



“Dead, to begin with”: The Role of Ghosts in Charles Dickens’s A Christmas Carol

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“Dead, to begin with”: The Role of Ghosts in Charles Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol*

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Abstract

An exploration of the role of the ghosts in Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*, specifically considering the influence of religion, the eighteenth century Gothic tradition, and the nineteenth century ghost story on Dickens's choices when crafting the novel. This work seeks to examine how and why the ghosts determine the course of Scrooge's future. Essentially – why ghosts?

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Introduction

The Ghost of an Idea

In a visit to two prisons in Pennsylvania in 1842, Charles Dickens was struck by the horror of the effects of solitary confinement on prisoners. Dickens explains his feelings about the use of fear by the prison officials: “I fear that to a certain extent the system [of solitary confinement] is a good one. I use the expression ‘I fear’, because it is dreadful to believe that it is ever necessary to impose such a torture of the mind upon our fellow creatures. But it seems, from all one can learn, to do good: and now and then to effect that reclamation which gives joy in heaven” (Barnes and Barnes 218). He notes that in this solitary confinement, “it is every night the lurking-place of a ghost” (219); Dickens himself explains that in solitude ghosts appear, and this generates fear enough to force prisoners to redeem themselves.

It is widely recognized by scholars and lay readers alike that Charles Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol* is a ghost story. With the story structured around the visits of four ghosts to Ebenezer Scrooge – Jacob Marley, The Ghost of Christmas Past, The Ghost of Christmas Present and The Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come – their contribution to the structural integrity of the novel is unquestionable. However, their role in Scrooge’s emotional change of heart is one that has been widely debated. One question that has not been fully explored is: why ghosts? If the tale is a Christian Christmas story that has morals and lessons learnt at its heart, why would Dickens choose to draw upon elements of the Gothic and ghost story genre in using the ghosts to ‘teach’ this lesson?

I hypothesize that by using ghosts, Dickens amalgamates the eighteenth century Gothic traditions and Victorian ghost story genres to create a morality tale driven by fear and the supernatural, rather than by the nostalgia of the Christmas setting. This sense of fear can be defined in many ways: the fear of the ghost as a physical form, the fear of the visceral or uncanny, and the fear of what the ghost represents – death, hell, retribution, or God. The presence of religion is not ill-fitting therefore, as the tradition uses the supernatural to teach moral lessons too. This relationship between the supernatural themes of the Gothic and ghost story (as well as religion) to morality is complicated, and part of the examination will be to untangle this relationship. In some ways, perhaps Dickens is showing us how fear runs through the core of, and connects, these seemingly competing traditions.

Chapter One:

Ghosts and God: Scrooge and the Four Last Things

Dickens's relationship with religion was ambiguous. Jennifer Gribble begins "Dickens and Religion" by outlining Dickens's contradictory attitudes to religion, noting that he has been argued to be all three of a "great Christian writer," a "radical doubter" and a "secular humanist" (582), concluding that he followed "a Christianity putting social good works before creedal content and demand" (583). Whilst he can certainly be considered all three of the former, Gribble's conclusion that Dickens prioritized benevolence over doctrine is a little more complex with regards to theology in *A Christmas Carol*. At its core the novella does indeed promote "social good works," but it also has its basis in more "creedal content" than one might see on the surface. Joshua Taft comments that "Dickens offers a disenchanted and humanistic Christianity, one that preserves a vague belief in the supernatural but stresses humanistic ethics. In this way, *A Christmas Carol* echoes the views of its creator, a believer in a largely rationalized, deliberately vague Christianity" (660). This "deliberately vague Christianity," as Taft calls it, allows Dickens to use the supernatural for his own moral purpose, as he uses a patchwork of Protestant and Catholic beliefs in order to create an atmosphere of fear. His decision to include ghosts (a distinctly supernatural entity) might appear at odds with religion, for it is often considered that a belief in the supernatural directly opposes Christian values, particularly those involving death. For example, in *The King James Bible* – the edition Dickens would have been most familiar with – Leviticus 19:31

instructs that we “Regard not them that have familiar spirits¹, neither seek after wizards, to be defiled by them” and Deuteronomy 18:9-12:

When thou art come into the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee... there shall not be found among you any one that... useth divination, or an observer of times, or an enchanter, or a witch, or a charmer, or a consulter with familiar spirits, or a wizard, or a necromancer. For all that do these things are an abomination unto the Lord.

However, the Bible is filled with supposedly supernatural occurrences – angel messengers, miracles, stars that guide the way – that are rationalized as divine intervention, so why can't Dickens's ghosts be religious too?

In his book *God and Charles Dickens*, Gary Colledge asserts that the “spirituality of popular lay Anglicanism in the early nineteenth century was shaped to a large degree by an almost superstitious preoccupation with death, judgment, heaven and hell—The Four Last Things” (66) and that “Dickens dealt with [this notion]” in his works (59). Victorian religion was therefore heavily concerned with the rites surrounding death, because the Victorians feared what came after. It could be considered, therefore, that Dickens utilizes the form of the specter in *A Christmas Carol* to corroborate Victorian religious beliefs about life after death. Kędzierska argues that it is the Great Examiner God, “who single-handedly decides not to fail Scrooge, and gives him another chance” (104), as Scrooge prays to the final Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come. However, I argue that God is a part of all of the ghosts who visit Scrooge. Victorian religion held an element of fear at its heart – the fear of God's omnipotent power both in life and the afterlife – and Dickens uses ghosts to personify the Victorian's preoccupation with the Four Last Things. Marley represents Victorian ideas about judgment day and purgatory,

¹ ‘Familiar spirits’ – spirits of the dead invoked by a medium.

highlighting what will happen to Scrooge if he does not save his soul. The Ghost of Christmas Past embodies heavenly ideas and notions of rebirth, giving Scrooge a glimpse of what he could have if he seeks redemption in time, but also what he will live without if he does not. The Ghost of Christmas Present is perhaps the personification of God the father, the giver of life, sent to remind Scrooge of what can happen if sin is left unchecked – the haunting creatures of Ignorance and Want. Finally, The Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come personifies death itself, embodying traditional imagery of death, as well as ideas about hell in the afterlife. Each figure terrifies Scrooge individually – not for their moral lessons taught, but for their divine warnings. Dickens uses these representations of various Victorian beliefs surrounding the afterlife in order to exploit Scrooge’s fear of life after death – the ultimate isolation.

Jacob Marley is the first vision to appear to Scrooge in an attempt to save his soul. Dickens first presents a vision of Marley to Scrooge on his front door, where there hung “not a knocker, but Marley’s face” (10)². Marley’s presence at the gateway to Scrooge’s house (formerly Marley’s own rooms) is significant, almost as though the knocker represents the border or veil between life and death. Scrooge crosses the threshold and is bombarded by deathly visitors; Marley’s visage here seems to mark the entrance to another world, or even the entrance to the afterlife – purgatory. The presence of this Catholic-associated concept in a text addressing a prominently Protestant population could be considered bizarre. However, it is not the only presence in Victorian Literature of the time. In his chapter on “Judgment”, Michael Wheeler explains that “belief in some kind of purgation in a future state was not restricted to Roman Catholics in the nineteenth

² All quotations are from the Penguin edition of *A Christmas Carol*, unless otherwise stated.

century” (75). He quotes Elisabeth Jay’s work *The Religion of the Heart: Anglican Evangelicalism and the Nineteenth Century Novel* in which she makes the link between the views of Anne Bronte’s heroine in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and Patrick Bronte’s skepticism about hell: “through whatever purging fires the erring spirit may be doomed to pass – whatever fate awaits it, still it is not lost, and God, who hateth nothing that He hath made, will bless it in the end!” (84-85). Dickens, despite being a baptized Protestant, was deeply aware of Catholic doctrine too. In a dream vision of his deceased sister-in-law Mary Hogarth, Dickens asks her ““What is the True religion? ... perhaps the Roman Catholic is the best?’ The spirit answers, ‘[f]or *you*, it is the best!’” (qtd. in Grippple 596, note 9). This suggests at least some of his beliefs overlapped with Catholicism, which makes the presence of a potential purgatory in *A Christmas Carol* less incongruous as Dickens uses Catholic theology for his own agenda. Additionally, in *The Life of Our Lord*, Dickens accounts Jesus’s ascension, and in this account the angels declare that Jesus would one day return “to judge the world” (Colledge 73). As Colledge identifies, this “is Dickens’s own gloss and is found in neither the book of Acts nor the Synoptic Gospels” (73). Dickens has therefore shown a belief in God’s divine judgment, beyond the evidence found in scripture. Colledge surmises that Dickens “is more than comfortable appealing to [the wrath of God] and its retributive justice especially against sin or crime that was particularly loathsome and destructive. For Dickens, that included any time of inhumanity, prejudice, hatred, or cruelty perpetuated by one human being against another” (75). If Marley’s visit signifies a threat from God that Scrooge could end up in purgatory, it reminds Scrooge that he has something to lose: his afterlife.

Dickens describes Scrooge's knocker as "not in impenetrable shadow... but had a dismal light about it" (10); the uncertain light symbolizes the opportunities for Scrooge, both good and bad, beyond its border. Despite Dickens gently introducing Scrooge to notions of the afterlife through the figure of his good friend, the image is horrifying to him and the reader nonetheless:

It was not angry or ferocious, but looked at Scrooge as Marley used to look: with ghostly spectacles turned up upon its ghostly forehead. The hair was curiously stirred, as if by breath or hot-air; and though the eyes were wide open, they were perfectly motionless. That, and its livid colour, made it horrible; but its horror seemed to be, in spite of the face and beyond its control, rather than a part of its own expression. (11)

It's important here that the vision "looked at Scrooge as Marley used to look" – if Scrooge is to be moved emotionally and spiritually into changing his ways, it would make sense for him to feel somewhat comforted by this appearance the better to believe the figures ahead of him. Earlier in Stave One, Dickens narrates that after Marley died "Scrooge never painted out Old Marley's name" (2) from above their warehouse door, and that "they had been two kindred spirits" (6). It is more likely therefore that Scrooge would welcome the ghosts that are to come, to believe in them, if introduced by a trusted friend and ally. In addition, Scrooge sees himself in Marley – "he answered to both names" (2) – and it is crucial that the first apparition is this friend, a parallel to Scrooge, a "kindred spirit." Marley is tormented in the afterlife; Scrooge, then, will see this in his future too. As important as it is for Scrooge to feel comfort by his comrade, he must also be made to feel fear or else he will not learn his lesson, nor understand what faces him if he continues his miserly lifestyle: an afterlife of misery. Dickens asserts that "Scrooge was not a man to be frightened by echoes" (11), yet this is exactly what Marley's visit is, an echo of his former self, sent to terrify and reform his old friend. The ghostly image of

Marley's wavering hair, and eerie motionless eyes, "a knocker again" (11) as quickly as it appeared, unsettles Scrooge as "his blood... conscious of a terrible sensation" (11).

Despite the narrator preserving Scrooge's character by suggesting he isn't scared, psychologically Marley's presence has already unnerved him. Evidently perturbed by images of death and his friend, Scrooge "thought he saw a locomotive hearse going on before him in the gloom" (11). Like the knocker symbolizing the gateway to purgatory, Scrooge now follows a funeral procession up the stairs towards the room in which he will meet his former partner.

The vision appears once more to Scrooge, a precursor to the main event, as Marley's face appears in the fireplace:

The fireplace was an old one, built by some Dutch merchant long ago, and paved all round with quaint Dutch tiles, designed to illustrate the Scriptures. There were Cains and Abels, Pharaohs' daughters; Queens of Sheba, Angelic messengers descending through the air on clouds like feather-beds, Abrahams, Belshazzars, Apostles putting off to sea in butter-boats, hundreds of figures to attract his thoughts; and yet that face of Marley, seven years dead, came like the ancient Prophet's rod, and swallowed up the whole. If each smooth tile had been a blank at first, with power to shape some picture on its surface from the disjointed fragments of his thoughts, there would have been a copy of old Marley's head on every one. (12)

Marley physically appears among the scriptures here, fortifying his religious position within the text. Additionally, the references Dickens makes to particular bible stories are not accidental, and are largely supernatural in nature. For example, the story of Belshazzar tells the tale of a disembodied hand that sends a message to a greedy king. The message "thou art weighed in the balances and art found wanting" (Dan. 5:27) tells of God's judgment of Belshazzar, as a supernatural warning to change his ways. Sound familiar? Terry W. Thompson also notes the allusion: "This early reference to Belshazzar

is particularly telling and insightful, for it anticipates Scrooge's coming trials by night, specifically his encounter with the third ghost of Christmas, a mute figure with a written message" (268). Unlike the hearse, a vision of Scrooge's own mind's making, it is unclear here whether Marley's face is indeed present upon the fireplace, or whether Scrooge simply imagines it to be. The vision of Marley at the door has triggered a psychological response within Scrooge; he links his partner's image to "the prophet's rod" (12), a reference to Aaron (the prophet, another messenger from God), whose rod had supernatural transformative powers (Ex. 4) when delivering God's messages. "Angelic messengers" (12) are also cited here and thus linked to Marley's presence.

This might be a good time to consider, if Marley is representative of purgatory and sent as a messenger from God, why would a ghost be sent and not, for instance, an angel? It is because fear is key here to Scrooge's lesson, not merely the message alone.

Dickens shows his self-deprecating awareness of his usage of the ghost story genre by having Scrooge "[remember] that ghosts in haunted houses were described as dragging chains" (13). Dickens repurposes this stereotype for his own purgatorial didacticism. For Marley, "the chain he drew was clasped about his middle. It was long, and wound about him like a tail; and it was made (for Scrooge observed it closely) of cash boxes, keys, padlocks, ledgers, deeds, and heavy purses wrought in steel" (13). Marley explains its relevance: "I wear the chain I forged in life" (16), and threatens that Scrooge's chain will be even longer, that his "was full as heavy and as long as this, seven Christmas Eves ago" and adds somewhat judgmentally "You have laboured on it since" (16). The imagery here of chains and labor evoke traditional images of purgatory, where work is needed to be done to recover the soul of the visitor before moving on to their

final destination. This is detailed in Dante's *Purgatorio* where, for example, Dante and Virgil meet the souls of the proud on the first terrace, who are bent over by the weight of huge stones on their backs (*Purgatorio*, Canto IV). Marley describes his position here as having "no rest, no peace. [Only the] Incessant torture of remorse" (17) – he lacks the traditional ideal of death and the afterlife that we might commonly associate with heaven – "rest," "peace" – and is constantly tortured instead.

Initially, Scrooge does not value, or believe, that Marley's presence is real – "Humbug!" (15). As though to prove him wrong, the ghost becomes more terrifying:

At this, the spirit raised a frightful cry, and shook its chain with such a dismal and appalling noise, that Scrooge held on tight to his chair, to save himself from falling in a swoon. But how much greater was his horror, when the phantom taking off the bandage round its head, as if it were too warm to wear indoors, its lower jaw dropped down upon its breast! (15)

Despite Dickens using the familiar image of his friend Jacob Marley to ease him into this new setting of the afterlife, he does not hesitate to also use him to elicit fear within Scrooge. At which point Scrooge "fell upon his knees" (15) and cries for "Mercy!" (15) as though begging God for forgiveness. However, it is too early for that. Marley's presence is not to deliver salvation, but merely offer the opportunity of redemption. Marley's role is to inform Scrooge that he has entered purgatory, and that his judgment day is coming.

