

## Charles Dickens and Popular Culture: A Study of *A Christmas Carol* Adaptations through the Years

Shuva Ranjan Sinhababu

PhD Research Scholar, Department of English and Culture Studies, The University of Burdwan  
&  
Assistant Professor of English Kalna College, West Bengal, India

---

### ARTICLE DETAILS

#### Article History

Published Online: 20 January 2019

#### Keywords

Dickens, Christmas, culture industry, adaptation, Christian, globalization

---

---

### ABSTRACT

Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* has many legends associated with it, including the revival of Christmas in England. Dickens himself has over the last two hundred years grown into a part of a gigantic West-dominated culture industry. This article aims to investigate how the culture industry keeps reinventing itself through Dickens in general and *Christmas Carol* in particular through changing cultural terrains. At the same time, it looks at the localization of Dickens in the Indian context.

---

Charles Dickens's novella, *A Christmas Carol* (1843), is said to be a legendary text, a book that was responsible for the revival of the tradition of Christmas celebration during the Victorian period. Critics and common readers alike have always regarded it as one with great entertainment-value. Its popularity is indeed so high and widespread that it has never gone out of print. Among all other classics (for example, *David Copperfield* or *Oliver Twist*) written by Dickens, this is the only work which has seen itself being adapted into all modes of popular entertainment genres. It changed the course of Christmas publishing forever. So, today, when Dickens himself is a big industry, *A Christmas Carol* is clearly one of its major products. This paper will attempt to examine the different ways in which Dickens can be a chief draw in popular entertainment today, and how it is similar/different from what Dickens thought of as the popular appeal of his works. Moreover, keeping in mind my own geographical and cultural position, I shall show how *A Christmas Carol* interacts with the Indian psyche as well as with the mass market of the subcontinent.

Dickens's own idea of popular entertainment was somewhat close to what we regard as popular entertainment today. However, there were major differences, too; for instance, Dickens believed in the continuation of traditional modes of entertainment, whereas today mass culture, under the impact of globalization, is seen as antithetical to tradition. In other words, in Dickens's time, those modes of celebration which would involve mainly the lower classes of the society (who formed the majority of the society as well) were regarded as popular amusement and derided by the upper classes of the Victorian society. Such celebrations were mainly traditional in nature. Dickens was immune to class-snobbery and, in fact, he used to advise his fellow novelists to keep it in mind that amusing the reader ought to be one of their top priorities. However, Dickens did not believe in any class-specific mass culture either; instead, he always advocated a more democratic form of entertainment/culture that went beyond class boundaries. *A Christmas Carol* appeared at a time when English popular culture had reached a tipping point. The changes taking place in Britain's economic and political spheres had a lot to do with it. During these times, England changed from being an agrarian economy to an industrial one.

Due to rapid urbanization, parks and other open spaces previously used for leisurely activities started to disappear. Seasonal occupations which were conducive for entertainment and amusement gave way to regimented and mechanical working style which laid stress on more work and hence less or perhaps no entertainment. Popular forms of amusement inevitably got caught up in this stream of changes. In the long term, there was a decisive shift away from gregarious, participatory activities towards large-scale spectator entertainments such as music-hall and professional sport. J. H. Plumb calls this phenomenon the "commercialisation of leisure" (1). Dickens was aware of this development; and, that is why he was bent on making his books accessible to all the classes.

A look at the basic plot of *A Christmas Carol* tells us that here Dickens advocates free festivity and kind-heartedness. In the character of Scrooge one sees the archetypal miser who is reformed overnight following visitations from three spirits—the Spirits of Christmas Past, Christmas Present, and Christmas Future. From being an insensitive old person who does not allow his clerk even to add coal to the fireplace, he becomes a kind-hearted philanthropist. From a person who does not know how to observe Christmas, he becomes an example for all Christians. Such a story certainly has great ethical grounds in every culture. No religious culture in the world encourages the worship of money. During Dickens's own lifetime the novel moved so many minds that pirated copies had flooded the market and unauthorized dramatic performances had filled every London theatre. The book, because of its moral turn, gradually came to be regarded as a morality text for children. Hence, a number of illustrated and abridged children's texts have been published since. A good number of animated films have come into being, too, since the beginning of the twentieth century.

A problem one faces while dealing with this text in the present age is that it is not regarded anymore as having much of a moral/religious purpose for the populace at large. Christmas, far from becoming irrelevant in a so-called post-religious age, has instead become a major capitalist symbol. *A Christmas Carol* is often taken for granted as being a mixture of ghost-story and folktale. This assessment of the book makes it look unsuitable for adult consumption and instead reduces it to

a fairy tale for children. However, given its classic stature, it is a popular text integrated within the cultural memory of the English-speaking world, even outside Christian communities. It would normally be very difficult for a religion-based text to survive in the present-day environment of increasing multiculturalism. But careful observation would reveal that *A Christmas Carol* is a rather secular text, where more than the festival of Christmas itself, the spirit of Christmas is celebrated. And, this mode is that of revelry and merriment, a time when “men and women seem by one consent to open their shut-up hearts freely, and to think of people below them as if they were really fellow-passengers to the grave, and not another race of creatures bound on their journey” (Dickens, *A Christmas Carol and Other Christmas Books* 12). So, all an adaptation of the book needs to do is focus on its celebratory aspect. That would strike a chord with audience of every cultural background.

