refuses to contribute to a charitable collection for the poor: “I don't make merry myself at Christmas, and I can't afford to make idle people merry. . . . If [the poor] would rather die,' said Scrooge, 'they had better do it, and decrease the surplus population.’”¹³ For Scrooge, as for other Victorian Malthusianists, the geometric growth in population always exceeds the arithmetic growth in food supply, and the inevitable hunger of the “surplus population” serves as a constant reminder of the scarcity of essential commodities. By contrast, the world of the *Carol* outside Scrooge's office nearly bursts with abundance—the abundance of commodity and consumption is matched only by Dickens's own linguistic abundance. Dickens fills paragraph after paragraph with sentimentalized representations of buying and selling and effusive description of commodities (fig. 4); his rhapsody on the fruiterers' shops is worth quoting in full simply for its gleeful celebration of surfeit:

There were great, round, pot-bellied baskets of chestnuts, shaped like the waistcoats of jolly old gentlemen, lolling at the doors, and tumbling out into



FIG. 4. An English market on Christmas Eve. Surrounded by such abundance—Dickens implies—people have no reason to not be charitable and provide for the poor. Illustration by R. Seymour, from Thomas K. Hervey, *The Book of Christmas* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1888), facing 267.

the street in their apoplectic opulence. There were ruddy, brown-faced, broad-girthed Spanish onions, shining in the fatness of their growth like Spanish Friars, and winking from their shelves in wanton slyness at the girls as they went by, and glanced demurely at the hung-up mistletoe. There were pears and apples, clustered high in blooming pyramids; there were bunches of grapes, made, in the shopkeepers' benevolence, to dangle from conspicuous hooks that people's mouths might water gratis as they passed; there were piles of filberts, mossy and brown, recalling, in their fragrance, ancient walks among the woods, and pleasant shufflings ankle deep through withered leaves; there were Norfolk Biffins, squab and swarthy, setting off the yellow of the oranges and lemons, and, in the great compactness of their juicy persons, urgently entreating and beseeching to be carried home in paper bags and eaten after dinner.¹⁴

In the copious world of the *Carol*, supply always exceeds consumption, so that the laws of supply and demand need not pinch the pockets of generous Christmas givers and the “surplus population” may revel in Christmas plenty. Christmas is reimagined from the perspective of affluence as a universal festival of giving and getting.

Second, in order to liberate Christmas from the grasp of impersonal economics Dickens strategically transforms economically mediated relationships—that of employer and employee, for example—into non-economic relationships, such as father and son. Scrooge, distanced from everyone at the beginning of the tale, by the end has become a “second father” to Tiny

Tim.¹⁵ The result of this strategic transformation of relationships is a conceptual redefinition of the urban “family.” Davis observes, “The *Carol* replaces the extended manorial family with an urban ‘family of man.’ . . . Not linked by relations of blood or property, the new urban family is a microcosm of the human economic community.”¹⁶ In the course of Scrooge’s personal transformation, he is shown the figures of the children Ignorance and Want, from whom he shrinks in disgust; by the end of the *Carol* he has learned that in the new urban family he must acknowledge his own complicity in the future of these creatures of social neglect. He must adopt them as his own son and daughter.

The *Carol*, then, draws a surprising conclusion about the social and economic problems it addresses: that is, social reform must be achieved through personal conversion. For the *Carol*, after all, is the quintessential urban conversion narrative, and Victorian readers would easily have recognized it as deeply rooted in the Bible and Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. Scrooge’s conversion shares important features with that of Paul and the pilgrim Christian: all involve dreams or visions, elements of the supernatural, and a spiritual awakening or rebirth. Overt references to Christian theology are curiously veiled in the *Carol*; notwithstanding, Scrooge’s exclamation “I’m quite a baby. Never mind. I don’t care. I’d rather be a baby” clearly indicates Scrooge’s fulfillment of Christ’s commandment to be born again.¹⁷

In enacting Scrooge’s Christmastime conversion, the *Carol* links the Easter story of spiritual death and rebirth to the Christmas season. And it is this juxtaposition of atonement and nativity that lends the *Carol* its powerful affective quality: the *Carol* does not set out to convert Scrooge alone but rather attempts to accomplish nothing less than the spiritual conversion of its readers. For if the tale is truly to become a sledgehammer on behalf of the poor man’s child—that is, if it is to have a material effect on the real world—it must turn its readers to love and charitable giving just as surely as it must transform Scrooge. But the reader’s conversion differs from Scrooge’s in one crucial aspect: while Scrooge is transformed by the visions shown him of the Ghosts, the reader of the *Carol* is transformed by the very experience of reading a written text. Dickens’s faith in Christian love as a remedy for the social problems of Victorian England is matched by his faith in the written word as an agent of transformation in individual lives.