Marley explains his presence: "It is required of every man... that the spirit within him should walk abroad among his fellow-men, and travel far and wide; and if that spirit goes not forth in life, it is condemned to do so after death" (16) suggesting that if man does not do good in life, he will be confined to purgatory as Marley is bound. Marley alludes to being sent by a higher power: "[information] comes from other regions,

Ebenezer Scrooge, and is conveyed by other ministers to other kinds of men. Nor can I tell you what I would. A very little more is permitted to me. I cannot rest, I cannot stay, I cannot linger anywhere” (16). The suggestion that his instruction “comes from other regions” suggests that Marley is sent by a higher power, namely God, who directs the ghosts in their work. In his repetition of “I cannot,” Marley emits a sense of helplessness – he does not have a choice in his actions, nor does he know much about the “ministers” they come from. The suggestion of “ministers” creates imagery of those, like on earth, who do God’s work and spread His word. At his height of mourning, Marley laments that he was “not to know,” exemplifying his regret at not embodying the “Christian spirit” of helping fellow man in his lifetime, of not making “mankind... [his] business” (17). This mimics Dickens’s own view of his faith, which was “TO DO GOOD always ... to love our neighbor as ourself ... to be gentle, merciful and forgiving” (qtd. in Taft 661), which also seems in keeping with the Christian tradition, whether specifically Protestant or Catholic³ in nature. Marley’s exclamations show real anguish, although it is unclear whether this is due to regretting not being better in life, or vexation at serving a never-ending “penance” (18). He prepares his friend for judgment: “I am here tonight to warn you, that you have yet a chance and hope of escaping my fate... without [the ghost’s]

³ For a fantastic exploration of Dickens’s division between the Catholic and Protestant faiths, see Mark Andrew Eslick’s dissertation *Charles Dickens: Catholicism and Anti-Catholicism*. As an example, Eslick asks “Is Jacob Marley in Purgatory or Hell?” (84). His footnote analyses Marley’s name: “The etymology of the name Marley is strangely relevant here. ‘Marley’ originates from Old English and means ‘meadow near the lake’. One of the most enduring images of Hell comes from the Book of Revelations in which the phrase ‘lake of fire’ is used in four verses to denote Hell. Purgatory, on the other hand, has often been represented to be a meadow. The most famous example of this occurs in Virgil’s *Aeneid*, a work that Dickens was familiar with. The topography of the descent of Aeneas into the underworld is described in detail, and meadows are the last point before the path forks to the Hell of Tartarus or the paradise of the Elysian Fields. Dickens’s use of the name Marley, whether employed consciously or not, figuratively places the ghost outside the hell of a ‘lake of fire’ and in a nearby ‘meadow’ that corresponds with a traditional image of Purgatory” (note 10, 84-85).

visits... you cannot hope to shun the path I tread" (18). Once again, Dante's purgatory comes to mind, literally on the path upwards through levels of suffering towards Earthly Paradise, representing the penitence of Christian life and the path to God.

Marley's appearance to Scrooge serves the purpose of informing him of his journey, that he will be judged, and has an opportunity of salvation. He ends his visit by invoking visions of other ghosts with the same symbolic chains, who also create fear within Scrooge and highlight Dickens's philosophy to "do good" (Taft 661):

The air was filled with phantoms, wandering hither and thither in restless haste, and moaning as they went. Every one of them wore chains like Marley's Ghost... none were free... [they] cried piteously... The misery with them all was, clearly, that they sought to interfere, for good, in human matters, and had lost the power for ever. (19-20)

The aural imagery here suggests misery, "moaning as they went," "cried piteously," and seek to remind Scrooge what will happen if he does not seek redemption: this is his last opportunity "for good" before he loses "the power for ever." Like Marley's references to "other regions" (16), it's interesting to consider who orchestrates these ghost's endeavors. Marley mentions he does not know how today he and these ghosts are visible to Scrooge, but at other times he remains invisible (18). This sense of divine leadership, as well as the work "for good" (20), lends itself to the suggestion that the ghosts are under the control of God himself, sent one after the other to incite fear in Scrooge.

Eslick writes that Marley allows Dickens "to explore the limitations of Victorian Protestant eschatology which held that a soul must either find salvation in Heaven or damnation in Hell" (81), thus playing on the Victorian's fear of judgment as part of the Four Last Things. Scrooge is terrified by Marley's visit: not only is he echoed in Marley,

but the very existence of purgatory is a denial for Scrooge of automatic entrance into heaven in the afterlife. For Scrooge, it is the alternative that is ultimately terrifying.

In his book *Dickens and God*, Colledge explains that Dickens understood heaven as life after death (68). Dickens describes his sister-in-law Mary Hogarth, who “passed quietly away to an immortality of happiness and joy” (qtd. in Colledge 68), and from this we learn that “when Dickens dealt with death, whether in his fiction or in his own life, he approached it with the certainty of an afterlife and the hope of heaven” (68). It is this lack of certainty which generates fear in Scrooge. Colledge explains that “for Dickens, the two things that mattered most about heaven were, first, that he would be there after death and, second, that he would enjoy reunion with loved ones there, especially family members” (70). In *A Christmas Carol*, Dickens removes this certainty for Scrooge.

As Scrooge lays awake waiting for the Ghost of Christmas Past, he feels “he could no more go to sleep than go to Heaven” (22), which is a pivotal realization for him at this point. Dickens presents this second Ghost as a heavenly entity, sent to give Scrooge a glimpse of what can be achieved in God’s kingdom if only he seeks the path to redemption. Michael Wheeler suggests that there were two important models of heaven in the nineteenth century: “heaven as worship,” a place or state of constant holiness, and “heaven as community,” a place in which we are reunited with loved ones (126). For the purposes of my argument, the latter will be primarily considered, as Dickens plays on Scrooge’s isolation as a means of generating fear, much like the solitary prisoners he was so concerned for during his Pennsylvania prison visits. When Scrooge inquires as to the ghost’s business with him, the Ghost of Christmas Past responds: “Your welfare” (24). Scrooge is silently dubious, to which the ghost responds: “Your reclamation, then. Take

heed” (24). Here the ghost uses the imperative to inform Scrooge that his soul can still be salvaged, and he is urged to pay close attention to instruction in how to end up in God’s Kingdom. Scrooge listens “reverently” (24). The ghost, heralded by “light [that] flashed” (22), is introduced by Dickens:

It was a strange figure -- like a child: yet not so like a child as like an old man, viewed through some supernatural medium, which gave him the appearance of having receded from the view, and being diminished to a child’s proportions. Its hair, which hung about its neck and down its back, was white as if with age; and yet the face had not a wrinkle in it, and the tenderest bloom was on the skin. (22)

The “supernatural” shifting age of the ghost is interesting here: “Like a child: yet not so like a child as an old man” (22) – the older form is likely to represent wisdom, and perhaps the eternal existence of heaven for those who reach it. The hair “white as if with age” (22) symbolizes the purity of the state of being in heaven in the afterlife. The figure of a child in heaven – “the face had not a wrinkle in it” (22) – is not as strange as it might initially appear, as this image was also evocative of heaven for the Victorians. Wheeler highlights an interpretation of Matthew 19:14 in which “Jesus said: Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me: for such is the kingdom of heaven,” suggesting that heaven is filled with children (132)⁴. The ghost’s youth could also be linked to ideas about rebirth, similar to Christ’s resurrection on the third day. Scrooge is “observant of his dwarfish stature” (24), yet he is not troubled by the age nor does he question the maturity of the ghost; to him, the ghost is all powerful despite his youthful stature.

In its initial description, the ghost is depicted as wearing “a tunic of the purest white, and round its waist was bound a lustrous belt, the sheen of which was beautiful. It

⁴ Michael Wheeler expands: “Children, it was generally agreed, would not somehow grow to ‘adulthood’, and those who wrote on the ‘recognition of friends in heaven’ consoled bereaved parents by stating that their children would be ‘among the first to welcome’ them on their arrival” (132).

held a branch of fresh green holly in its hand; and, in singular contradiction of that wintry emblem, had its dress trimmed with summer flowers” (22). Again, we see the motif of “purest white” (22) in the ghost’s attire, symbolizing the white light more contemporarily associated with angels and heaven.⁵ Equally, the natural imagery here of the “branch of fresh green holly” and the “dress trimmed with summer flowers” (22) evokes the Victorian belief in heaven, or paradise, as a place like the Garden of Eden.⁶ The winter image of “holly” and “summer flowers” can be reconciled here by the understanding that heaven is a place without seasons.⁷ The image of Eden can also be seen as the Ghost of Christmas Past takes Scrooge to see his former partner, Belle, where “his face... had begun to wear the signs of care and avarice. There was an eager, greedy, restless motion in the eye, which showed the passion that had taken root, and where the shadow of the growing tree would fall” (34). Over time, the sin of avarice had taken hold upon Scrooge, and the reference here to the “growing tree [that] would fall” evokes the tree of life from the Garden of Eden as sin was introduced into the world, as paradise on earth was taken away by God. Thus, the Ghost of Christmas Past wears foliage, and shows Scrooge this “growing tree” (34) as a reminder of the detrimental effects sin can have on a person’s afterlife.

The Ghost of Christmas Past begins with a gentle touch, allowing Scrooge to put his trust in the ghost for what he is about to be shown, much as Scrooge is shown his

⁵ The light of heaven is described in Revelation 21:23 “And the city had no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it: for the glory of God did lighten it, and the Lamb is the light thereof”; angels are referenced throughout, on instance being Revelation 18:1 “And after these things I saw another angel come down from heaven, having great power; and the earth was lightened with his glory.”

⁶ The parallel between Eden and heaven is found in Revelation 2:7: “to him that overcometh will I give to eat the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God” (qtd. in Wheeler 124).

⁷ Psalms 74:17, “Thou hast set all the borders of the earth: thou hast made summer and winter” suggests that on earth there are seasons, but not beyond these “set... borders.”

friend Marley for the same purpose. When Scrooge laments he is but “mortal” (25), the ghost responds: “‘Bear but a touch of my hand *there*,’ said the Spirit, laying it upon his heart, ‘and you shall be upheld in more than this!’” (25). The ghost suggests his own touch has the power to elevate Scrooge to a position higher than his earthly status, to heaven, to be “more than” he is now. The ghost has a clear plan for Scrooge; when it is through showing him the happier scenes of the past and Scrooge can bear the memories no longer: “the relentless Ghost pinioned him in both his arms, and forced him to observe what happened next” (36). The violence of “pinioned” and “forced” suggest the ghost’s brute force, as well as its penchant for severity when necessary. Thus, the ghost whose touch is both gentle and transcendental, also has the ability to provoke fear in Scrooge.

The supernatural atmosphere is intensified by Dickens’s use of the movement of light to distort the outline of the ghost as it “fluctuated in its distinctiveness” (23). However, unlike ghosts sent purely to incite fear and menace, “in the very wonder of this, it would be itself again; distinct and clear as ever” (23): the ghost takes its lit form again, promoting hope and optimism for Scrooge’s reclamation. E.H. Bickersteth argues that the Bible “exhausts ‘all the images of the purest and the deepest human joy’ in describing the heavenly state” (qtd. in Wheeler 129). I hypothesize the ghost’s light represents joy – the joy which one might feel perpetually in heaven. Yet this joy makes Scrooge feel uncomfortable: “Scrooge could not have told anybody why, if anybody could have asked him; but he had a special desire to see the Spirit in his cap; and begged him to be covered (24). The ghost admonishes him for this keenness to extinguish the light – “Would you so soon put out, with worldly hands, the light I give. Is it not enough that you are one of those whose passions made this cap, and force me through whole trains of years to wear

it low upon my brow” (24). Here, the ghost suggests that Scrooge’s mortal power, his “worldly hands” and “passions,” are that which destroy joy. Scrooge’s “passions” (24) – his miserly and capitalist attitudes – are the antithesis to the ghost’s “light I give” (24), and thus metaphorically create the “cap” to extinguish the light. In response to this admonishment, Scrooge “reverently disclaimed all intention to offend or any knowledge of having wilfully bonneted the Spirit at any period of his life” (24). The repetition of “reverently” (24, 47) suggests Scrooge is aware he is interacting with a heavenly being. We also see Scrooge’s discomfort with joyous scenes when the ghost takes him to visit his former employer, Fezziwig: “Scrooge had acted like a man out of his wits. His heart and soul were in the scene, and with his former self. He corroborated everything, remembered everything, enjoyed everything, and underwent the strangest agitation” (33). In reliving “everything,” Scrooge is reminded of the joy he can feel when surrounded by those he loves, but becomes “a man out of his wits” (33) and feels “the strangest agitation” (33) for it. As Scrooge’s “heart and soul were in the scene” (33), the light of the ghost burns brighter – “the light upon his head burnt very clear” (33) – representing the ability of Scrooge to feel joy, even though it may make him uncomfortable.

Equally, when the ghost shows Scrooge the sadness of his past, reminiscing that Belle’s daughter “might have called him father, and been a spring-time in the haggard winter of his life” (37) the symbolic light darkens: “his sight grew very dim indeed” (37). Again, nature imagery is used to replicate the good of heaven, as Scrooge’s wish for a daughter becomes a metaphorical “spring-time,” contrasting with the “haggard winter of his life” (37), evocative of his earlier wish to remain cold:

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... A frosty rime was on his head, and on his eyebrows, and his wiry chin. He carried his own low temperature always about with him; he iced his office in the dogdays; and didn't thaw it one degree at Christmas. (2)

As the ghost's projections of joy from Scrooge's past, or lack thereof, conclude, it becomes too much for Scrooge who declares "Haunt me no longer!" (38), and attempts to physically stop the ghost's haunting:

In the struggle... Scrooge observed that its light was burning high and bright; and dimly connecting that with its influence over him, he seized the extinguisher-cap, and by a sudden action pressed it down upon its head.

The spirit dropped beneath it, so that the extinguisher covered its whole form; but though Scrooge pressed it down with all his force, he could not hide the light: which streamed from under it, in an unbroken flood upon the ground. (38)

The light is physically held above Scrooge here, overhead just as heaven would be. It is "high and bright" and has an "influence over him" (38), which reinforces the light as representing the joy of heaven. Despite Scrooge trying to "struggle" with God's power "with all his force," "he could not hide the light" (38). Scrooge tries to eliminate joy by extinguishing the ghost's light, because he is reminded of the fear he feels in being alone, but heaven and God are too powerful.