Again, when it comes to the child audience, the point of focus becomes the stress on the sympathising aspect. So, in a way, more overtly, the text plays/caters to the various demands of the audience. This aspect of the text has been very effectively called “mass marketing of an ideology about sympathy” (Jaffe 256).

So far, in talking about the text, I have not necessarily talked about the novella itself, but also its various adapted forms. This view is commonly held that the different adaptations are either different things or that only the written text is the authentic one. However, Paul Davis differs while talking about this issue. He considers the film-versions of the novella as only “one generic variant in the tale’s manifestation as culturally determined intertext” (110). He writes in the Introduction:

*A Christmas Carol* could be said to have two texts, the one that Dickens wrote in 1843 and the one that we collectively remember.... The text of *A Christmas Carol* is fixed in Dickens’ words, but the culture-text, the Carol as it has been re-created in the century and a half since it first appeared, changes as the reasons for its retelling change. We are still creating the culture-text of the *Carol* [. . .] (4).

Davis analyses how the patterns of *A Christmas Carol* met the anxieties of different times. He demonstrates that Dickens’s novella had tapped the contemporary urban anxiety regarding the loss of rural society, and that the early literary reviewers recognised the inscription of that anxiety by focussing on Fezziwig’s ball as Christmas lost, and the Cratchit dinner as Christmas reconstructed for the city. He also describes the reaction to the text later on. For instance, he shows the turn-of-the-century adult’s attempt to retrieve their childhood across Dickens’s text by foregrounding Tiny Tim and the reformed, childlike Scrooge. Eventually, he goes on to show the Depression era’s tendency to find in the novel “a fantasy of liberation from the iron laws of economics” (70) and to see Scrooge “as a misguided businessman who [has] forgotten his business ethics” (92). He carefully points out that if in the pre-World War I era, some people celebrated release from Victorianism and found in *A Christmas Carol* a recovery of

childhood, others found it childish. Similarly, he argues that in the Depression era the responses were different in England and America. Whereas in America’s 1938 film Scrooge dines with the Cratchits, overleaping class boundaries and resolving financial difficulties by an expression of community, England’s 1935 version Scrooge recognizes responsibilities strictly delimited by class.

In this regard, one can talk about the recent animated adaptation made by Walt Disney Pictures in 2009. This adaptation bases itself on the spectacular aspects of the story. For example, the appearance of the spirits gets more importance than their function. The advance in technology makes it possible for the film to have all its characters look exactly as they are described in Dickens’s book; however, this closeness with Dickens’s text is balanced by the differences created by the spectacular visual effects. For instance, Scrooge’s journey with the Spirit of Christmas Present is shown in the film as a kind of sight-seeing on a three-dimensional giant-screen. In fact, the very way this spirit is shown bears much resemblance with Santa Claus (the production house being an American one). And, the Spirit of Christmas Future is portrayed in the fashion of modern Hollywood supernatural horror films. In such a context, it becomes difficult to point out the popular culture aspect of *Carol*. The film, far removed from all its didactic intention, becomes a major source of worldwide entertainment. In this manner, the Dickens industry keeps growing, beyond linguistic and cultural boundaries.

Interestingly, Walt Disney’s 1981 adaptation of the book, *Mickey’s Christmas Carol*, featured all Walt Disney characters. Uncle Scrooge plays the role of Ebenezer Scrooge, Mickey Mouse plays the role of Mr Cratchit, Goofy plays the role of Marley, etc. One needs to remember that the Disney character of Uncle Scrooge got his name from the character of Ebenezer Scrooge. Scrooge McDuck is supposed to be the richest duck on earth. So, this identity he carries with him into the film. In keeping with the depiction of the habitats of the different characters, the counting house owned by Scrooge is not half as dingy and dark as shown in all other film-adaptations of the book, in keeping with the pre-reformation state of Scrooge. When Marley’s ghost appears before him, his chain is shown to be connected by piggybanks, as opposed to “cash-boxes, keys, padlocks, ledgers, deeds, and heavy purses wrought in steel” (Dickens, *A Christmas Carol and Other Christmas Books* 19). The very nature of the adaptation shows the kind of reception the producers expect: this is a great marketing game played by the Disney empire, designed to validate its popular characters by tradition. That the consumerist culture that today’s popular culture advocates becomes clear in the last scene of this short film where Scrooge gifts Tim a bag of toys. There is no mention of any big piece of turkey being bought by Scrooge for the Cratchits. Toys are more important than food, and without the purchase of such commodities (which are aggressively marketed by Disney), Christmas cannot be celebrated by children. Whereas Dickens commodified childhood in his novels, Disney advocates that without commodification there is no childhood.