LDS Christmas Stories as a Product of *A Christmas Carol*

Dickens’s belief in the power of the written word is not unique to him, of course; the notion that a book can effect a spiritual conversion in its reader is one that resonates vigorously within a Latter-day Saint context. In fact, the 1997 anthology *Once upon a Christmastime* seems to have been

conceived and structured upon that premise. The subtitle of the volume reads “Short Stories for the Season.” These were collected not merely as stories *about* the season but also as stories *for* the season, not simply describing the Christmas spirit but, like *A Christmas Carol*, helping to generate that transformative spirit in its readers. For readers who believe that a book—the Book of Mormon—possesses the power to convince its readers of Christ’s divinity and thus to transform lives, it is not difficult to accept the notion that the written word has existence and efficacy *off* the page and *in* the realm of lived experience.

Other aspects of Latter-day Saint theology and collective psychology make its culture particularly fertile soil for the *Carol*, and these affinities reveal both familiar and surprising characteristics of that culture. For example, Scrooge’s transformation depends on his capacity to identify with the visual representations he witnesses in the visions shown him by the ghosts; furthermore, his identification with those representations was strong enough to work permanent changes in Scrooge’s character. The capacity to identify with representation finds an analogue in Latter-day Saint theology: the ancient American prophets’ repeated admonitions to liken the scriptures unto ourselves depend on the same ability to identify with representations, albeit written representations, and to allow such identification to work real changes in one’s character. Latter-day Saints recognize the mechanism of Scrooge’s conversion as one method of their own continuing spiritual conversions.

One might find an additional evidence of a “Carol-friendly” culture in the LDS concept of a “change of heart.” For decades, critics have struggled with the difficulty the reader encounters in believing that “Scrooge could overcome the neglect and psychological distress of a lifetime overnight, no matter how therapeutic the spirits.”¹⁸ But the Latter-day Saint concept of spiritual transformation resolves this credibility problem, for we understand a “conversion” to be both a moment and a process. While scriptures contain accounts of sudden conversions not unlike Scrooge’s (Alma the Younger’s and Lamoni’s, for example) and while Latter-day Saints recount their own “conversion moments,” the weekly renewal of covenants and Alma’s sermon in the fifth chapter of his book both acknowledge the fact that a conversion is also a lifelong process. Furthermore, we frequently (if tacitly) allow the account of the conversion moment to stand as a synecdoche for the lifelong conversion process: converts share their “conversion stories,” understanding that the story of the initial conversion represents the continuing process of conversion in which we participate together. For Latter-day Saint readers, then, Scrooge’s overnight transformation simply represents in narrative form the lifelong process of transformation on which he embarks, and the difficulty finds a satisfactory—and credible—resolution.

By far the most significant affinity between Latter-day Saint culture and the *Carol*, however, is immediately apparent to readers of *Once Upon a Christmastime*, that is, the importance assigned to the conversion narrative as a formal and informal genre of Mormon literature and self-expression. The pages of Latter-day Saint scriptures, magazines, and lesson manuals are filled with narratives of conversion, as are the informal testimonies delivered monthly from the pulpits in Latter-day Saint chapels; the protagonists of these narratives range from investigators to long-time members experiencing more subtle “conversions” to particular principles of the gospel.