The real impact of the Ghost of Christmas Past is that it prompts Scrooge to realize what he truly fears: being alone. Wheeler highlights that "The most characteristic Victorian ideas of heaven are of a place in which family reunions and 'the recognition of friends' are to be achieved after death, and (more radically Romantic) of a site in which lovers are reunited as couples" (120-21). Dickens plays upon this notion of heaven in the scenes shown to Scrooge, as the heavenly Ghost of Christmas Past reunites him with family, friends and a lover. It is important to note that the key loved ones of Scrooge's

past are dead in his present: his sister Fanny - "she died a woman" (29); his former employer - "It's Fezziwig alive again!" (30), not to mention his partner Marley - "dead as a doornail" (1). As much as the scenes of the past provoke joy in Scrooge, they also provoke sadness at the thought of his lost loved ones. In these scenes, Scrooge "sobbed" (26) and "gave a freer passage to his tears" (27) to see himself alone as a boy, and "in pity for his former self... cried again" (27). The repeated tears of Scrooge are caused by reminders of his earlier isolation and emphasize his fear of being alone. Likewise, Belle ending their relationship results in further isolation for Scrooge; she claims "that which promised happiness when we were one in heart, is fraught with misery now that we are two" (35). After watching her departure, Scrooge exclaims: "Show me no more! Conduct me home. Why do you delight to torture me?" (36): to Scrooge, seeing scenes that lead to isolation are torture. This is reminiscent of Dickens's comments on the effects of solitary confinement on prisoners: "it is dreadful to believe that it is ever necessary to impose such a torture of the mind upon our fellow creatures. But it seems, from all one can learn, to do good: and now and then to effect that reclamation which gives joy in heaven" (qtd. in Barnes and Barnes 218). Dickens knew well enough that to be isolated from others was torture, and yet seems to think this isolation necessary to find "reclamation," and subsequent "joy in heaven."

It is the very same for Scrooge here. The reference to Marley's deathbed by Belle's husband is what breaks Scrooge completely: "His partner lies upon the point of death, I hear; and there he sat alone. Quite alone in the world, I do believe" (38). The repetition of "alone" is linked to "the point of death" (38), emphasizing how Scrooge's fear is intensified by the loss of his loved ones. "'Spirit!' said Scrooge in a broken voice,

‘remove me from this place’” (38); he repeats “Remove me! ... I cannot bear it!” and demands the spirit “Haunt [him] no longer!” (38). The repeated exclamations highlight Scrooge’s fear of being alone. If the Victorian’s ideal is of heaven as a place of family reunion, Dickens denies this ideal to Scrooge by using the ghost to remind Scrooge of what he lives without. The ghost also seems to threaten that Scrooge will not be reunited with friends or loved ones – in heaven or on earth – if he does not change his ways. Many critics have focused on the nostalgic effects of these scenes on Scrooge,⁸ but it is not nostalgia that prompts his change: the change comes from the Holy Ghost’s visit, reminding Scrooge of solitary confinement and provoking fear in him. The Ghost of Christmas Past’s visits to family and friends remind Scrooge of how alone he is on earth, but also, more importantly, how alone he will be in the afterlife if the joy of heaven (and therefore any reconciliation with his loved ones) is denied him.

The ghost that follows also represents a divine figure. The Ghost of Christmas Present is widely recognized as the personification of Christmas, of Christian good-nature and will. However, I see a holier form – a representation of God himself, specifically God the Father.⁹ The climactic departure of the previous ghost leaves Scrooge scared and alone, fearful of this isolation as a permanent state. One moment, he is “ready for a good broad field of strange appearances” (39), ready for the next supernatural appearance to save him from his fate; yet moments later “he was taken with a violent fit of trembling” (39), indicating the sheer volatility of his emotions.

⁸ Critics have offered varying reasons for Scrooge’s surprising change of heart, with the most common being the nostalgia that visiting past family and friends fills Scrooge with. See Andrew H. Miller, Audrey Jaffe, Brandon Chitwood and Karen Petroski for example.

⁹ In Orthodox Protestant thought, God is a trinity – the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. All three ghosts therefore have some connection to the trinity. The Ghost of Christmas Past’s references to transcending to be “more than this” could be considered links to the Son, who ascended into heaven; and the final ghost, of Christmas Yet to Come, the most spirit like, could be the Holy Spirit personified.

Like the previous ghost, this figure arrives surrounded by an abundance of light: “which being only light, was more alarming than a dozen ghosts... [Scrooge] began to think that the source and secret of this ghostly light might be in the adjoining room” (40). Considering Scrooge’s fear at the Ghost of Christmas Past’s light, the fact that this new ghostly light was “more alarming than a dozen ghosts” suggests the significant increase in power of this particular phantom. Scrooge opened the door to find: “There sat a jolly Giant, glorious to see, who bore a glowing torch, in shape not unlike Plenty’s horn, and held it up, high up, to shed its light on Scrooge” (40-41). “Plenty’s horn” was a cornucopia, a symbol of abundance and nourishment, and this image is used by Dickens to highlight this ghost’s giving nature. For many, the ghost’s plentiful and giving character is associated with the personification of Christmas; indeed, the ghost is certainly situated in abundance, with luxurious food “heaped up on the floor, to form a kind of throne” (40). The rich color imagery of “living green,” “bright gleaming berries,” “leaves of holly, mistletoe, and ivy [that] reflected... the light,” and the “mighty blaze” (40) of the fire surrounds the ghost in natural warmth. As the ghost guides Scrooge through the scenes of Christmas present, he uses his torch to empower citizens with happiness and good-spirit: “when there were angry words... he shed a few drops of water on them from it, and their good humour was restored directly” (44); “opened its capacious palm, and floated on, outpouring, with a generous hand, its bright and harmless mirth on everything within its reach” (53). Interestingly, when Scrooge asks “Is there a peculiar flavour in what you sprinkle from your torch” the ghost responds “There is. My own” (44-45). The fact that the ghost is able to give joy and warmth to all with his “own” essence, suggests that he is God, he who ‘gives’. In the Nicene Creed, God is described

as “the lord the giver of life.” Here I interpret the ghost as Lord the ‘giver’, in association with Job 1:21, where Job laments: “Naked came I out of my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return thither: the Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.” Through this ghost, Dickens reminds us that Christmas is a giving time.

Importantly then, Scrooge is immediately reverent toward this ghost: “Scrooge entered timidly, and hung his head before this Spirit... though the Spirit’s eyes were clear and kind, he did not like to meet them” (41); Scrooge hangs his head, as though in shame or in prayer. The God-like ghost demands Scrooge’s gaze: “‘I am the Ghost of Christmas Present,’ said the Spirit. ‘Look upon me.’ Scrooge reverently did so” (41). The adverb “reverently” highlights Scrooge’s awareness of the holiness of this creature. Dickens gives further hints at the ghost’s true identity by referencing his age, which is significant for this argument: the Ghost tells Scrooge “you have never seen the like of me before!” (41), even though he had “more than eighteen hundred” brothers (41). *A Christmas Carol* was written in 1843, and we can assume it was set at a similar time. Additionally, the ghost is presented to only live for one year: “It was strange, too, that while Scrooge remained unaltered in his outward form, the Ghost drew older, clearly older” (60). The ghost explains to Scrooge: “my life...is very brief... it ends to-night” (61). It could therefore be suggested that the ghost’s lineage can be traced back to the birth of Christ when the Anno Domini (A.D.) era began, almost as though every year he is reborn, like Christ born on Christmas. This divine ghost uses his power to remind Scrooge of the terrors of being alone:

It was a great surprise to Scrooge, while listening to the moaning of the wind, and thinking what a solemn thing it was to move on through the lonely darkness over an unknown abyss, whose depths were secrets as profound as Death: it was a great surprise to Scrooge, while thus engaged,

to hear a hearty laugh. It was a much greater surprise to Scrooge to recognise it as his own nephew's and to find himself in a bright, dry, gleaming room. (55)

Here, Dickens presents the darkness of isolation – personifying the deathly “moaning of the wind,” the “lonely darkness” and the “unknown abyss” – to contrast with the “hearty laugh” “in a bright, dry, gleaming room.” The “surprise” to Scrooge is that he prefers the warmth of a laugh over the darkness of being alone.

The ghost announces his power as it repeats Scrooge’s earlier words to him about Tiny Tim: “If he be like to die, he had better do it, and decrease the surplus population” (50), for which Scrooge “hung his head to hear his own words quoted by the Spirit, and was overcome with penitence and grief,” and he “bent before the Ghost's rebuke, and trembling cast his eyes upon the ground” (50). This feeling of penitence is important here, as Scrooge hangs his head once more before God, as though begging for forgiveness. The ghost commands Scrooge: “Will you decide what men shall live, what men shall die. It may be, that in the sight of Heaven, you are more worthless and less fit to live than millions like this poor man's child. Oh God!” (50). The words of Job are pertinent here “the Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away” (Job 1:21). This is reiterated through Tiny Tim’s desire for people to remember that it was God who “made lame beggars walk, and blind men see” (47). It is only God who has the power to “decide what men shall live, what men shall die” (50), and Scrooge fears this power, fearing his own death, for there may be only punishment in the afterlife for him.

The ultimate power and contradiction of the Christian God is highlighted here: his power means he can both give and take away anything as he so chooses. However, the ghost counters this by suggesting it is he who gives, but “man” takes away. He reveals

Ignorance and Want among his robes: “from the foldings of its robe, it brought two children; wretched, abject, frightful, hideous, miserable... Yellow, meagre, ragged, scowling, wolfish; but prostrate, too, in their humility” (61). Dickens’s use of listing here highlights the contrast between the “mirth” (53) that the ghost, or God, brings to the world and the sin that “Man” (62) creates. These terrifying creatures – “stale and shrivelled... pinched and twisted” (61) – appear to have had all life and joy extracted from them, and the religious imagery of “where angels might have sat enthroned, devils lurked, and glared out menacing” (62) threatens Scrooge, suggesting that God has the power over “angels” and “devils” and therefore Scrooge’s fate. The figures of Ignorance and Want indicate what man becomes when one sins and does not ask God’s forgiveness: the ghost replies that they are not his creation, “they are Man’s” (62). Additionally, the ghost’s warning about Ignorance: “for on his brow I see that written which is Doom, unless the writing be erased” (62) links to Marley’s earlier message – that if man, in this case Scrooge, does not repent for his sins, he will face the “Doom” of judgment day. As if they had planned it together, the final ghost auspiciously presents itself: “a solemn phantom, draped and hooded, coming, like a mist along the ground” (62).

Where the two previous ghosts were immediately associated with light, this final ghost is the opposite: “It was shrouded in a deep black garment, which concealed its head, its face, its form, and left nothing of it visible save one outstretched hand. But for this it would have been difficult to detach its figure from the night, and separate it from the darkness by which it was surrounded” (63). The semantic field of darkness emphasizes how the phantom contrasts the former ghosts. Dickens’s use of “shrouded” is reminiscent of the cloth placed over a dead body and creates the image of a veil. E.H.

Bickersteth writes of a 'veil' between mortals and departed spirits sometimes being lifted by God, who separates time from eternity: "Yet sometimes / The veil is lifted by His high behest / Who separates eternity from tie, / And spirits have spoken unto men..." (qtd. in Wheeler 29). We also see a veil referenced in Scrooge's deathbed scene:

Scrooge glanced towards the Phantom. Its steady hand was pointed to the head. The cover was so carelessly adjusted that the slightest raising of it, the motion of a finger upon Scrooge's part, would have disclosed the face. He thought of it, felt how easy it would be to do, and longed to do it; but had no more power to withdraw the veil than to dismiss the spectre at his side. (71)

The ghost itself seems to represent a veil, a conduit linking Scrooge to death, and if we consider Marley's earlier reference of how ghostly instruction "comes from other regions" (16) we could infer that this ghost is also the proxy of God's work. Just as the Ghost of Christmas Present personified joy ("the Lord gave" (Job 1:21)), the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come personifies death itself ("the Lord hath taken away"). Not surprisingly, Scrooge fears this ghost the most:

Its mysterious presence filled him with a solemn dread... Although well used to ghostly company by this time, Scrooge feared the silent shape so much that his legs trembled beneath him, and he found that he could hardly stand when he prepared to follow it... It thrilled him with a vague uncertain horror, to know that behind the dusky shroud, there were ghostly eyes intently fixed upon him, while he, though he stretched his own to the utmost, could see nothing but a spectral hand and one great heap of black. (63-64)

The ghost is fearsome for a number of reasons. Firstly, it is completely "silent" (63), which is eerily resonant of Dickens's use of sound and silence in the opening Stave, preceding Marley's visit, to create fear. Dickens also literally "shroud[s]" (63) the ghost in mystery, removing any identity, emotions or humanity (all of which the previous ghosts had). The ghost also brings darkness and a chill to the scene "it made [Scrooge]

shudder, and feel very cold” (66), contrasting with the warmth and light of the previous two ghosts. This dark and cold state evokes death images for the reader, and this may also be a reason for Scrooge’s intense fear – his ultimate fear of death and the afterlife.

“‘Ghost of the Future!’ [Scrooge] exclaimed, ‘I fear you more than any spectre I have seen. But as I know your purpose is to do me good, and as I hope to live to be another man from what I was, I am prepared to bear you company, and do it with a thankful heart. Will you not speak to me?’” (64). Scrooge proclaims that he “hope[s] to live to be another man from what I was” (64); if this is true, he is already a changed man, so why would Dickens send this final, most fearsome ghost, to continue to torture him? It is because the real lesson has not been taught yet – while Scrooge has seen the need to change for moral reasons, he has not yet felt the true fear of isolation, and ultimately death.

Wheeler explains that the Victorians felt that “deathbed scenes and graveyard scenes” were “key sites of communication and interpretation” (31). In this final Stave, Dickens uses both scenes to communicate Scrooge’s fear of being alone. With regards to the ‘deathbed scene’, Wheeler describes “Social and literary conventions relating to the deathbed included the visit from a doctor or priest, the presence of a loving attendant to whom a dying confession could be made or of a family on whom a dying blessing could be bestowed, the laying out of a corpse in a darkened room, the ‘last visit’ of the bereaved, and the closing of the coffin” (30). Margarete Holubet has pointed out that Dickens’s treatment of deathbed scenes in his novels and other fiction are plentiful and “are indeed largely typical of general Victorian attitudes” (qtd. in Colledge 67). For instance in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, Little Nell dies with the characters closest to her: her

grandfather who holds her hand after she passes “The old man held one languid arm in his, and had the small hand tight folded to his breast, for warmth” (214) and her schoolmaster Mr Garland who “bent down to kiss her on the cheek, and gave his tears free vent” (214). Likewise, Jo’s death in *Bleak House* is attended by many: Phil, George, Esther, Mr. Jarndyce and Mr. Snagsby. However, in *A Christmas Carol*, instead of seeing mourners at his side, Scrooge cries “Merciful Heaven, what is this?” (70) as he is taken to his own deathbed, where he lies, alone. Scrooge’s body lies on a “bare, uncurtained bed” covered only by a “ragged sheet” (71). He observes his own corpse as “unwatched, unwept, uncared for” (71). Indeed the room is “darkened” (Wheeler 30), but it is “very dark, too dark to be observed” (Dickens 71). Everything about this scene subverts the traditional Victorian depiction of the deathbed scene, and this sense of loneliness terrifies Scrooge, who calls it “a fearful place” (72). Scrooge has no “loving attendant,” no “family” or “‘last visit’ of the bereaved” (Wheeler 30); he is quite alone. This, to a Victorian reader, would be terrifying that these rites were not fulfilled appropriately. It could also be considered that the novella itself is Scrooge’s deathbed scene, the images of people brought to him by the ghosts – Belle, Fanny, Fred – are his mourners, and this goes to emphasize how very alone Scrooge is, out of the timeframe the ghosts have created.

The “closing of the coffin” (Wheeler 30) is followed by the graveyard scene, in which Scrooge finally breaks as the ghost reminds him of what lies beneath the ground – both his dead body, and the threat of an afterlife in hell:

A churchyard. Here, then, the wretched man whose name he had now to learn, lay underneath the ground. It was a worthy place. Walled in by houses; overrun by grass and weeds, the growth of vegetation’s death, not

life; choked up with too much burying; fat with repleted appetite. A worthy place.