At this point, one can go back to Dickens’s written text and find the elements of consumerism evident there. It is certainly true that Scrooge’s lifestyle is unsocial and requires improvement. But, more than that, people like Scrooge are harmful for a capitalist society. Such people amass property

without spending, whereas capitalism encourages consumerism. Scrooge's change may be read as feudalism giving way to capitalism. From the hands of the lords the power gets transferred to big corporate houses. In view of such a reading, the turkey might stand for international restaurant chains of today (the likes of KFC), and its culmination is in its substitution by toys in *Mickey's Christmas Carol*. There is an alternative view, too. William Wrigg says, "In the character of Scrooge, Dickens personified the rising tide of materialism in the nineteenth century that has now reached flood stage in our affluent twentieth century society" (537). In other words, Scrooge, in such a reading, would be a forerunner of the vast corporate empires growing charitable in order to improve their image.

I shall now look at one children's edition of *Christmas Carol*. This is part of the Saddleback's Illustrated Classics Series. The book follows the storyline faithfully, making cuts at places which might seem difficult to children. But, the incongruity is found in the painting. There is a desperate attempt to portray every character neatly and palatably here. Whereas in the novel one observes that the Cratchit family is one which only barely manages to live on the meagre income of Mr Cratchit, the picture of that sort of hardship is entirely absent here. The relatively shorter stature of Bob Cratchit in every other adaptation, except the 1981 Disney one, is here replaced by a jovial face and a body stouter than that of Scrooge. The most hilarious change is seen in the depiction of Scrooge after his transformation. The unpleasant demeanour of the character vanishes completely, and one finds a very handsome figure bearing no resemblance whatsoever to his earlier self except streaks of grey hair visible around his hat (Dickens, *A Christmas Carol* 2). Thus, the actual money-related issue is partly, if not entirely, sidelined in the visual media.

I want to conclude with a reference to the place of *Christmas Carol* in India. Unlike in Britain, the novella by Dickens never had any such great impact on Indian culture. Naturally, it is a challenge for the Dickens industry to find a market at a place like that. Unlike in Britain, here there is an additional job, and that is, of making this festival look grand and making it popular. So, when the *Carol* adaptations hit the Indian theatres, their task is much more different from that in the predominantly Christian nations. Here, this film would be seen as a cinematic adaptation of a novel alone, and maybe as a film about Christmas. So, in the Indian context, such films would lie in the long queue of classic Hollywood Christmas films like *It's a Wonderful Life* or *Home Alone* or *The Polar Express*. Thus, in the Indian context, Christmas itself has to be

commodified and sold in order to sell products that capitalize on the Christmas spirit.

The discussion had started with Dickens's own idea of popular entertainment. We have reached a place where we find that Dickens has got smoothly integrated into the present mode of popular entertainment. Purists do not like the way experimentations have been and are being done with the creations of Dickens, but society does not stand still. As one proudly says that Scrooge, Tim, Bob Cratchit have all become idiomatic characters in English language and Anglophone cultures, if they are to weather the course of time, they need fresh and continually renewing treatment. Only then can *Christmas Carol* be as much a part of popular culture as it was in the Victorian times, and Dickens's works are very flexible in this regard. Juliet John says:

Dickens is arguably the only author to have aimed to have a huge impact on global mass culture and to have consistently done so without jeopardizing, despite Leavis's efforts, his central place as an object of study in the academy (144).

This is the quality which had prompted Orwell to comment:

It is difficult otherwise to explain why he could be both read by working people (a thing which has happened to no other novelist of this stature) and buried in Westminster Abbey (421).

Dickens had once said:

I would rather have the affectionate regard of my fellow men, than I would have heaps and mines of gold. But the two things do not seem to me incompatible (Juliet 11).

Dickens could indeed merge these two seemingly opposite aspects of the business of writing. The Dickens industry has been managing it well too, though not necessarily compromising with the capital. Dickens is still a popular icon. Dickens industry is a multinational corporation with its lustre nowhere near being on its wane.

## Works Cited

1. Dickens, Charles. *A Christmas Carol*. Saddleback Publishing, 2006.
2. ---. *A Christmas Carol and Other Christmas Books*. Edited by Robert Douglas-Fairhurst, Oxford, 2006.
3. Jaffe, Audrey. "Spectacular Sympathy: Visuality and Ideology in Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*." *PMLA*, vol. 109, no. 2, Modern Language Association, 1994, pp. 254–65, doi:10.2307/463120. JSTOR.
4. Juliet, John. "The Novels and Popular Culture." *A Companion to Charles Dickens*, edited by David Paroissien, Blackwell, 2008, pp. 142–56.
5. Orwell, George. *Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters*. Edited by Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus, vol. 1, Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968.
6. Plumb, J. H. *Commercialisation of Leisure in Eighteenth Century England*, Reading UP, 1973.
7. Schlike, Paul. *Dickens and Popular Entertainment*. Unwyn Hyman, 2002.
8. Wrigg, William. "Dickens' Message of Christmas." *The English Journal*, vol. 48, no. 9, National Council of Teachers of English, 1959, pp. 537–39, doi:10.2307/808856. JSTOR.