Since the story of Scrooge is the story of his conversion, it is no surprise that the culture-text of the “LDS Carol” lives on most robustly in the form of the Mormon conversion narrative. In *Once upon a Christmastime*, for example, forty-one of the forty-five stories are structured by the conversion or spiritual transformation of the protagonist. In the most overt rehearsals of the standard Latter-day Saint conversion narrative, the protagonist undergoes a religious conversion to Mormonism that happens to take place at Christmastime; Dallas Merrell’s Christmas memoir, for example, recounts the Christmastime conversion of a family friend who takes the missionary discussions and accepts baptism.¹⁹ Sometimes the conversion takes the form of reactivation and long-overdue repentance, as in Michael Wilcox’s “A Father’s Christmas Answer,” in which the protagonist’s father undergoes a long struggle with nicotine addiction that culminates in his Christmastime victory over the drug and his reconciliation with the Church and his family.²⁰ Most frequently, however, the central conversion is a more subtly rendered spiritual transformation in which the protagonist, like Scrooge, finally comprehends and embraces the “Christmas spirit.” These stories begin with their main characters in need of redemption, though their particular necessities vary: some are lonely, some selfish, some grieving, some prideful, some cynical. The stories follow an upward trajectory, and by the conclusion—usually on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day—their respective Scrooges have experienced the needed spiritual transformation. Christmas works its miracle, a joyous change in the hearts of these characters.

The protagonist of Carroll Morris’s story, “Silent Night,” is typical of these converted Scrooges: she “feels the darkness begin to lift; in its place comes something as light and sweet and full of promise as the first warm breeze of spring.”²¹ Even direct references to Scrooge’s conversion abound: “Scrooge changed because of Christmas . . . Christmas helps people change.”²² Conversion is a common theme in all Christian literature, but these conversions are uniquely Mormon: not only do they involve Latter-day Saint characters and situations, but they are narrated in unmistakably

Latter-day Saint terms. One character asks, "But have I had a change of heart? Was I renewed in Christ? Have I been born again?"²³ Scrooge might well have asked himself the same questions had Dickens made him a Mormon.

But perhaps more interesting than the generic similarities connecting the *Carol* to its LDS culture-text is the prevalent and puzzling difference that distinguishes the two, namely, the pronounced lack of any supernatural element in the LDS carols. The full title of Dickens's novella is *A Christmas Carol, in Prose, Being a Ghost Story of Christmas*, and a ghost story it certainly is (fig. 5); the element of nonrationality introduced by the ghosts—not to mention their importance for the plot—is vital for Scrooge's redemption. Strange, then, that not a ghost (aside from the Holy Ghost), angel, vision, or spirit haunts the present-day Christmas stories. Although some story titles hint at the supernatural—"The Bread of the Angels," "Angel," "Ghosts," "Angel Voices," "The Angel of the Bathtub"—the "angels" turn out to be rambunctious children in tinsel halos and the "ghosts" to be memories of a lost wife or pioneer ancestors. That angels and ghosts should be absent from Latter-day Saint fiction carries a particular irony, of course, since our religious community and belief are built upon the strength of a message delivered by an angel. But in this age of rationality when the phenomena and forces that shape our everyday lives are fully explained, or seem to be, perhaps some have lost the ability to imagine the supernatural. The characters who live in these stories no longer require angels; they prefer to experience the divine more quietly, more privately, more explicably.

If the Ghosts are the agents of Scrooge's conversion and if they are conspicuously eliminated from these LDS Carols, what takes their place



FIG. 5. The Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come haunts Scrooge. Containing no supernatural elements, LDS Carols are often haunted instead by "motherless and fatherless children, childless parents, and alienated couples." Illustration by John Leech, from Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1843), facing 150.

in the narrative structure of the tale? A simple plot summary of nearly any of the stories suffices to provide the answer; Jack Weyland's story "Shop with a Cop" is a typical example. The story's Scrooge is one Dutton, a crotchety cop who is assigned (against his will) to supervise a Christmas shopping trip for two poor children. He grudgingly performs the task and during the experience finds himself pondering the purpose of Christmas; by Christmas morning, he has experienced a change of heart, and at the end of the story, he arrives at the children's home laden with Christmas gifts and food to augment their meager celebration. No ghosts visit Dutton during the night; rather, it is the giving of person-to-person service that brings about his conversion to the Christmas spirit. This is the model that informs virtually all of the stories in the collection: the performance of an act of Christian charity, typically formulated as providing the Christmas trappings for a disadvantaged family, kindles the redeeming warmth of Christmas within the cold heart of the protagonist. At first glance, this seems to parallel Dickens's *Carol*—after all, on Christmas Day Scrooge

sends the prize turkey to the Cratchits and makes a charitable donation to the poor. But Scrooge's acts of charity are simply evidence of his conversion (fig. 6); in these LDS Carols, the act of charity is actually the catalyst of conversion.²⁴