The Spirit stood among the graves, and pointed down to One. He advanced towards it trembling. The Phantom was exactly as it had been, but he dreaded that he saw new meaning in its solemn shape. (77)

Wheeler notes that “Both death and damnation are traditionally thought of as a downward movement, a descent into the depths... Both hell and the grave are ‘below’ and loathsome... the dual nature of the grave, which is at once transitional (as the site of the resurrection of the body to judgment) and permanent (as the fixed state of physical corruption)” (183). The first thing that Dickens does in the description of the graveyard, is emphasize that the body “lay *underneath* the ground” (77, emphasis mine), in order to suggest that this “wretched man[’s]” (77) fate is to end in hell. Not only is the body’s seclusion highlighted by the neglected site: “overrun by grass and weeds, the growth of vegetation’s death, not life” (77), the repetition of “a worthy place” suggests that God has judged Scrooge, and sent him deservedly to hell. Ideas about hell were changing in the 1800s with the rise of cremation; eternal damnation was no longer just associated with fire, and the unpredictable and contradictory possibilities of hell – “a place of fire and water, crowdedness and solitude, noise and silence” – was “an aspect of its horror” (Wheeler 183). This description of an alternative hell, particularly the “solitude” and “silence” corresponds with our argument here – Scrooge fears an afterlife of seclusion such as this.

Scrooge’s fear of being alone, and in hell, is intensified here as he is “trembling” (77). He then tries to bargain with the spirit, so as not to end up in eternal torture as suggested by the physical placement of his body: “‘Spirit.’ he cried, tight clutching at its robe, ‘hear me. I am not the man I was. I will not be the man I must have been but for this

intercourse. Why show me this, if I am past all hope” (78). As Dante enters hell in *Inferno*, he passes a sign commonly translated as “ABANDON HOPE, FOREVER, YOU WHO ENTER” (Canto III.9). Scrooge’s bargaining places him on the border, at the veil, between life and death, between earth and hell. Scrooge is desperate not to end up like the corpse beneath him: alone, unblessed, unloved, and potentially in hell. His physical anguish is evident as he “clutch[es]” at the spirit’s robe, and begs it by catching “the spectral hand” (78). Finally, as he knows the ghost is a higher religious being, he prays: “holding up his hands in a last prayer to have his fate reversed” (78). Critic Aleksandra Kędzierska argues that as Scrooge prays, God saves him and who “single-handedly decides not to fail Scrooge, and gives him another chance” (104). However, I argue that it is the fear of what the ghost represents that incites Scrooge’s change.

Mark Andrew Eslick highlights Pat Jalland’s study of death in the nineteenth century, explaining that the concept of a ‘good’ or ‘bad’ death was “intimately linked to traditional Christian fear of judgement at the moment of death on the sins of life resulting in eternal punishment in hell” (41). Dickens uses the Victorian preoccupation with the rites of a ‘good’ death, and the Four Last Things, to create fear within Scrooge that builds with each individual ghost. The final ghost scares Scrooge the most, as it shows Scrooge his reality – he will die alone, and end up in eternal solitude, eternal solitary confinement, perhaps even in hell. In the beginning of the novella, Scrooge enjoys isolation, possibly because he never saw the joy of heaven he could possess, nor did he consider the depths of hell where he may end up. It is only when he meets The Ghost of Christmas Yet To Come, death personified, that he is scared enough to truly change, because death is the ultimate isolation and solitary confinement.

Chapter Two:

Ghosts and the Gothic: From Castles to the Streets

“The gothic was dead, to begin with” (xi) states Julian Wolfreys, in his preface to *Victorian Gothic*. Indeed, it is widely considered that the Gothic genre took a hiatus in the early 1800s, with Robert Mighall naming Charles Robert Maturin’s *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820) as the Gothic’s “swansong” (Mighall 81). The Gothic’s resurgence in the late 1880s with a new fin de siècle ‘Gothic horror’ marked a change – a movement from the rolling hills of Western Europe, castles, villains, damsels in distress, to the dark streets of London. A change in setting also called for a change in character type, as well as a move from the emotions of terror, to the physical violence of Gothic horror. Emily St. Aubert’s harmless dread in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1795) marks a startling difference to Hyde’s violent acts in Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) in this sense. But what of the interim? Enter, Charles Dickens. Yet, on Dickens being a Gothic writer, the critics are divided.

John Bowen wrote that “Dickens never wrote a Gothic novel, and like many of his post-Romantic generation, often saw it as an outdated and intermittently absurd literary form” (246-7). Bowen’s argument is based on William St Clair’s observations on Dickens’s own upbringing, noting that “When Dickens recalls his childhood reading, for example, there are no Gothic texts mentioned. Instead, the iconic works are novels by Daniel Defoe, Henry Fielding and Tobias Smollett... not Gothic, but either comic and picaresque, or oriental and exotic” (qtd. in Bowen 247). Yet it was not what Dickens read

that inspired his Gothicism, but his own experiences and family life. Robert Mighall disagrees with Bowen, instead focusing on his writings: “From his earliest works, Dickens displayed an awareness of, and an apparent fondness for, aspects of Gothic literary convention” (82). For example, “the recurrence of ghostly, grotesque, or fearful happenings in the interpolated tales in *The Pickwick Papers* suggests that making his readers’ flesh creep as well as their bellies laugh was part of the young writer’s understanding of his role as an entertainer” (82). Julian Wolfreys agrees that, as in the case of the Fat Boy from *The Pickwick Papers*’ unintentional threat to Mrs Wardle of “I wants to make your flesh creep”¹⁰ (114), “all good scenes of gothic tension should be... simultaneously, unremittingly comic... as is usually the case in the novels of, for example, Anne Radcliffe, when the rational explanation arrives to calm down the unbearable agitation of being” (Wolfreys 35). Dickens plays on this concept of the ‘rational explanation’ from the genre of Gothic past, and uses humor in its place. In *A Christmas Carol*, for instance, Scrooge tries to reason away Marley’s appearance, claiming his senses may be fooled:

“A slight disorder of the stomach makes them cheats. You may be an undigested bit of beef, a blot of mustard, a crumb of cheese, a fragment of an underdone potato. There’s more of gravy than of grave about you, whatever you are!”

Scrooge was not much in the habit of cracking jokes, nor did he feel, in his heart, by any means waggish then. The truth is, that he tried to be smart, as a means of distracting his own attention, and keeping down his terror; for the spectre’s voice disturbed the very marrow in his bones. (14-15)

¹⁰ The Fat Boy (Joe) states “I wants to make your flesh creep” as a precursor to informing Mrs Wardle of her daughter’s romance with Tupman. Joe means to warn Mrs Wardle that she will be unhappy with the news, but Mrs Wardle interprets his intentions as threatening.

Here Dickens has Scrooge use humor to explain the presence of a ghost. In this way he recapitulates the Radcliffe narrator's rational explanations of what had earlier seemed supernatural. However, he also has the self-awareness to note that although there is humor in the pun "more of gravy than of grave," it is merely a means of "keeping down his terror." Instead of a rational explanation, Dickens uses comedy, but not in a way that overrides the fear he creates. Dickens, as Mighall notes, delights in overturning conventions: he brands Dickens "comic and Gothic, sentimental and cynical" (84). It is in this amalgamation, then, that we can begin to define Dickens's manipulation of the Gothic for his own purpose.

As we shall see in this chapter, Dickens employs a variety of conventions that suggest why it's appropriate to consider *A Christmas Carol* a Gothic novel.¹¹ In Dickens's hands, the genre saw a "radical transformation... [which] makes the definition of the gothic much harder" (Wolfreys xvii). As a result of Dickens's work, "the Gothic moved from the remote and exotic to the familiar worlds of everyday existence... horrors were now found in the very heart of the modern metropolis" (Mighall 94). This new Gothic, more familiar and real, became ultimately more terrifying for his readers. As modern readers, we aren't necessarily terrified when reading *A Christmas Carol* – it is enjoyed by all ages nowadays – but a Victorian reader would certainly identify the chilling undertones, as Dickens plays on their beliefs and fears surrounding religion, death and burial, and be made uneasy. Dickens therefore uses Gothic conventions to simultaneously isolate and terrify Scrooge. The Gothic setting is all about isolation, whilst in Scrooge, we see elements of a truly Gothic character. Constructed as an

¹¹ For an overview of all of the genres the novel could be said to comprise of, see J. Hillis Miller's "The Genres of *A Christmas Carol*", which only lends a paragraph to the Gothic.

outsider, a villain at least in part, he also portrays issues of inheritance and ancestral repetition that are inspired by Dickens's Gothic antecedents. Dickens needs to use Gothic stereotypes in order to show the significant change in Scrooge from start to finish. Just as Dickens uses character types to show Scrooge's change in personality, he uses the ghosts as psychological hauntings to invoke the change.

The first convention Dickens repurposes is the Gothic setting. Dickens's dark and fog-filled streets are a far cry from the picturesque scenery of France or Italy. Mighall explains that "When the term 'Dickensian London' is used, it often evokes a Gothic vision – of swirling fogs, cobbled labyrinthine streets, with menace or mystery stalking their ways. *Oliver Twist* and *Bleak House* mapped out the cityscape through which Stevenson's Mr Hyde, and his avatar Jack the Ripper, would permanently stalk in our imaginations... He made the capital Gothic" (94). Here Mighall argues that during Gothic's "supposed sabbatical" (82) Dickens not only moved the location of the Gothic from rural to urban, he changed the landscape of the Gothic for good, as by the time writers such as Stevenson and Stoker surfaced in the 1880s, the Gothic had permanently set up shop in London. In the earlier Staves of *A Christmas Carol*, Dickens uses "all that swirling fog" (Wolfreys 31) as a repeated motif to introduce the new Gothic¹² to the reader: for in Scrooge's counting house "It was cold, bleak, biting weather: foggy withal" and "the fog came pouring in at every chink and keyhole" (3); as Scrooge returns home on Christmas eve "the fog and darkness thickened" (8) and "Foggier yet, and colder.

¹² I use the term 'new Gothic' here loosely. Wolfreys suggests, "The gothic is always with us. Certainly, it was always with the Victorians. All that black... All that swirling fog" (31). As modern readers, we automatically associate the Victorians with the Gothic fog that descended upon London as a result of the industrial revolution, the fog we would see later in *Jekyll and Hyde* (1886) (referenced 10 times), *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) (6 times) and *Dracula* (1897) (28 times!). Yet in earlier Gothic texts, it is hardly referenced. It doesn't appear at all in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), *The Italian* (1797), or *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), and only twice in *The Monk* (1796).

Piercing, searching, biting cold” (9); and even upon his house “The fog and frost so hung about the black old gateway of the house” (10), “it was still very foggy and extremely cold” (21). In the opening of *A Christmas Carol*, Dickens certainly uses the pathetic fallacy of fog to set the tone for his character of Scrooge: murky, gloomy and miserable. Interestingly Bowen identifies that “The word [Gothic] itself appears no more than six or seven times in [Dickens’s] work” (246), and yet it does appear in *A Christmas Carol* in this early stage of the novel: “The ancient tower of a church, whose gruff old bell was always peeping slyly down at Scrooge out of a Gothic window in the wall” (8). This church window is of little specific narrative importance, and yet here we have the presence of what we might consider ‘old Gothic’. That is, the conventional castles and churches of earlier eighteenth century Gothic. Perhaps Dickens throws in the term here to remind the reader of the legacy he wishes to draw upon. Indeed, Pritchard cites Ann Ronald’s “Dickens’s Gloomiest Gothic Castle” as he comments that “[she] made the point that the gloomy, ruinous, labyrinthine city of London can be seen as the ultimate Gothic castle” (Pritchard 435). It could therefore be supposed that Dickens recalls the gloomy Gothic castle as a reminder of the new Gothic setting he is trying to convey.

Pritchard explains that “A major part of Dickens’s solution to the problem of depicting the modern city was to turn to the conventions devised for Gothic horror fiction, which characteristically had an isolated rural setting at opposite poles to his crowded urban setting” (433). Even though we may not imagine the urban setting to be as isolated as his Gothic predecessors, Dickens makes it so. Scrooge’s home is “dreary enough, for nobody lived in it but Scrooge” (10) and on the streets of London, “there was no noise of people running to and fro” (21). Dickens creates an important and recurring

sense of isolation in his dark, empty, city; but simultaneously brings the Gothic into the modern by moving it to the urban capital.

The presence of the Gothic in what is largely considered a ‘Christmas’ tale is somewhat incongruous. But the Gothic might go some way to actually explain the link. Structurally, the majority of (what I argue to be) ‘Gothic’ references are at the beginning of the novel (the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come notwithstanding). It could be, therefore, that Dickens uses this genre to highlight Scrooge’s Gothic isolation – as Christmas is inherently anti-Gothic, filled with family values, warmth and domesticity. For instance, the Ghost of Christmas Past presents Scrooge at his old employer’s warehouse: “now in the busy thoroughfares of a city, where shadowy passengers passed and repassed; where shadowy carts and coaches battled for the way, and all the strife and tumult of a real city were” (30). The busy yet Gothic urban scene is described repeatedly as “shadowy,” representing the “strife and tumult of a *real city*” (italics mine). Dickens therefore uses the Gothic here to represent the realities of urban London in the Victorian era. Yet, on entering the warehouse, Fezziwig prepares for the Christmas party and the setting becomes instantly warmer: “fuel was heaped upon the fire; and the warehouse was as snug, and warm, and dry, and bright a ball-room, as you would desire to see upon a winter’s night.” (31). This duality between Gothic and Christmas is more clearly seen in Stave 3, as the Ghost of Christmas Present shows Scrooge a series of Christmas vignettes. However these moments of joy and togetherness are interspersed with fearful, dark images. In the first, Christmas seems to overpower the gloom of the Gothic weather:

The sky was gloomy, and the shortest streets were choked up with a dingy mist, half thawed, half frozen... There was nothing very cheerful in the climate or the town, and yet was there an air of cheerfulness abroad that

the clearest summer air and brightest summer sun might have endeavoured to diffuse in vain. (42)

Time moves with them; they move from an isolated “moor” to a “cheerful company”:

And now, without a word of warning from the Ghost, they stood upon a bleak and desert moor... the setting sun had left a streak of fiery red, which glared upon the desolation for an instant... lost in the thick gloom of darkest night... Passing through the wall of mud and stone, they found a cheerful company assembled round a glowing fire. (53)

And lastly, we see that even those isolated in a dark sea are merrily celebrating

Christmas:

To Scrooge’s horror... he saw the last of the land, a frightful range of rocks... and his ears were deafened by the thundering of water, as it rolled and roared, and raged among the dreadful caverns it had worn, and fiercely tried to undermine the earth... But even here, two men who watched the light had made a fire, that through the loophole in the thick stone wall shed out a ray of brightness on the awful sea. (54)

The contrast between the joy of Christmas and the darkness of the Gothic reinforces Dickens’s moral message that in togetherness, we can beat off the darkness. This can also be seen at the end of the novel, when Scrooge awakens a changed man on Christmas day: “Running to the window, he opened it, and put out his head. No fog, no mist; clear, bright, jovial, stirring, cold; cold, piping for the blood to dance to; Golden sunlight; Heavenly sky; sweet fresh air; merry bells. Oh, glorious! Glorious!” (80). The repetition of “no fog, no mist” stands as a clear contrast to the repeated fog and gloom of the opening staves. Thus it could be said that Dickens’s use of the Gothic fog is a metaphor for uncertainty. Throughout the novel, it could be argued that Scrooge is ‘lost’ in the fog, as he has certainly lost his way. This sense of uncertainty for Scrooge’s fate creates anxiety, a feeling typically generated in Gothic tales.