In a significant variation on the Latter-day Saint model, the protagonist accepts rather than offers the act of service, but the redemptive result remains the same. In another Jack Weyland story, "A Christmas Song," a Scrooge-like teenager and his terminally ill mother experience a spiritual Christmas redemption by accepting an act of loving service offered by their ward family.²⁵ For Latter-day Saints, redemption requires that one accept Christ's love



FIG. 6. The new Scrooge. Here Scrooge warms his assistant while discussing a salary raise plus assistance to the Cratchit family. Unlike Scrooge, who is changed by visits from phantoms, the protagonists in LDS Carols are rendered more charitable by the act of giving itself. Illustration by John Leech, from Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1843), 164.

as well as radiate it to others, and this requirement is registered in our Christmas stories. The real Christmas miracles, these stories tell us, are not angelic visitations or ghost-borne visions; the real Christmas miracles happen when hearts are changed and sincere acts of Christian charity follow.

As one reads through the dozens of Christmas stories collected in the anthology, one begins to detect thematic and structural patterns that surface regularly throughout the book. One of the most salient of these patterns involves the completion of a family group, which coincides with the protagonist's ultimate conversion to the Christmas spirit. While these Christmas stories are not visited by ghosts or angels, they are haunted by motherless and fatherless children, childless parents, and alienated couples. In the world of the LDS Carol, death, sin, grief, selfishness, and, above all, divorce leave families incomplete and crumbling, and these stories recite their recuperation. A typical example is Margaret Blair Young's "China Doll," in which an adolescent girl struggles to accept her mother's death and deal with her father's inept parenting; the story concludes as the girl learns that her father will remarry and finds herself capable of loving his new wife. The girl's newfound capacity for Christmastime love coincides with the completion of her previously incomplete nuclear family. In other stories, nuclear families are not actually incomplete but are fractured by a sense of alienation and isolation; the central Christmastime conversion neutralizes this alienation and restores familial solidarity. Benson Parkinson's story, "Wesley's Carol," for example, has a prodigal son returning home for the family Christmas celebration; in Carroll Morris's "Silent Night," the protagonist reveals feelings of grief and isolation that have been straining her marriage, and the couple reaches a Christmastime reconciliation.

These tales of broken and incomplete families are obviously the structural representation of a deep cultural anxiety about the perceived breakdown of family values and the nuclear family; it doesn't require much insight as a cultural critic to observe that Mormons see themselves as advocates for the integrity of the traditional family. Less obviously, this intense focus on the nuclear family maps a significant departure from Dickens's *Carol*, which corresponds to an equally significant feature of our present-day collective values. Whereas Dickens's *Carol* works to broaden the concept of "family" to include all members of an economic community (so that Scrooge himself becomes a father to Tiny Tim), LDS Carols collapse the concept of family to include only the core group of parents and children. In contrast to Dickens's concern with the systemic and societal problems fracturing the "family of man," our Carols articulate a concern with the private problems that fracture the nuclear family. Carroll Morris's character Maggie voices one of the primary themes of our Carols when she

says, referring to her friends and community associates, “But they’re not family. It’s family that’s most important to me.”²⁶

This focus on the nuclear family rather than the “family of man” gestures toward a more general rupture between the LDS Carol and the Dickensian Carol: whereas Dickens’s tale responds to vexing social, political, and economic issues and advocates reform aimed at eliminating ignorance and want from the community, LDS Carols address the human capacity for experiencing personal suffering and sin and advocate redemption at the individual and familial levels. Dickens’s characters suffer from poverty, hunger, disease, ignorance, economically enforced isolation, and other public problems; with a few notable exceptions, the characters in the Latter-day Saint stories suffer from disappointment, doubt, jealousy, fear, ingratitude, sin, depression, grief, fatigue, insecurity, and the host of personal problems that plague the human heart. These Carols explore the limits of the individual potential for sin, suffering and redemption, while broad social problems such as economic injustice and poverty fade to the margins of awareness.