Finally, Dickens's use of the city setting goes to create a more social, real Gothic. As the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come takes Scrooge into the future – a future that will occur without social change – the dark, murky setting changes from the commingled joy/darkness to one of “filth, and misery”:

They left the busy scene, and went into an obscure part of the town, where Scrooge had never penetrated before, although he recognised its situation, and its bad repute. The ways were foul and narrow; the shops and houses wretched; the people half-naked, drunken, slipshod, ugly. Alleys and archways, like so many cesspools, disgorged their offences of smell, and dirt, and life, upon the stragglng streets; and the whole quarter reeked with crime, with filth, and misery. (66-67)

This description is painfully realistic, and shows the true gloom of London isn't in the Gothic darkness, it's in the reality of the “half naked, drunken, slipshod, ugly” populace, evoking olfactory imagery to smell the “dirt, and life, upon the stragglng streets.” Here, in the penultimate chapter of *A Christmas Carol*, the horror is in the human of the streets of London. When writing of *Bleak House*, Pritchard identifies that the novel “grows out of Dickens's perception that the remote and isolated country mansion or castle is not so much the setting of ruin and darkness, mystery and horror, as the great modern city: the Gothic horrors are here and now” (435-436); the same could be said of *A Christmas Carol*.

Gregory G. Peperone names Scrooge “a typical gothic anti-hero. Such individuals are proud, obsessive, unconventional, alienated, insensitive, and selfish” (12); whilst this is certainly the case for the beginning of the novel (as well as Scrooge's past), it is inaccurate to call him “typical,” because of the way he changes so dramatically after his interactions with the ghosts. Scrooge is frequently identified as an outsider, an archetype Dickens uses across his texts, in particular those with Gothic conventions. In the first

stave, Dickens presents Scrooge to enjoy isolation, avoiding humanity as much as possible: [being alone] “was the very thing he liked. To edge his way along the crowded paths of life, warning all human sympathy to keep its distance” (3). Bowen argues that “[Dickens’s] novels are full of those who exist at the margins or limits of both Victorian and our own understandings and categories of human life and being. Gothic motifs, tropes, plottings and characterisations are essential to this work of exploration, and are used in inventive and controlled ways throughout his career” (248). In this sense, Scrooge is the classic Gothic outsider, living on the “edge” (Dickens 3) of society. Wolfreys also refers to Dickens’s “work of exploration” (Bowen 248), his interim period of Gothic (1840-1870), interestingly identifying that Dickens made the concept of the outsider more “English” (32) by contrasting his work with “the gothic of the latter years of the eighteenth century [which] focused its terror of the other on foreigners, on Catholics, on distant lands and long-ago days, on creepy castles and even creepier foreigners” (32). He identifies that Gothic means to embrace all that is ‘other’, and that used to mean foreign or strange, but for Dickens there is an exploitation of “the gothic aspect of Englishness” (32). This is “the intense fascination, obsession even, with English manners, with Englishness and all that is the most alien to the definition of Englishness” (32). Thus, Scrooge is presented as the Gothic outsider due to his intense scorn for English manners and the kindness of human nature: he does not partake in the pleasantries of society “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?’” (2). Scrooge blatantly opposes the Victorian’s ‘English’ culture of manners by isolating himself from society. Dickens

exploits the Victorian's predisposition towards excessive politeness, and this lack of perceived "Englishness" also presents Scrooge as a villain.

Bowen states that "[Dickens's] victims are often also his tyrants" (248). Whilst Scrooge is somewhat the victim of the ghosts' hauntings, as we have seen in the terror they inflict on him throughout the novel, is Scrooge also a villain? Dickens draws upon the stereotype of the villain in several of his other novels and amalgamates these traits within Scrooge. Like Miss Havisham of *Great Expectations*, Scrooge is also in "seclusion" (Bowen, 248), but his intense bitterness is directed towards both Christmas and the poor. To his nephew Fred, he threatens: "'If I could work my will,' said Scrooge indignantly, 'every idiot who goes about with 'Merry Christmas' on his lips, should be boiled with his own pudding, and buried with a stake of holly through his heart'" (4). Although hyperbolic and somewhat humorous, the imagery here is nevertheless violent. In addition, when Scrooge is met by a carol singer he "seized [a] ruler with such energy of action, that the singer fled in terror" (9). Both threats of violence here are towards Christmas, but Scrooge shows equal vehemence towards the poor. When asked to be charitable and give to the poor in the opening stave, Scrooge merely responds: "Are there no prisons? ... And the Union workhouses?" demanded Scrooge. "Are they still in operation? ... The Treadmill and the Poor Law are in full vigour, then?" (7). When the gentlemen asking for charity admit that they are, Scrooge responds he is "very glad to hear it... [for] those who are badly off must go there" (7). The men respond that "Many can't go there; and many would rather die" (7) to which Scrooge heartlessly replies "If they would rather die... they had better do it, and decrease the surplus population" (7). Scrooge's villainy here is shown through a lack of compassion, humanity and altruism.

This, coupled with his isolation, his vehemence for Christmas and violence towards others could suggest the “evil” (3) within Scrooge. Scrooge also has vampire-like qualities:¹³ “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... He carried his own low temperature always about with him” (2). This description is oddly vampire-like, cold and stiff, with demonic “red” eyes and corpse-like “blue” lips. The aforementioned reference to “a stake of holly through his heart” (4) is also an interesting reference if we make this allusion to Scrooge having vampire features. He could be said to ‘suck’ the joy from Christmas, and indeed the wealth from others.

Scrooge’s miserly ways could be argued to mark him as a villain. Robert Mighall analyzes the villainy of Quilp in *The Old Curiosity Shop*: “Quilp’s actions do, in part, conform to those prescribed for the Gothic villain. Like Radcliffe’s Montoni before him, and Le Fanu’s Uncle Silas after, he is in part motivated by a desire to get his hands on a prime Gothic property that should rightfully fall to the heroine” (83). Whilst we do not see the “squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous, old sinner” (2) character of Scrooge specifically plot and steal property from unsuspecting damsels, it is intimated (although never specifically named by Dickens¹⁴) that he is a money lender, specifically for mortgages, who has a reputation for foreclosure. Later in the novel, Scrooge begs the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come to show him someone who feels emotion at “this man’s death” (72) (his own death, unbeknownst to him), and the

¹³ For a more in depth study of Dickens’s vampire-like characters, see Benjamin Franklin Fisher IV’s “Dickens and Vampirism” in which Fisher looks at the presence of vampirism in Dickens’s work – particularly *Bleak House*, *Oliver Twist* and *The Old Curiosity Shop*.

¹⁴ For a persuasive piece on Scrooge as a creditor or moneylender, see “More About the Business of Scrooge and Marley: an Ethnographic Approach” by Stephen Winick.

phantom shows him a couple who owed him money. Caroline asks “We are quite ruined?” (72), suggesting that as they cannot pay their debt, Scrooge will “ruin” their family, leaving them bankrupt and likely homeless. Her husband explains that since Scrooge is dead “there is hope yet” (73) and “it would be bad fortune indeed to find so merciless a creditor in his successor” (74), which intimates that Scrooge has a reputation for calling in his debt, and taking property from families. Thus, Scrooge does seem to possess the traits of a Gothic villain in his desire to obtain property.

Scrooge could also be considered to be entrapped by an ancestral curse, a common convention of antecedent Gothic texts of the eighteenth century. A key factor in Scrooge’s fear is that he will follow in the footsteps of those that have come before him: Marley and his father. To begin with, Marley highlights that he is “doomed to wander through the world,” claiming “I wear the chain I forged in life... I made it link by link, and yard by yard” (16). As a result of his poor deeds on earth, Marley is cursed to spend his afterlife trying to make amends, which makes Scrooge “tremble[...] more and more” (16), warning him that without the ghosts visits “you cannot hope to shun the path I tread” (18). The ghosts are Scrooge’s opportunity to break the cycle, to break the curse. This curse, I hypothesize, is a generational inheritance from Scrooge’s father. On the first of the Ghost of Christmas Past’s visits to Scrooge’s own past, his sister Fanny comes to take him home from boarding school. She tells him: “Father is so much kinder than he used to be, that home’s like Heaven! He spoke so gently to me one dear night when I was going to bed, that I was not afraid to ask him once more if you might come home; and he said Yes, you should; and sent me in a coach to bring you. And you’re to be a man!” (28). Fanny’s suggestion that their father is “so much kinder than he used to be” and how that

night she was “not afraid” of him, suggests that he had previously been an unkind and forbidding man – not unlike the villainous Scrooge we meet at the beginning of the novel. Scrooge’s father here appears to have had a change of heart, perhaps breaking his own curse. This, however, does not stop Scrooge inheriting certain evil behaviors, and attempting to pass them on himself. The Ghost of Christmas Past reminds Scrooge: “‘She died a woman,’ said the Ghost, ‘and had, as I think, children.’ ‘One child,’ Scrooge returned. ‘True,’ said the Ghost. ‘Your nephew!’ Scrooge seemed uneasy in his mind; and answered briefly, ‘Yes’” (29-30). Scrooge is “uneasy” here, as the ghost has reminded him of his poor treatment towards Fred, reminding him that he has continued the cycle of behavior towards the nearest person he has to a son. We see this same concern strike fear in Scrooge as he is reminded of what, or who, he has become. The same ghost takes him to see Belle, his old love:

He was older now; a man in the prime of life. His face had not the harsh and rigid lines of later years; but it had begun to wear the signs of care and avarice. There was an eager, greedy, restless motion in the eye, which showed the passion that had taken root, and where the shadow of the growing tree would fall. (34)

This metaphorical tree is reminiscent of his own family tree, his ancestor’s curse. Greed had “taken root,” leading Belle to comment that “you were another man” (35). If Scrooge’s ancestral curse has made him “another man” (35), it is now down to the ghosts to break the curse. Next the ghost takes him to see Belle later in life, showing Scrooge the family he missed out on:

And now Scrooge looked on more attentively than ever, when the master of the house, having his daughter leaning fondly on him, sat down with her and her mother at his own fireside; and when he thought that such another creature, quite as graceful and as full of promise, might have called him father, and been a spring-time in the haggard winter of his life, his sight grew very dim indeed. (37)

For Scrooge, the painful part of this image isn't that Belle is now married to another man, "the master of the house," but it is the image of Belle's daughter "leaning fondly on [her husband]" and that she "might have called *him* father" (italics mine). Scrooge here is wistful: he wishes he could have had a child with Belle, but knows that ultimately he would have passed on his ancestral curse and this was never to be. Dickens highlights this by the choice of gender – Belle's "graceful and ... full of promise" daughter being the very antithesis to Scrooge's relationship with his own father and nephew. The key tense here is in the past "been," likening Belle's daughter to "spring-time." This metaphor reminds the reader of the constant Gothic "haggard winter" (37) that "froze his old features" (2) and hung about Scrooge, reflecting his cold nature. The final reminder Dickens gives us of the effect of ancestral curses, is when the Ghost of Christmas Present introduces Scrooge to the terrifying images of Ignorance and Want:

‘Spirit! are they yours?’ Scrooge could say no more.

‘They are Man’s,’ said the Spirit, looking down upon them. ‘And they cling to me, appealing from their fathers. This boy is Ignorance. This girl is Want. Beware them both, and all of their degree, but most of all beware this boy, for on his brow I see that written which is Doom, unless the writing be erased.’ (61-62)

Straight away, Scrooge is concerned with the lineage of the "children" (61) in asking the ghost: "are they yours?" The idea that "they are Man's" is more terrifying for Scrooge – he can see how easily the curse can be passed on. Indeed, Ignorance and Want are "appealing from their *fathers*" (italics mine) – Dickens is stressing that man, more generally speaking Scrooge, is the father to these children. His own ways have directly caused the birth of the "boy and girl. Yellow, meagre, ragged, scowling, wolfish" (61). Instead of the "beautiful young girl" (36) he is denied with Belle, he is faced with the

reality of the “frightful” and “hideous” (61) children of Ignorance and Want, the result of his curse. Dickens knew the subject of curses from fathers well. His own father was imprisoned for debt “and taken to the Marshalsea prison, together with his wife Elizabeth and their younger children. Dickens himself was sent out to work in a rat-infested warehouse on the banks of the Thames, visiting his captive family every Sunday for the six months of their incarceration, an experience that he could never directly speak about, or forget” (Bowen 250).

By the end of the novel, however, as a result of the ghosts’ visits, it is as though Scrooge is reborn; he exclaims to himself as he awakens on Christmas morning: “I don’t know how long I’ve been among the Spirits. I don’t know anything. I’m quite a baby. Never mind. I don’t care. I’d rather be a baby” (80). Scrooge’s direct references to youth, repeating the idea he is a “baby,” along with his excitable short sentences, suggest his elation in discovering that his curse is broken.

The reference to time here is a key concern in the novel: the three ghosts that visit are all concerned with time – past, present and future – meanwhile, in reality, time stops.¹⁵ Mighall identifies that anachronisms in time are a Gothic trait:

The Gothic is obsessed with the historical past and how this affects the present. In the original Gothic, this tended to involve historical distancing, with novels typically set in earlier centuries (any time between the thirteenth and the sixteenth centuries), or in countries where religion or politics marked them out (to the Protestant mind) as time-bound or regressive... This emphasis on anachronism, on forms of chronological disparity or conflict, is essential to understanding the Gothic. For it plays a defining role in its development. (82)

¹⁵ For an in-depth analysis of time throughout *A Christmas Carol*, see Robert L. Patten’s “Time and Again”.

Just as he changed the geographical goalposts, Dickens's Victorian Gothic rejected the need for historical anachronisms; instead of using a setting from historical past times, he modifies the Gothic anachronism so that the novel is set in the past, present *and* future. In *Great Expectations*, for instance, for Miss Havisham time has stood still physically and psychologically since she was jilted. Mighall notes that for her "the clocks are stopped, the wedding feast is left on the table, the wedding dress remains on her back" (92). Havisham's alarming presence is created by her staged Gothicism, the fact she seems to be living and stuck in the past. For Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol*, time is also frozen while the ghosts visit him. Whilst real time is frozen, his historical past, personal present, and projected future are all used as tools to try to evoke fear within him. Time, for Scrooge, is torture. With each ghost, when presented with an issue in time, we see fear in Scrooge. In his past, Belle tells Scrooge of their break up: "the memory of what is past half makes me hope you will – have pain in this" (36), to which Scrooge responds to the ghost "why do you delight to torture me?" (36). Here, not only is Scrooge reminded of a painful memory of the past, but Belle's reference to previous "memory," that is, their happier times, creates a cycle of pain for Scrooge – their past relationship, their past break up, and pain in his present as he is reminded of both. Equally, the Ghost of Christmas Present has Scrooge "trembling" (50) at the thought of Tiny Tim's death – bringing something so real into his present. As the final ghost takes Scrooge into the Future, he is "shuddering from head to foot" (70) at the scavengers who pore over his clothes, seeing that "this man's death might be my own" (70). The ghosts are named after time, rulers of time, and each instance in time tortures Scrooge, generating fear in him to

force his change. Perhaps Dickens is ahead of his own time here,¹⁶ situating *A Christmas Carol* in what he hoped would indicate a regressive time if read in a Gothic light. His own hope for change meant that maybe Scrooge's past and present – a devastatingly difficult time for the lower-classes – would become the historical past like Gothic novels of the eighteenth century. The Christmas setting and hopeful ending therefore represents Dickens's own hope for the future: "I will honour Christmas in my heart, and try to keep it all the year. I will live in the Past, the Present, and the Future. The Spirits of all Three shall strive within me. I will not shut out the lessons that they teach. Oh, tell me I may sponge away the writing on this stone!" (78). If Christmas is anti-Gothic, it is because it is a festivity, or sentiment, beyond time, and Scrooge can now live in this time, having "shun[ned] the path [Marley] tread" (18), as Dickens has created his own Gothic anachronism.

Thus far, we have seen how Dickens has used Gothic conventions to cast Scrooge as a cursed villain – a curse and fate that runs through time and space. However, this curse, like the terrors of the Gothic, also moved from the physical to the psychological in the nineteenth century Gothic tale. Mighall considers the concept of the ancestral curse in *Little Dorrit*, naming the "malign legacy" (88) as a key narrative driver; but for Dickens, this Gothic curse now has psychological impact rather than physical. Arthur Clennam, the protagonist, ultimately suffers as a result of his father's infidelity. Mrs Clennam is not Arthur's biological mother, and Mrs Clennam's refusal to be honest about it causes her to "confine[...] herself within a self-imposed prison of her own resentment... from her

¹⁶ Humphry House pointed out the paradox in Dickens's view of the past "it is curious that he, who was so scornful of the moral abuses of the times in which he lived, should have almost universally condemned the times before him" (qtd. in Mighall 86).

refusal to forget” (Mighall 91). Mighall explains “*Little Dorrit* shows how memory can be a much stronger prison than the ones constructed by the state, and how lives can be blighted by the burdens it entails on future generations” (90). In *Great Expectations* we see a similar legacy curse the antecedents: Havisham’s bitterness originates from being left at the altar, rather than from “ancestral antecedent or malign legacy” (Mighall 92), but her curse is created in her own mind, and extended “to the formation of Estella, the (behavioural) legatee of her resentment” (Mighall 93). In Estella, she raises a cold and unfeeling young woman, who takes pleasure in spurning and psychologically playing with men like Pip. Pip even refers to Estella as “more like a curse” (226). Havisham’s trauma has established her into a malevolent being, whose own haunting of the mind then impacts her legacy, Estella. Mighall notes that in *Little Dorrit* and *Great Expectations*, for Dickens, “the sphere of haunting is now confined to the mind” (91). The same could be said for *A Christmas Carol*. For Scrooge, the impact the ghosts have on him is largely psychological fear, rather than a physical haunting.¹⁷ In seeing Marley’s face uncannily portrayed on his front door knocker, Scrooge is described as having blood “conscious of a terrible sensation” (11): he is suddenly psychologically conscious, and fearful, that something bad is about to happen to him. This intensifies with the Ghost of Christmas Past, where he feels the scenes being shown to him formulate a mental torment: “‘Spirit!’ said Scrooge, ‘show me no more! Conduct me home. Why do you delight to torture me?’” This psychological torture is reminiscent of Poe’s Gothic, particularly “The Pit and the Pendulum”, where the protagonist is physically and mentally tortured, having been

¹⁷ There are moments of physical threat, for instance when the “relentless” Ghost of Christmas Past “pinioned him in both his arms, and forced him to observe what happened next” (36), but these references are not as common as references to Scrooge’s mental anxiety.

captured as part of the Spanish Inquisition. The protagonist's cell is designed as a device to torture – small, dark, with an “abyss” (114) in the center, and a swinging pendulum of a scythe from above. Just as the construction of this man's cell is designed to torture his mind, so are the visions shown to Scrooge. For both stories, it is the fear of the unknown that plague upon both of their protagonists. With the final ghost, Scrooge is unable to see a face or any human features. Dickens describes that “it thrilled [Scrooge] with a vague uncertain horror, to know that behind the dusky shroud, there were ghostly eyes intently fixed upon him, while he, though he stretched his own to the utmost, could see nothing but a spectral hand and one great heap of black” (63-64). Equally, in “The Pit and the Pendulum”, the speaker is likewise terrified of the unknown fate that he cannot see: “shaking in every limb, I groped my way back to the wall; resolving there to perish rather than risk the terrors of the wells, of which my imagination now pictured many in various positions about the dungeon” (114).

Poe was a fan of Dickens, and when Dickens visited America with his family in 1842 (interestingly the same trip in which Dickens visited the Pennsylvania prisons cited in this work's introduction) the two writers met. Many works have been written on the potential influences Dickens may have had on Poe's writing,¹⁸ but Garrett notes, when writing of their relationship, that: “the Gothic also offered Dickens more specialized plot and character conventions for elaborating the guilty and yet innocent condition of being haunted by a secret past” (149). For Scrooge, his past is his own secret, but revealed in a painful and overwhelming fashion over the course of an evening by the ghosts. Garrett notes that Poe singled out “A Madman's Manuscript” and “A Confession Found in a

¹⁸ For more details on the intertextuality of Edgar Allan Poe and Charles Dickens, see Wilkins et al, *Poe and Dickens: a Mystery Cleared up* and Galván's “Plagiarism in Poe: Revisiting the Poe-Dickens relationship”.

Prison in the Time of Charles the Second” from Dickens’s early work, “and may well have copied [them in his own writing]. [Dickens’s stories] are strong, clear instances of the [Gothic] genre, in which the rising pressure of self-enclosed alienation and guilt culminates in violent explosions of confession and exposure” (149). This is the result for many of Poe’s characters, such as the narrators of “The Tell Tale Heart” and “The Black Cat”, who both admit to being guilty of murder. The ghosts of *A Christmas Carol* force Scrooge into a similar position of “alienation and guilt” (Garrett 149) by the end of the novel. Having witnessed his lonely fate of death and the consequences of his many guilty actions – his neglect of the Cratchits and the subsequent death of Tiny Tim; the creation of Ignorance and Want; the desertion of his nephew Fred, to name a few – Scrooge is forced into “violent explosions of confession and exposure” (Garrett 149). In his final ghostly meeting, Scrooge pleads: “‘Spirit!’ he cried, tight clutching at its robe, ‘hear me! I am not the man I was. I will not be the man I must have been but for this intercourse. Why show me this, if I am past all hope!’” (78). Scrooge is desperate here, having been psychologically tormented the most by this final ghost. The references to Scrooge’s fear in this meeting are intensified, referenced more so than any other ghost, and lead to his physical incapacity too: “Scrooge feared the silent shape so much that his legs trembled beneath him, and he found that he could hardly stand when he prepared to follow it” (63). He even tells the phantom: “‘I fear you more than any spectre I have seen. But as I know your purpose is to do me good, and as I hope to live to be another man from what I was, I am prepared to bear you company, and do it with a thankful heart. Will you not speak to me?’” It gave him no reply. The hand was pointed straight before them” (64). It is important here that the ghost does not speak with Scrooge at all, for this is part of

Scrooge's psychological torment. The horrors that lay ahead for Scrooge are down to his own inferences and deductions, as a result of the scenes the ghosts show him, for example in the graveyard: "The finger pointed from the grave to him, and back again. 'No, Spirit! Oh no, no!' The finger still was there" (78). This is frightening for Scrooge because it is for him to infer that the dead man, alone in the bedroom, and now alone in a grave, is himself. The fear is within his own mind, not due to a physical or tangible threat. Thus Dickens's Gothic is now marked by an internalization of fear, or what Mighall describes as: "what we witness in the nineteenth century is a scaling down of Gothic focus. From landscapes to mindscapes, the Gothic found and came to rest in a new domain. This transformation can be traced through the Dickensian canon" (95).

If the new domain for the Gothic is in the mind, we must consider why. For the Gothic to become psychological, it means that the ghosts can influence Scrooge mentally, leading to finding his conscience – one he did not have at the beginning of the novel. Andrew Smith notes that, in Dickens's use of Gothic, "the presence of a conscience implies the possibility of redemption, but by the time we get to the later narratives, most notably *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870), images of the conscience have been supplanted by troublesome dreams" (107). There is of course an argument here that the ghosts are no more than "troublesome dreams," sent to trouble Scrooge into changing his ways, but it is more likely that they are the physical embodiments of a conscience ("Scrooge hung his head to hear his own words quoted by the Spirit, and was overcome with penitence and grief" (50)). Scrooge is allowed redemption due to the Gothic haunting of his mind, an invasion of specters who force Scrooge into his own deathly prison, like the narrator of "The Pit and the Pendulum", only to be freed by redemption.

Chapter Three:
The Ghost Story: Belief and Power

As we have seen, Dickens uses *A Christmas Carol* to bridge the gap between the old and new Gothic; but this new genre also overlaps – more obviously perhaps – with the ghost story. Indeed, ghosts were figures used in Gothic literature, but not until the nineteenth century did they claim their own genre, a natural progression from the Gothic. Lyn Pykett states that “Dickens was himself the author of a new kind of ‘anti-Gothic’ ghost story with a contemporary setting, in which the supernatural erupts into the ordinary, everyday world” (197). As with his domestication of the Gothic, he also relocates the ghost story not only into the home, but into the individual. He internalizes the ghost story, making it more of the mind than of a physical haunting. Jennifer Bann notes that “what [ghost stories of the early nineteenth century] show is not a linear progression from gothic revenants to spiritualist entities, but rather the adoption of various aspects of spiritualist ghosts in a piecemeal fashion” (675). This chapter will identify how Dickens draws upon the beliefs of Victorian readers in the supernatural, as well as his personal attitude towards ghosts, to create beings that not only physically haunt the individual, but psychologically haunt the mind.

Ghost stories in the nineteenth century were an object of great interest; Pykett explains that they “filled a cultural and psychological gap left by the rise of positivistic science and the decline of the supernatural and magical aspects of religion in an increasingly secular age” (197-8). From the first chapter, we have seen how Dickens has

drawn upon religious beliefs and skepticisms; the ghost story is a natural progression also, it seems, from the supernatural described in the Bible. Science and the supernatural was, however, a subject of conflict for both Dickens and the Victorians. Scott Brewster cites Eve M. Lynch to support this, considering that “Victorian literary ghosts have tended to be treated as metaphors or ciphers for ‘a spectrum of social anxieties of the day’” (224), anxieties of which include the decline of the Christian faith, the rising interest in the supernatural, and the development of science and medicine. As Nina Auerbach highlights, “to be haunted in the nineteenth century was to be human” (qtd. in Brewster 224).

The Victorians had a keen interest in the supernatural, particularly in Spiritualism, the belief or practice involving communications with the dead. Spiritualists would attend, or conduct, séances in which they would claim to relay messages from spirits, some touring the country to do so. Spiritualists agreed on little in terms of doctrine, such as the nature of the afterlife; the existence of a deity; the importance of other religions; how trustworthy spirits at séances were considered to be, or the appropriate level of professionalism among mediums, and this varying practice was reflected in the depictions of the supernatural in literature. In “Ghostly Hands and Ghostly Agency”, Jennifer Bann seeks to explain the changing nature of the ghost throughout nineteenth century literature, and how ghosts gradually acquire more agency¹⁹ as time progresses. Bann explains that the rising interest in Spiritualism “helped to subtly transform the figure of the ghost, from the less-than-human apparitions of earlier narratives into the more-than-human characters

¹⁹ However, this is not entirely the case in *A Christmas Carol*. Although the ghosts of the Carol are not the agentless ghosts of the Gothic, as they have psychological complexity in the sense that they are able to speak, act and instill fear, they are also somewhat powerless as they are sent from “other regions” (16).

of the later nineteenth century” (665). Spiritualism, contact between the dead and the living, made the ghosts more human, more real. Spiritualism and science are entangled here because, as Steven Connor asserts, the ghost is linked to the “‘real world’ of science and progress... in its mirroring of the communicational technologies of the second half of the nineteenth century” (qtd. in Brewster 239). Brewster develops this assertion: “the uncanny properties of the telephone and telegraph linked [ghosts] to other phenomena – telepathy, hypnosis, second sight, spirit photography, spirit rapping and planchette writing – that offered ways of communicating with and representing ghosts, of bridging that chasm between the living and the dead” (239). Thus, the development of science made the supernatural, more precisely *contact* with the supernatural, more realistic. It is this *scientific* manner of believing that specifically interested Dickens.

In his 1874 biography of Charles Dickens, John Forster recalled that Dickens “had something of a hankering after ghosts” and “such was his interest generally in things supernatural that, but for the strong restraining power of his common sense, he might have fallen into the follies of Spiritualism” (qtd. in Henson 44). This “common sense” was coupled with a pervading interest in the science of the supernatural. His numerous writings and publications on the subject were certainly a reaction to readers’ interest in the supernatural,²⁰ but he was not a believer himself. In a letter to Elizabeth Gaskell in 1851 Dickens stated his belief that the supernatural events²¹ in his recently published

²⁰ Louise Henson explains that: “Dickens passion for collecting and classifying ghost stories was given greater focus after 1850 when he launched *Household Words*... Dickens was clearly responding to the climate of supernaturalism that had been shaped by the growth of Spiritualism” (59).

²¹ Dickens is referring to the moment in “To Be Read at Dusk” when a German courier tells the story of an Englishman who sees the phantom of his twin-brother shortly before the brother dies (Dickens, *Pilgrim Letters* 546).

ghost story “To Be Read at Dusk” in *Health’s Keepsake*²² were “in the slightest incident, perfectly true”; however, only as the result of “particular states of mind and processes of imagination” (Dickens, *Pilgrim Letters* 546). Dickens therefore believed that ghosts were only to be seen when the mind was otherwise preoccupied. For instance, in the story discussed with Gaskell in which a man sees the phantom of his twin-brother shortly before the brother dies, the appearance could be explained by imagination or coincidence, just so happening that the Englishman thought of his brother at that very same time. For Dickens, ghost stories were only real as a creation of the mind, as “mental phenomena” (*Pilgrim Letters* 546). Dickens didn’t believe in ghosts.²³ As he states in *A Christmas Carol* about Marley’s death, “This must be distinctly understood, or nothing wonderful can come of the story I am going to relate” (2). What he *was* concerned with was the way in which ideas, society and situation can haunt one’s mind. Certainly Dickens himself was haunted by past trauma: his father spent years in debtor’s prison, and his own writings are littered with the hauntings of his family’s financial circumstance. Andrew Miller opens his chapter *The Specters of Dickens’s Study* with a citation from Jacques Derrida: “Everyone reads, acts, writes with *his* or *her* ghosts, even when one goes after the ghosts of the other” (322). For a long time the ghosts of *A Christmas Carol* have been observed as mere characters, fashionable plot devices used by Dickens for his moral purpose – but what if they weren’t ‘real’ at all, even within the realms of the novel? Dickens uses an amalgamation of Victorian beliefs of ghosts, to create a truly modern

²² Tore Rem, where this citation was originally seen, references the publication as *Household Words* (Rem 14), but the footnotes of the original letter cite the story was published in *Health’s Keepsake*.