This thematic slippage—from the socioeconomic to the personal realm—might signal a shift in the Latter-day Saint notion of Zion building: when Zion meant a utopia like Nauvoo, Zion building necessarily involved the social, political, and economic structures that allow a physical community to function; now that Zion designates “the pure in heart,” Zion building concerns itself with the emotional and spiritual formation of individual Latter-day Saints. In any case, the focus on the individual reveals the relative affluence of the society portrayed in these stories, for economic concepts lose their significance when everyone is perceived as more or less comfortably middle-class. As one such comfortable middle-class character says, “Sometimes it’s much more painful to be poor in love than it is to be poor in money.”²⁷ Affluence takes the edge off the image of the Cratchits’ poverty and turns the reader’s attention to the condition of Scrooge’s heart.

Because these Christmas stories are written from a position of affluence, they tend to elide the harsh economic forces that differentiate the figures of Scrooge and Cratchit. As a result, Scrooge and Cratchit slip toward one another, becoming difficult to distinguish or even merging completely. Chris Heimerdinger’s *A Return to Christmas* offers a striking visual representation of this structural shift: the two protagonists of the story, who represent a wealthy Scrooge and an impoverished Cratchit, turn out to be identical twins separated at a young age and reunited at the climax of the story—Scrooge and Cratchit resemble one another literally in this case.²⁸ In a more subtle instance, Laurel Mouritsen’s “The Mistaken Gift” tells the story of Winston Langley, a young working man who, like Cratchit, holds a low-paying position; like Cratchit, Langley is the sole provider for his

family and struggles to stretch his wages to cover the necessities of his mother and sisters. Unlike Cratchit, however, Langley is not trapped in poverty by rigid class distinctions; on the contrary, he plans to enroll in business school and has every reason to expect—together with the reader—that his economic situation will soon improve. Langley considers himself a “man of business” and occupies himself wholly with his business affairs; in this sense, he is a clear Scrooge-figure, “filled with none of the cheer and goodwill that characterized the holiday’s approach,”²⁹ and the story continues on to recount Langley’s Scrooge-like conversion to the proper Christmas spirit. Langley resembles both Cratchit and Scrooge, and in the climate of optimistic upward mobility that pervades the story, Cratchit and Scrooge come to resemble one another.

In another example, Eileen Kump’s “The Hope Chest,” awareness of the unpleasant economic reality of poverty is so thoroughly effaced that the Cratchits nearly disappear from view completely—and would disappear altogether were it not for their structural importance to the plot. The story rehearses the familiar scenario of a comfortable suburban family giving their own Christmas gifts to a poor family, discovering the real meaning of Christmas in the process. In this rendition, however, the narrative is entirely concerned with the middle-class dilemmas of the protagonists, and throughout the entire story, the recipients of their Christmastime charity are referred to only as “that other family.” The poor lose their names and personalities, and consequently poverty loses its urgency and meaning. This story could have been produced only in the context of affluence, where the figures of Ignorance and Want (fig. 7), lacking faces and names, become abstractions.

Yet even while these Carols reveal affluence, they disclose a grave ambivalence with regard to materialism. Like Dickens’s *Carol*, these Latter-day Saint Christmas stories are filled with depictions of the abundant material accouterments of the season: all manner of food, Christmas trees, presents, colored lights, and decorations swirl around the action of the stories. And the celebrations depicted in these Christmas stories almost all require some kind of ritual exchange of material goods, taking the form of gift exchanges, charitable donations, or potluck dinners. In this sense, LDS Carols, like Dickens’s, convey a materialist notion of Christmas, as if they were saying, “Christmas is Christmas because of the things we surround ourselves with during our celebrations.”

Dickens employs images of material plenitude to suggest a Christmastime model of economic abundance that replaces the prevailing scarcity model, but these Carols put images of material abundance to a different use. In the LDS Carol, the tangible trappings of Christmas serve, paradoxically, to evoke an intangible, transformative “Christmas spirit.” While the

stories appreciatively employ the material objects that characterize Christmas, they insist that the Christmas spirit—the spirit of love, generosity, and fellowship—is the real object of Christmas celebration. “Christmas is more than gift-wrapped boxes, holly berries, and office parties. . . . Christmas is love,” these stories tell us.³⁰ In Chris Hicks’s “The Little Christmas Tree,” for example, the protagonist, a soldier in Vietnam, receives a parcel from home that turns out to contain a small plastic Christmas tree. When the narrator comments, “The box contained Christmas, or at least the spirit of Christmas,”³¹ he implicitly equates the contents of the box—a material object—with “the spirit of Christmas.” He goes on to describe how “the tree seemed to alter the atmosphere of the whole camp”; in other words, the material presence of Christmas effects a spiritual change in the environment. The stories convey a message at once materialist and anti-materialistic, engaged in an endless tug-of-war struggling to resolve our own ambivalence toward materialism.