²³ In my extensive research, the only critic that suggested Dickens had a genuine belief in ghosts as a supernatural entity is Tore Rem’s “Fictional Exorcism?: Parodies of the Supernatural in Dickens”. Other critics tend to disagree, and Dickens himself stated: “Don’t suppose that I am so bold and arrogant as to settle what can and what cannot be, after death” (qtd. in Henson, 44), which leaves ambiguity.

haunting. For Scrooge, the ghosts are figments within his haunted mind, physical representations of his fear of dying alone, and it is the fear invoked in him by his own mind that engenders his change.

Dickens sets his ghost story within a domestic setting, Scrooge's home. It certainly isn't deemed homey though: "He lived in chambers which had once belonged to his deceased partner. They were a gloomy suite of rooms... The fog and frost so hung about the black old gateway of the house, that it seemed as if the Genius of the Weather sat in mournful meditation on the threshold" (10). Despite the lack of warmth in Scrooge's home – "Darkness is cheap, and Scrooge liked it" (12) – and the personified "mournful" atmosphere "on the threshold," there is a sense of affection as his home had once belonged to Marley. Steven Connor comments that "With some exceptions, the Victorian ghost story operates on an intimate, domestic scale, far from the castles and catacombs of the early Gothic novel: ghosts now frequent more modest middle-class town houses and country estates, and haunting becomes 'a feature of less exclusive addresses'" (qtd. in Brewster 241). This setting of domesticity is used to make the hauntings more personal. Before Marley's appearance, Dickens emphasizes the fact that Scrooge is all alone in Marley's old house:

Sitting-room, bedroom, lumber-room. All as they should be. Nobody under the table, nobody under the sofa; a small fire in the grate; spoon and basin ready; and the little saucepan of gruel (Scrooge had a cold in his head) upon the hob. Nobody under the bed; nobody in the closet; nobody in his dressing-gown, which was hanging up in a suspicious attitude against the wall. (12)

The repetition of "nobody" here only goes to emphasize Scrooge's seclusion. What should be comforting to Scrooge – whom we have been told until this point that to be alone was "the very thing he liked" (3) – actually feeds his fear. Despite proving to

himself he is alone, Scrooge is still afraid, as he “locked himself in; double-locked himself in, which was not his custom” (12). What location could be more personal, and domestic, to a human than their bedroom – the very place in which Scrooge’s first hauntings occur? Both Jacob Marley and The Ghost of Christmas Past visit Scrooge inside his locked bedroom, and the Ghost of Christmas Present is in the adjoining room. This setting is used in order to emphasize Scrooge’s unease – in a location usually used for rest, he is disturbed. The Ghost of Christmas Past even personally draws him from his bed after waking:

The curtains of his bed were drawn aside, I tell you, by a hand. Not the curtains at his feet, nor the curtains at his back, but those to which his face was addressed. The curtains of his bed were drawn aside; and Scrooge, starting up into a half-recumbent attitude, found himself face to face with the unearthly visitor who drew them: as close to it as I am now to you, and I am standing in the spirit at your elbow. (22-23)

Philip Collins explains in “Dickens on Ghosts” that visions of ghosts “in vast numbers of cases they are known to be delusions superinduced by a well-understood, and by no means uncommon disease... they are often asserted to be seen... in that imperfect state of perception, between sleeping and waking” (7). It is interesting to note, then, that the visions of Marley and “phantoms [that filled the air]” (19) disappear moments before Scrooge “went straight to bed, without undressing, and fell asleep upon the instant” (20). The Ghost of Christmas Past escorts Scrooge out from his bed, and after the visit “[Scrooge] was conscious of being exhausted, and overcome by an irresistible drowsiness; and further, of being in his own bedroom... had barely time to reel to bed, before he sank into a heavy sleep” (38). If Scrooge was actually physically visited by these ghosts, how is it that he falls asleep so quickly afterwards? These ghosts then, are not real visitations, but figures in Scrooge’s “middle state between sleeping and waking”

(Collins 8). The next two Ghosts – Christmas Present and Christmas Yet to Come – do not greet Scrooge in his bedroom, but are also figures of greater fear for Scrooge. When Scrooge awakens before Christmas Present’s visit, “he turned uncomfortably cold when he began to wonder which of his curtains this new spectre would draw back” (39). Scrooge is “uncomfortable” as he is powerless here “for he wished to challenge the Spirit on the moment of its appearance, and did not wish to be taken by surprise, and made nervous” (39). In his first two ghostly visits, Scrooge is able to be a passive participant in the hauntings, but for Present and Yet to Come, he must take action: he must first leave his own bed and seek them out, and his fear is driven by this sense of “powerless[ness]” (40). The third ghost also does not return him safely home to sleep, but uncannily disappears before his very eyes, and in its place the last of the ghosts, arguably the most fearful: “Scrooge looked about him for the Ghost, and saw it not. As the last stroke ceased to vibrate, he remembered the prediction of old Jacob Marley, and lifting up his eyes, beheld a solemn Phantom, draped and hooded, coming, like a mist along the ground, towards him” (62). Equally, when the final ghost returns him home, he is not returned to the peace of sleep: “Holding up his hands in a last prayer to have his fate reversed, he saw an alteration in the Phantom’s hood and dress. It shrunk, collapsed, and dwindled down into a bedpost” (78). Split between chapters, the ghost disappears and transfigures into Scrooge’s bedpost: “YES! and the bedpost was his own. The bed was his own, the room was his own. Best and happiest of all, the Time before him was his own, to make amends in!” (79). ‘The End of It’ sees Scrooge returned to domesticity, to his home, his bed: the haunting is over, but Scrooge hasn’t been permitted to rest. The final ghosts do not allow Scrooge to return to sleep or to rest, he is, like Marley complains,

faced with “No rest, no peace. [Only the] Incessant torture of remorse” (17). The phantom of Christmas Yet to Come has transfigured into Scrooge’s bedpost (78), always a presence in Scrooge’s bedroom that he cannot escape.

In the same way that Scrooge has to be active in his hauntings, Dickens ascribes to the ghosts varying degrees of passivity. Marley’s ghost is powerless; shackled in chains and mourning his loss of liberty “Oh! captive, bound, and double-ironed” (17), Marley does not know who sent him, nor “How it is that I appear before you in a shape that you can see, I may not tell. I have sat invisible beside you many and many a day” (18). Jennifer Bann explains that “in presenting ghosts as essentially restricted figures—catalysts to another’s action rather than the agents of their own—Dickens places Marley’s ghost in a long tradition of the limited dead” (663). In this respect, Marley is the powerless ghost of the Gothic, shackled and restricted, limited in the sense that he can only report as he is told and can only appear to Scrooge as he is bid. Marley is like many mournful but essentially ineffective ghosts represented before the Gothic era, such as Hamlet’s father in *Hamlet*, or Achilles in *The Odyssey*. Old King Hamlet can do nothing except wait to be avenged:

Doom'd for a certain term to walk the night,
And for the day confined to fast in fires,
Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature
Are burnt and purged away. (I.V.11-13)

Like Marley, who is “Doomed to wander through the world” (*A Christmas Carol* 16), the ghost can give warnings, he can appear and disappear, but he cannot act. Similarly, a dispossessed Achilles in *The Odyssey* can only mourn his death, explaining that he would rather be a “servant in a poor man’s house” on earth, than “king of kings among the dead” (Book XI). Marley differs, however, as Brewster explains: “Marley may be one of

‘the limited dead’, but he clings to some form of life and renewal, and is stubbornly up-to-date: he is clad with clanking chains, typical of the traditional ghost, but these chains are the trappings – both visible expression and constraints – of modern capitalism (225). In this sense, in creating Marley Dickens has paid tribute to the ghosts of the past, whilst using him as a cipher for the Victorian anxieties of the present. Marley is limited, but active. He cannot act, but he can scare Scrooge into saving his own soul. Aleksandra Kędzińska argues that “the objective of [Marley’s] mission is not to so much to frighten Scrooge, as to deliver him a message” (95), but it is important to note that Marley does *both*. Marley “disturbs the very marrow in [Scrooge’s] bones” (15) and the sight generates fear even within the reader: “for though the ghost sat perfectly motionless, its hair, and skirts, and tassels, were still agitated as by the hot vapour from an oven” (15). A fearsome image for Scrooge, but one that is brought on by his mind. Why do ghosts appear to Scrooge is the question at hand, but importantly *why now*? Marley “died seven years ago, this very night” (6), and after recalling this to the gentlemen from the charity who ask if they have “the pleasure of addressing Mr. Scrooge, or Mr. Marley?” (6), it may be that Scrooge, reminded of his partner’s death, even mistaken for him, and so exhausted he “fell asleep upon the instant” (20), created this visitation of Marley in his mind. After Marley, Dickens’s portrayal of ghosts changes, just as the climate of ghosts of the nineteenth century did. The rise in spiritualism, Bann argues, meant there was a shift from the “powerless hand-wringing of Marley’s ghost to the controlling, guiding or demonstrative hands of later ghosts” (664).

As well as spiritualism (the belief that the dead can communicate with the living) the Victorian’s interest in the supernatural fed a craze of phantasmagoric shows in the

early 1800s – ghostly light shows that used magic lanterns to project frightening and typically supernatural images onto a screen. Terry Castle defines phantasmagoria as “the so-called ghost-shows of late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century Europe – illusionistic exhibitions and public entertainments in which ‘specters’ were produced through the use of a magic lantern.” She notes the addition to the Oxford English Dictionary definition that “the figures were made to increase and decrease in size, to advance and retreat, dissolve, vanish, and pass into each other, in a manner then considered marvellous” (Castle 27). This description of how the magic lantern shows projected ghosts is distinctly reminiscent of the Ghost of Christmas Past, who “from the crown of its head there sprung a bright clear jet of light” (23), and like the figures of the magic lantern, varies in distinctness:

For as its belt sparkled and glittered now in one part and now in another, and what was light one instant, at another time was dark, so the figure itself fluctuated in its distinctness: being now a thing with one arm, now with one leg, now with twenty legs, now a pair of legs without a head, now a head without a body: of which dissolving parts, no outline would be visible in the dense gloom wherein they melted away. And in the very wonder of this, it would be itself again; distinct and clear as ever. (23)

Scrooge utilizes the fashion of phantasmagoric here, lifting the image out of a show and into the reader’s (and Scrooge’s) mind. The flickering of the ghost makes it enigmatic and inexplicable, thereby creating fear. Terry Castle says of magic lantern shows, that even though the optical illusions “supposedly explained apparitions away, the spectral technology of the phantasmagoria mysteriously re-created the emotional aura of the supernatural. One knew ghosts did not exist, yet one saw them anyway, without knowing precisely how” (30). Despite the viewer of a show, the reader of the novel, and Scrooge

himself, knowing that ghosts were not real, they are still seen and felt through the phantasmagoria.

Etienne-Gaspard Robertson, a Belgian inventor, physicist and demonstrator of optics, devised improvements for the magic lantern, one of which for “increasing and decreasing the size of the projected image by setting the whole apparatus on rollers. Thus the ‘ghost’ could be made to grow or shrink in front of the viewers eyes” (Castle 33), just like the Ghost of Christmas Past. Robertson was famous for his spectacles and shows of the early 1800s, in which he would emerge “specterlike, from the gloom, and addressing the audience, offered to conjure up the spirits of their dead loved ones” (Castle 35). An observer said of Robertson’s show “the lights are suddenly extinguished and one is plunged for an hour and a half into frightful and profound darkness... in an instant, two turnings of a key lock the door: nothing could be more natural than that one should be deprived of one’s liberty while seated in the tomb” (Castle 35). Robertson’s shows were scary because viewers were ‘locked in’, imprisoned if you will, in a darkness and faced with ghosts, the “spirits of their dead loved ones” (Castle 35). This is a similar haunting to the Ghosts that visit Scrooge. “Double-locked” in darkness (Dickens 12), he is also shown images of loved ones, both of the dead and of the living. Robertson would conclude his shows with a parting speech:

“I have shown you the most occult things natural philosophy has to offer, effects that seemed supernatural to the ages of credulity,” he told the audience; “but now see the only real horror ... see what is in store for all of you, what each of you will become one day: remember the phantasmagoria.” And with that, he relit the torch in the crypt, suddenly illuminating the skeleton of a young woman on a pedestal. (Castle 35)

Robertson's finale is the "real horror," one that every person faces, "what each of you will become one day" – death. The magic light show of the ghost's visits to Scrooge all build to a crescendo of his fear – that one day he too will die alone.

Terry Castle explains that in the nineteenth century, the mind itself became a magic lantern show:

Imaginative activity itself... [became] a kind of ghost-seeing. Thus in everyday conversation we affirm that our brains are filled with ghostly shapes and images, that we 'see' figures and scenes in our minds, that we are 'haunted' by our thoughts, that our thoughts can, as it were, materialize before us, like phantoms, in moments of hallucination, waking dream, or reverie. (29)

Arguably, this is what happens to Scrooge; his thoughts have a spectral nature – the ghosts haunt him, but so do memories of his actions against others. In this sense, the ghosts create a magic lantern show for him, a projection of flickering images, all portraying his transgressions. Edgar Allan Poe, in his supernatural tales, often uses the word phantasmagoria near the beginning of a tale specifically to describe an eerie optical effect (Castle 50), as in "The Fall of the House of Usher", when the narrator is disturbed by once familiar surroundings "the carvings of the ceilings, the sombre tapestries of the walls, the ebon blackness of the floors, and the phantasmagoric armorial trophies which rattled as I strode" (92). Here, the narrator is shown a series of objects that make him feel unsettled, just as Scrooge is shown images by the ghosts. As Castle notes, Poe's references "predictably enough, soon become psychological in nature. The narrator of "The Fall of the House of Usher" learns that his sickly friend Usher suffers from 'phantasmagoric conceptions' and is obsessed, to the point of madness, with thoughts of phantoms and apparitions" (Castle 50). Like Poe's narrator, Scrooge's mind is filled with "phantasmagoric conceptions" (Poe 96), by the magic lantern show performed by the

ghosts for him. Instead of madness though, it is fear that Scrooge encounters. Terry Castle concludes “If ghosts were thoughts, then thoughts themselves took on—at least notionally—the haunting reality of ghosts. The mind became subject to spectral presences... by relocating the world of ghosts in the closed space of the imagination, one ended up supernaturalizing the mind itself” (52). Scrooge’s ghosts are no longer chain-bound, mourning and powerless, but are now powerful ghosts of memory and mind.

Dickens liked there to be rational explanations for his ghosts. In “Investigations and Fictions: Charles Dickens and Ghosts”, Louise Henson explains that for Dickens “authentic ghost stories and Spiritualism were very different phenomena” (61). For his periodical *All the Year Round*, Dickens “insisted that contributors should consider difficult matters of evidence, authority and belief,” and would reject stories that were “perfectly known *as* a story” (Henson 59). Henson also notes that modern scholars have identified inconsistencies in the way that *All the Year Round* strongly endorsed scientific explanations for ghosts yet would, at the same time, tell the most sensational ghost stories.²⁴ Some critics have favored the explanation for ghosts as being a projection of Scrooge’s mind, as a result of a physical illness.²⁵ Scrooge’s first response to Marley is disbelief. The ghost asks Scrooge “Why do you doubt your senses?” (14), to which he replies: “Because... a little thing affects them. A slight disorder of the stomach makes them cheats. You may be an undigested bit of beef, a blot of mustard, a crumb of cheese,

²⁴ Henson refers specifically to the scholar Elaine Ostry’s “Social Wonders: Fancy, Science and Technology in Dickens’s Periodicals”.

²⁵ Also see: Charles Ollier (1848) “anyone who thinks he has seen a ghost, may take the vision as a symptom that his bodily health is deranged... To see a ghost, is, ipso facto, to be a subject for the physician” (qtd. in Brewster 231); Sir Walter Scott’s *Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft* (1830) deems ghost-seeing as a result of faulty perception (ref in Brewster 230); Terry Castle: ghosts had been treated as “figments, or phantasmata, produced by a disordered or overwrought brain” (Brewster 230); Samuel Hibbert argued that apparitions were “nothing more than ideas or the recollected images of the mind” as a result of some physiological change in the body (Henson, 46).

a fragment of an underdone potato. There's more of gravy than of grave about you, whatever you are!" (14-15). Brewster explains that Scrooge is "modern in his attempts to explain Marley as a disorder of the senses" (225), and Henson also references this "heavy supper' theory of the vivid dream" (49), that Scrooge's full stomach causes him to imagine the vision of Marley. In *An Essay Towards a Theory of Apparitions* (1813), the physician John Ferriar introduced the idea of ghost-seeing as a result of diseased or over-active minds: "Poor digestion, a diseased state of the nerves, irregular circulation, or some other [condition] all served to enflame the brain and 'renew' visual or auditory impressions imprinted in the past" (Castle 55). Ferriar's explanation here could be applied to Scrooge's vision of Marley: having "died seven years ago, this very night" (6); this image is renewed for Scrooge, and the vision is therefore brought on by a physical ailment. The images created in this way were those accompanied "by a strong sense of fear or horror: thus the prevalence of corpses and bloody sights and other grotesque images in popular ghost visions" (Castle 55). Therefore, it could be suggested that Scrooge has an unwell mind, one that creates the visions of the ghosts to create fear in his mind. Catherine Crowe's *The Night Side of Nature: Or Ghosts and Ghost Seers* (1848) rejects John Ferriar's theory – ghosts were *not* the product of individual delusions: Crowe argued for their actual existence. Dickens famously reviewed Crowe's book in *The Examiner* in February 1848 – he maintained her claims were "Doubtful and scant of proof" and wrote that ghosts "were in vast numbers of cases... known to be delusions superintended by a well-understood, and by no means uncommon disease" (qtd. in Brewster 235). Dickens later circulated reports of Crowe's apparent breakdown, connecting her belief in the supernatural with psychological instability (Brewster 235).

Dickens's view, therefore, was that ghosts were a psychological matter, usually as a result of a physical or mental ailment. For example, in "The Signal Man", the narrator 'diagnoses' the signal-man's ghostly premonition as "a disease of the delicate nerves that minister to the functions of the eye" (265),²⁶ just as Poe's narrator in "The Tell Tale Heart" attributes the uncanny sound of a dead-man's beating heart to "the disease" that had "sharpened [his] senses" (143). Those suffering from a surplus of "melancholy humours," wrote Robert Burton in his *Anatomy of Melancholy*, were especially likely to see specters (qtd. in Castle 54), which reinforces Edmund Wilson's famous view that Scrooge suffered from depression. Wilson also argues that Dickens's own upbringing caused a duality in his own persona; Dickens's daughter Kate Perugini claimed "my father was a wicked man – a very wicked man" (qtd. in Wilson 64), yet from the memoirs of his other daughter Mamie "we hear of the colossal Christmas parties, of the vitality, the imaginative exhilaration, which swept all the guests along" (Wilson 64). It is, as Wilson identifies "Scrooge bursting in on the Cratchits" (64). Wilson ascertains that "unquestionably [Scrooge] would relapse when the merriment was over... into moroseness, vindictiveness, suspicion. He would... reveal himself the victim of a manic-depressive cycle" (64).

Whether it be a physical or mental ailment, it is clear that Scrooge needs healing. Dickens's inclination for a scientific and rational explanation for ghosts can be justified, to an extent, by the fact that Dickens was a mesmerist, who learnt mesmerism from Dr John Elliotson, a close friend and family physician. Mesmerism, or animal magnetism, was what we would now identify as the process of hypnotism and was used to heal

²⁶ Brewster drew my attention to this reference in "The Signal Man" (240).

physical ailments. Henson explains that “this technique involved inducing artificial somnambulism (the mesmeric sleep, or trance) as a means of provoking the symptoms of the patient’s illness, and hence of affording relief... ultimately, effecting a cure” (46). Dickens’s interest in mesmerism was therapeutic, and “decidedly non-spiritual” (Henson 50). Despite the increasing attention to the sensational aspects of mesmerism, such as clairvoyance, Dickens and John Elliotson “persisted in the belief that the mysterious agent of animal magnetism was a physical one and that the extraordinary mental powers of the mesmeric subject were physiological in their nature” (Henson 50). For instance, Dickens famously treated Madame de la Rue, who had seen ghosts as a result of a physical ailment; Henson explains that “after some hesitation Dickens located the origin of this phantom in some disturbance of her nervous system” (47). Madame de la Rue suffered from an anxiety condition, which created a phantom in her own mind. Dickens was able to treat de la Rue by inducing a trance-like sleep and placing his hands on her in order to heal.

In this sense, it could be argued that Scrooge is healed by mesmerism too. Marley is no use in this respect, as when he wasn’t “wr[inging] its shadowy hands” (16), they were occupied by shaking (15, 16), clanking (17), and holding (18) the chain that he “wound over and about its arm” (19). But the other ghosts have hands to offer. As we have seen previously, Scrooge had not long awoken from sleep when “the curtains of his bed were drawn aside, I tell you, by a hand” (22). The Ghost of Christmas Present – as though he were administering a mesmeric treatment – later offers his hand to Scrooge so they can embark on their healing journey together; the ghost states ““Bear but a touch of my hand *there*,’ said the Spirit, laying it upon his heart, ‘and you shall be upheld in more

than this!” (25). If the ghost touches Scrooge, he will be “upheld,” and made better; this mesmeric touch will give Scrooge the visions that will ultimately prompt his change, and heal him. Later, in Scrooge’s old classroom, “The Spirit touched him on the arm, and pointed to his younger self” (27). Showing Scrooge his younger self allows Scrooge to remember how even as a child, Scrooge was alone. He felt “pity for his former self” (27); this sadness, as we see, leads to his fear of remaining alone forever.

A similar tactile relationship is made with the Ghost of Christmas Present:

“‘Touch my robe!’ Scrooge did as he was told, and held it fast” (42). After following the ghost’s order for mesmeric contact, he is transported into the streets of London to witness Christmas Day, and later “holding to his robe” (46) is taken to the Cratchit’s Christmas meal; the Ghost “bade Scrooge hold his robe” (53) as he took Scrooge across seas to show isolated people celebrating Christmas too: “Much they saw, and far they went, and many homes they visited, but always with a happy end” (60). If animal magnetism is the healing of the body through the mesmerist’s contact with the patient, the ghosts are performing a reverse magnetism here – a healing of Scrooge’s mind through his contact with the mesmerists (the ghosts). For Scrooge, this reverse mesmerism, the ghosts’ healing of his mind, is apparent until the creatures Ignorance and Want appear from the “foldings” (61) of the very same robe that has been used for healing physical contact with Scrooge. From this point onwards, there is no more contact for Scrooge, but instead the narrator refers repeatedly to the pointing outstretched hand of the fearsome Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come (63, 64, 65, 66, 71, 72, 77, 78). In fact, when Scrooge attempts to catch “the spectral hand... [it] repulsed him” (78). This is because the final ghost is not there to provide healing in the traditional sense, it is there to remind Scrooge that only he

can heal himself.²⁷ Henson explains that Scrooge's trance-like journey with the ghosts and "The temporary absence of volitional control is, in fact, crucial to Scrooge's reformation, for the purpose of the visitation is to release him from his well-practised habit of miserliness. [The story] suggests that individuals can wilfully imprison themselves in their mental habits" (49). Scrooge has imprisoned himself in his miserly ways, and as much as the Ghosts of Past and Present attempt to heal and free him using their mesmeric touch, it is only the fearsome lack of contact from the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come that prompts Scrooge to free and therefore heal himself.

Lyn Pykett notes that "Ghost stories are also, in many cases, stories about power, in which the seduced, betrayed, persecuted, wronged, or dispossessed return to right or avenge their wrongs or repossess what has been taken away" (198). The traditional ghosts of King Hamlet, Achilles and Marley are powerless, but the other ghosts of *A Christmas Carol* all assert their power over Scrooge. For *A Christmas Carol*, the ghosts are avenging what *might be*, should Scrooge decide not to change. Interestingly, Tore Rem depicts Charles Dickens as enjoying the feeling of power over others, earning this through the power of his stories. After a reading of *The Chimes* to actor William Macready, Dickens told his wife "If you had seen Macready last night – undisguisedly sobbing, and crying on the sofa, as I read – you would have felt (as I did) what a thing it is to have power" (qtd. in Rem 26). Dickens here seemingly enjoys evoking fear upon his listener, enjoying the power he has to control emotion through his ghost story. Rem links

²⁷ Interestingly, Dickens only uses mesmerism one other time in his writing, in "To be Taken with a Grain of Salt", in which the narrator of 'The Trial for Murder' unintentionally communicates his visions by touching his valet (reference in Rem 20). Although Edmund Wilson argues that in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* Mr. Jasper exercises a malicious kind of animal magnetism over Rosa Budd (Wilson 91), this wasn't Dickens's belief in what mesmerism was used for.

Dickens's "fascination with power and control, partly also manifested in his strong relationship to his readers, [as] one of his main motivations for practising mesmerism" (26), adding that even though "he was a powerful mesmeriser and often practised his arts... he never once allowed others to mesmerise him" (26). Could Dickens's motivation for using ghosts therefore be about reclaiming power? As an adult writer and mesmerist, perhaps now he is able to repossess the power he lost as a child due to his family's financial circumstance.

During his American tour of 1842 – the year before *A Christmas Carol* was published – Dickens visited a series of prisons. The use of solitary confinement as treatment – which he had not encountered before – "greatly troubled him" (Barnes and Barnes 218). Barnes and Barnes argue that this visit "preyed on his mind" as he composed his Christmas stories (218). Dickens wrote to his friend Forster:

A horrible thought occurred to me when I was recalling all I had seen that night. What if ghosts be one of the terrors of these jails? I have pondered on it so often, since then. The utter solitude by day and night; the many hours of darkness; the silence of death; the mind forever brooding on melancholy themes, and having no relief; sometimes an evil conscience very busy; imagine a prisoner covering up his bedclothes and looking out from time to time, with a ghastly dread of some inexplicable silent figure that always sits upon his bed, or stands... in the same corner of his cell. The more I think of it, the more certain I feel that [these men]... are nightly visited by spectres. (qtd. in Barnes and Barnes 219)

What frightened Dickens was the concept of "utter solitude" and the effect of such on the prisoners, who also faced "the silence of death; the mind forever brooding on melancholy themes... sometimes an evil conscience" (219). Sound familiar? This description of the prisoners sounds remarkably like the Scrooge we meet in the *Carol*. Even the image Dickens depicts of the prisoner in "his bedclothes... looking out from time to time, with a ghastly dread of some inexplicable silent figure" (219) is reminiscent of the image we've

seen of Scrooge waiting in his bedchamber, cold and fearful of the ghost that will visit him next. It is the fear of “no relief” (Barnes and Barnes 219), or “No rest, no peace” (Dickens 17) as Marley calls it, that ultimately scares both Dickens and Scrooge – the idea that Scrooge will die alone and that nobody will care haunts him greatly. However, Dickens’s spirits do more than lurk in the corner of Scrooge’s self-made prison. Barnes and Barnes ask “could it be that [Dickens] fashioned Scrooge as a prisoner, subject to the horrors of solitary confinement within his own house, and visited in turn by four frightening ghosts?” (220). This is an interesting theory, but what exactly is Scrooge a prisoner of? Barnes and Barnes argue he is a physical prisoner in his home (220) – he has indeed, as we have identified “double locked” (12) himself in – but Scrooge has created his own prison, one that keeps him in a perpetual state of solitary confinement. Scrooge has made his own mind a prison cell: trapped and alone, the ghosts visit him there.

When Dickens was twelve, his father John was arrested for debt and taken to the Marshalsea Prison. Dickens had to stop his schooling, and go to work pasting labels onto blacking bottles. The rest of his family moved into the prison with his father, but Dickens, who had lodging nearby, visited the jail every evening and ate breakfast with them every morning (Wilson 5). Wilson explains that Dickens, who had suffered from nervous fits in his early childhood, began to relapse into these seizures during the term of his father’s sentence (5). From a young age therefore, Charles Dickens associated prisons with an unwell mind, and his American visits developed this association into one where ghosts haunt this mind. When Dickens described the effect of solitary confinement on prisoners, he linked this concept of being alone to the “torture of the mind” (qtd. in Barnes and Barnes 218). Every scene the ghosts show Scrooge remind him of his

isolation, and eventually the ultimate isolation – death. Dickens refers to a change within Scrooge’s mind throughout the novel: the Ghost of Christmas Past’s visions “threw him into a dreadful state of mind” (29) and made him “uneasy in his mind” (30); the actions of the Present ghost took “full possession of his mind” (40), and remembering “all the things that Ghost had shown him, came upon his mind” (57); and the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come’s visions of death resolve him to change “for he had been revolving in his mind a change of life” (66). For Dickens, his experiences with his father’s imprisonment caused his own unwell mind, and it could be argued, a depression that haunted him throughout his life.²⁸ The mind, like the cell of a solitary prisoner, as Dickens comments in *American Notes*, “is every night the lurking-place of a ghost: a shadow: - a silent something, horrible to see, but whether bird or beast, or muffled human shape, he cannot tell” (Barnes and Barnes 219). The ghosts of the mind vary in shape, just as Scrooge’s do, but each incite fear and the desire for change upon their prisoners.

Ghosts in the nineteenth century became active participants in hauntings, rather than purposeless apparitions, and Dickens clearly uses popular beliefs about ghosts in the nineteenth century in *A Christmas Carol*. Through the powerless Marley, the phantasmagoric Ghost of Christmas Past, the lantern shows of the Ghosts, the mesmeric attempts at healing by Past and Present, and the psychologically terrifying death-like Future, Dickens really does exploit the Victorian’s interest in the occult and spiritualism, in an increasingly secular and scientifically minded society. For Dickens, using ghosts was about reclaiming power lost as a child, and the references to imprisonment and isolation are all nods to his own childhood. In his Preface to the 1843 edition of *A*

²⁸ See Edmund Wilson’s “The Two Scrooges” for a detailed argument of this case.

Christmas Carol, Dickens states he has “endeavored in this Ghostly little book, to raise the Ghost of an Idea” (Collins edition xiv). Even in his Preface, Dickens warns us that these ghosts are of the mind, an “Idea.” Where the magic lantern show and mesmerism failed, it is the punishment of solitary confinement – the fear of being alone for ever – that prompts Scrooge’s change.

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