Michael Fillerup’s story “Ghosts,” perhaps the best in the anthology, explicitly thematizes the ambivalence over materialism implicit in so many of these stories. The story’s opening sentence—“The Janitrol furnace that had kept them warm for eleven winters gave up the ghost late Friday afternoon”—echoes the opening of *A Christmas Carol*, in which the narrator memorably declares Marley to be dead, and by the time Fillerup refers directly to the “Ghost of Christmas Future” in the story, we have already recognized his protagonist, Dale, as Scrooge. Dale, like Scrooge, finds himself “alone and without heat on Christmas Eve”; like Scrooge, Dale’s heart is as cold as his home. Dale’s Christmas Eve is marked, not by visits from the ghosts of Christmases past, present, and future, however, but by memories of his late wife and a visit from his tactless home teacher.



FIG. 7. Ignorance and Want. For Dickens, ignorance and want have faces—“yellow, meagre, ragged, scowling, wolfish,” pinched, and twisted. In contrast, some modern Carols reduce ignorance and want into mere abstractions. Illustration by John Leech, from Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1843), 119.

Like so many LDS Scrooges, Dale's nuclear family has been incomplete since his wife's death about a year ago, but as the story unfolds the reader learns that the marriage had been struggling for years. Dale had been a life-long member, a successful Church leader and lawyer, ambitious but also image conscious and materialistic; Verna was a convert, idiosyncratic, an activist for every cause, spiritual, and absolutely unconcerned with image and wealth. Their personal conflicts over materialism dramatize the ideological conflict that informs so many Latter-day Saint Christmas stories: "When they moved into their dream house, . . . it annoyed him that she didn't seem to fully appreciate his hard-earned bounty. When she joked about 'large and spacious buildings' and too many rooms to clean, he took it personally."

As with most of our Carols, acts of charity—in this case, Christmas Eve gifts for the homeless and an impromptu home teaching visit—signal the Christmas season, but Fillerup does not sentimentalize the acts; rather, he takes the opportunity to explore the limits and efficacy of love. Where is the boundary between duty and charity? How much discomfort should we be willing to endure for love's sake? Can compassion really melt pride?

The story investigates the private regrets of one grieving widower but also deals with the public milestones that mark male Latter-day Saint adulthood: mission, college, courtship and marriage, early poverty, later professional success, and Church leadership. In his portrayal of Dale's life, Fillerup broaches the stickier aspects of Latter-day Saint social structure; he tackles its occasional religious aristocracy and ecclesiastical snobbery, for example, by showing the familial objections to Dale's marrying Verna. As the story approaches its climax, Fillerup's observant eye focuses on two of the most vexing and resonant Latter-day Saint social issues of recent years: the distribution of priesthood power and the related formation of gender relationships. As Dale recalls his final argument with Verna, during which he tried to stop her from taking what would prove to be a fatal plane trip, he articulates the complex interweaving of these two issues:

No, he had to have it his way, always his. He was the priesthood holder; he was the boss. But it wasn't even that: no one could have lorded it over her by virtue of the priesthood or any other -hood. No one could have unless she allowed them to. And why had she allowed him all those years?

Here "Ghosts" most closely approaches the *Carol*, for Fillerup has discovered the *Carol's* real genius: the skillful wedding of the personal with the public. Just as Dickens explores explosive social problems through the lens of Scrooge's personal redemption, Fillerup confronts the living, breathing social issues that animate LDS culture today through the lens of Dale's personal grief. At the site where public meets personal in Fillerup's story, the heat of friction kindles a Christmastime warmth that can melt the iciest of

his readers' hearts. As "Ghosts" concludes, Dale's Janitrol furnace is resurrected.³² And as the furnace's belly belches blue flames, Dale and the reader together feel the Christmas blaze begin to burn within themselves, ignited by sparks flying from the *Carol's* own heart.

Conclusion

Works of fiction serve their communities of readers in various ways: they crystallize and dramatize cultural changes, anxieties, and contradictions; they provide the cultural narrative for social structures and rituals; and they intervene in social projects by galvanizing individual readers to change their personal behavior and their public institutions. *A Christmas Carol* works in all of these capacities, but the latter describes its explicit themes as well as its underlying objective: Dickens links the public and the personal and fashions his literary sledgehammer as an act of social reform driven by spiritual transformation. The Latter-day Saint Christmas stories in *Once upon a Christmastime* are also socially produced, and the best of them are socially productive, as well. These stories, through their similarities to and differences from the culture-text of the *Carol*, register contemporary anxiety over disintegrating nuclear families, they reveal a preoccupation with the nuclear family and personal redemption over the "family of man" and public reform, and they suggest a grave ambivalence over materialism even as they point toward collective affluence. The culture-text of the LDS Christmas story changes subtly from year to year; this year, let us change ourselves and our communities, deeply and spiritually, as we tell our Christmas stories.

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1. Paul Davis, *The Lives and Times of Ebenezer Scrooge* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 4.
2. *Once upon a Christmastime: Short Stories for the Season* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997).
3. Davis, *Ebenezer Scrooge*, 53.
4. Russell Baker, "Dickens Stacks the Deck," *New York Times*, December 24, 1983, 23, quoted in Caroline McCracken-Flesher, "The Incorporation of *A Christmas Carol*: A Tale of Seasonal Screening," *Dickens Studies Annual: Essays on Victorian Fiction* 24 (1996): 93–118.
5. See Davis, *Ebenezer Scrooge*, chapter 2.
6. Madeline House, Graham Storey, and Kathleen Tillotson, eds., *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, 11 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), 3:459, 461. For a detailed

account of the events preceding the *Carol*, see Kathleen Tillotson, "A Background for *A Christmas Carol*," *The Dickensian* 89 (1993): 165–69.

7. Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*, stave 1.
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9. Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*, stave 1.
10. Edgar Johnson, "The *Christmas Carol* and the Economic Man," *American Scholar* 20, no. 1 (1951–52): 91–98.
11. Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*, stave 1.
12. Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*, stave 1.
13. Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*, stave 1.
14. Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*, stave 3.
15. Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*, stave 5.
16. Davis, *Ebenezer Scrooge*, 35–36.
17. Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*, stave 5.
18. Davis, *Ebenezer Scrooge*, 196.
19. V. Dallas Merrel, "Our Christmas Lamb," in *Christmas Treasures: Stories and Reminiscences from General Authorities* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1994), 13–14.
20. S. Michael Wilcox, "A Father's Christmas Answer," 13–18, in *A Christmas to Remember: A Collection of Favorite Holiday Memories* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1990), 13–18.
21. Carroll Hofeling Morris, "Silent Night," in *Once upon a Christmastime*, 140–49.
22. Jack Weyland, "Shop with a Cop," in *Once upon a Christmastime*, 1–7.
23. Jay A. Parry, "Christmas Offerings," in *Once upon a Christmastime*, 226–30.
24. One notable exception to this generalization has the protagonist find an abandoned copy of the Book of Mormon, the reading of which results in a Christmastime conversion. See LaRene Gaunt, "Christmas Light," in *Once upon a Christmastime*, 61–64.
25. Jack Weyland, "A Christmas Song," in *A Celebration of Christmas: A Collection of Stories, Poems, Essays and Traditions by Favorite LDS Authors* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988), 17–24.
26. Carroll Hofeling Morris, "Silent Night," in *Once upon a Christmastime*, 140–49.
27. Shirley G. Finlinson, "Gifts for the Poor," in *Christmas Classics: A Treasury for Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1995), 86–88.
28. Chris Heimerdinger, *A Return to Christmas* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1996).
29. Laurel Mouritsen, "The Mistaken Gift," in *Once upon a Christmastime*, 94–110.
30. *The Magic of Christmas: A Collection of Stories, Poems, Essays and Traditions by Favorite LDS Authors* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992), 89.
31. Chris Hicks, "The Little Christmas Tree," in *Once upon a Christmastime*, 115–18.
32. Michael Fillerup, "Ghosts," in *Once upon a Christmastime*, 174–88.